

Using Credible Sources with Dr. Gerrit Dirkmaat

Hank Smith:	<u>00:02</u>	Welcome to Follow Him, a weekly podcast dedicated to helping individuals and families with their Come Follow Me study. I'm Hank Smith.
John Bytheway:	<u>00:10</u>	And I'm John Bytheway.
Hank Smith:	<u>00:11</u>	We love to learn.
John Bytheway:	<u>00:12</u>	We love to laugh.
Hank Smith:	<u>00:13</u>	We want to learn and laugh with you.
John Bytheway:	<u>00:15</u>	As together, we follow Him.
John Bytheway:	<u>00:21</u>	Welcome to this week's bonus episode on using credible sources in studying church history, and avoiding pseudo scholarship.
Dr. Gerrit Dirk...:	<u>00:28</u>	Whenever you're looking at events from the past, not all sources are created equal. There's a different between me writing in my journal as soon as we finish this podcast, "I can't stand that Hank Smith. I will never give him Coke again." That captures what I feel in the moment. Well, let's say you ask me 10 years from now, and in that intervening 10 years you become an apostate, and you burn my house down. That might color my impression, not because I'm deliberately trying to lie about what I thought about our first meeting, but because that's what happens.
Dr. Gerrit Dirk...:	<u>01:07</u>	An even better way to think about it is most Latter Day Saints have had their patriarchal blessing. Try to remember exactly what you thought about each individual line in that blessing, as the patriarch was giving it to you. It was a powerful experience, I certainly felt the Spirit very strongly, I remembered some of the things. A couple days later, I got the transcript back from the patriarch. Reading through it the first time, there were things where I was like, "I don't remember him saying that. Oh." And then, I went throughout the remainder of my life thinking well, I think this is what that means. And then, life happened. "This obviously means something to do with going on my mission." After that, I got married. "Oh, I can't believe I ever thought it meant this, I actually think it means this." Even when

we're dealing with our own history, our thoughts about what happened, they change over the course of time.

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 02:02 So historians prize, first and foremost, firsthand accounts. It's much better if I'm telling you what I think than someone else saying, "Oh yeah, that Gerrit, he thinks that." But, they also want contemporary accounts, written at the time. Not, "Oh yes, I remember on my mission X." Again, that doesn't mean that you're being deliberately dishonest, but it certainly means that you have the benefit of hindsight, looking back. You now know that that day on your mission, when that door was slammed in your face, wasn't the worst day of your life. But, it might have been up to that point, in your life. Perspective changes things.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 02:40 It's really hard especially, when people are looking back, when they already know the end from the beginning. I mean, how many times do you hear people say things like, "Oh, I should have known that he was a criminal, because that one time we had a conversation and he was a little shady about it. I could tell." Well, you couldn't tell enough to tell any of the authorities, so obviously it wasn't actually as big a deal as you thought at the time.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 03:04 This is even more important to be careful with the sources you use when we're dealing with religion. Because fundamentally, religious truth claims are things that cannot be proven or disproven by historical sources. This is not just true of Latter Day Saints, this is true of all believers. The Bible tells us that Jesus walked on water. How would you prove, scientifically, that Jesus actually walked on water? We could do an experiment. We could just take John and Hank down to Utah Lake, and walk them out into the lake. And, even with as much carp in Utah Lake, you still would eventually sink. But, you could have the whole world do that experiment, where the whole world walks out into the nearest body of water, and not one of them would walk on water. Would that prove that Jesus didn't walk on water? It wouldn't, because Jesus walked on water, he walked on water because it was a miracle, it was by the power of God.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 04:07 So one of the things that historians don't have access to, however wonderful they think they are, they don't have access to the power of God. They can't replicate. There's no hypothesis you can do to demonstrate whether or not an angel appeared to somebody. What can historians do? Historians can say, "This is what that person said. They really seem to believe it." Historians don't try to disprove the religious truth claims of people.

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 04:37 You know, often times what people are saying about ... Let's take Joseph Smith, for instance. What they're really saying is, "Well, I find it pretty hard to believe that an angel appeared to him." It's more than hard to believe, it's impossible outside of the intervention of God. You can't prove whether or not Joseph saw an angel. What can you do? You can certainly demonstrate, historically, that Joseph really believed that he did. That he acted like he did, that he lived his life as if he did, and that is the best you can come as a historian.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 05:13 Often times, antagonists of not only our faith, but of any faith, they want to attack the miraculous truth claims of that faith. The reality is the very thing they're attacking is something that is not actually academic anymore. If you want to have a conversation about whether or not Joseph Smith should have instituted the high priests when he did, okay well that can be a conversation. But fundamentally, you actually can't have a conversation about whether or not God and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith. Anyone who was making that claim is no longer doing academic work. If someone says, "Well, this proves that Joseph Smith was lying and he never saw God." First of all, that can't be proven. And second of all, that's just thank you for your opinion. It's duly noted, there's lots of people who don't like Joseph Smith. Thank you for joining the chorus, but that proves essentially nothing.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 06:12 I would urge your listeners that antagonists of religion often try to use historical statements for their shock value, to try to rattle people. To say, "I bet you haven't heard this." Well, no one's heard everything from history. I've been doing history for my whole life, I hear things all the time. "Oh, I had no idea." I just pretend that I still know. But, the reality is that nobody knows everything, which means that always someone's going to be able to bring something up. Sometimes, that can really rattle people because they'll say, "I had no idea Joseph Smith was using a seer stone and a hat." Sometimes that discomfort of not knowing is used against believers.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 06:52 You'll hear people make non sequiturs all the time. "If Joseph Smith didn't tell the exact same story in every account of the first vision, that proves that he's a liar." First of all, no historian makes that argument. You already know someone who makes that argument isn't qualified to make the argument they're making. Historians understand that people tell stories different ways multiple different times, and that in no way demonstrates that someone's being dishonest. But also, fundamentally they understand if Joseph Smith changed every single word of the

first vision, that would not demonstrate in any way whether or not Joseph actually saw God.

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 07:32 Miracles are outside of the realm of historical inquiry, and that's the reason why we say that you have to have faith to believe. As desperately as we want to be able to prove every single aspect of the Gospel, and as cool as those insights might be, fundamentally as a Christian, you believe something that is utterly fantastic. Entirely unprovable. Forgive my triteness, but you believe that a carpenter who lived 2000 years ago was murdered by the Romans and came back to life. And, that because he came back to life, you're going to come back to life. That is not logical, it's not provable, no one else has done that, and it's absolutely true. We don't believe it because we can prove it, we believe it because it's true.
- John Bytheway: 08:24 I've had these conversations with you before, personally. I wanted everyone to hear this.
- John Bytheway: 08:28 I remember one time, you and I discussing pseudo scholarship, that sometimes Latter Day Saints fall victim to what you call pseudo scholarship.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 08:37 Sometimes people mistake having read about something as being an expert on that thing. There are things that I love to read about. I love to read about the creation of the universe, and all kinds of astrophysics. I'm certain that I couldn't do better than a D minus in any actual astrophysics class, because it involves math and I don't have that ability. But, sometimes people start to believe that because they're passionate about something, that that's the same thing as being an expert in that thing.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 09:11 If you were going in for a major surgery, and you're nervous. You say to your doctor, "So, where'd you get your medical degree?" "Medical degree? I don't have a medical degree. But, you know what I have? I've seen 1000 episodes of the TV show ER." It might even be, "I've watched 1000 surgeries." Now, that person probably will have more information, and have a better understanding. But, my guess is you're still going to want someone whose actually been certified by someone else as an expert in that. Not a self-appointed one.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 09:41 If someone feels the need to be an expert on some aspect of church history, well then maybe they need to go in and do the work to go get that PhD so that they can talk about it. Because half of the arguments they make, would be demonstrated as ahistorical, non-academic arguments their first year in graduate

school. Look, you can't make the argument that X proves that Joseph Smith is a liar about the gold plates, that's not an argument that can be proven.

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 10:13 Pseudo academic research is when someone uses, in some ways, the tools of academia. Here's a source, but almost always lifted from a larger source with very little context given on the background of it, with no explanation to what the other sources are surrounding it, or mitigating it. Simply, here's a source.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 10:31 A great example of that, with Martin Harris. In 1838, a member of the church who apostatizes, and he attempts to persuade other members of the church to leave. The way he does it, he writes a letter to his friend and says, "Martin Harris told me that he never actually saw the plates. And in fact, the eight witnesses all never actually saw the plates." He just goes all down the line. He's writing to his friends saying, "None of these people actually ever saw the plates." Okay, well that is a source. It exists, it's a letter that exists from history. Is that the kind of evidence that should be destroying our faith and belief in whether or not the gold plates existed? Because Martin Harris reiterates dozens of times in his life that he saw the plates, Oliver Cowdery reiterates he saw the plates. David Whitmer, all throughout his life, as antagonistic as he was toward the church after his apostasy, reiterates that he actually saw the plates and actually saw the angel.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 11:35 Sometimes, people confuse the fact that there is a source about something from the past for that source actually being a credible one. Or even more so, one that should affect our faith. Yes, many people claim that Joseph Smith was a liar in the past, and many people claim that Jesus was too. I think a lot of times, it's simply because it's a shock to people. I was told none of the witnesses ever denied it. Well, according to the witnesses they never denied it. But, just because someone says that someone says something, in a conversation that I don't even know whether or not it existed, is not proof. I don't actually know, as a historian, whether or not it happened.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 12:15 As a historian, I footnote that and I say, "There was one apostate member of the church who once said they heard Martin Harris say ..." But, that would never trump Martin Harris' own statements. He's the one who had the miracle where he saw the angel. Only he is going to be able to tell you whether or not that happened, not some guy who claims he had a conversation, that's not good history. It's shock value of being able to say, "See? I bet you didn't know about this."

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 12:44 Again, the reality is there are lots of things that everyone doesn't know about church history, that your average Latter Day Saint, they're studying the scriptures, they're studying the publications of the church. My guess is, most of them aren't combing through the letter archives of the church history department. That means that it allows for people to make arguments, and to take things truly out of context, but especially out of historical context, out of the realm of what other sources exist that either mitigate that document, shed some kind of different light on it.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 13:16 Early detractors of Joseph Smith, many of them in Palmyra, would later sign affidavits to the effect that, "Oh yeah, Joseph told me that the whole thing was just made up, and that he was lying about it." Okay. Well first of all, that wouldn't stand up in any court of law, someone saying that someone told them years earlier that they'd made up ... That's not how that works. So, are there detractors? Absolutely. Does the fact that there are detractors prove that Joseph didn't see God? By definition, it can't.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 13:52 If you're ever making that connection, if you're every saying, "Well, this person says this negative thing about Joseph," you're not doing history anymore. You're allowing emotion and opinion to determine it, but you're not making a historical judgment. A historical judgment can't determine whether or not a miracle happened.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 14:09 One of the more effective things to do, if you have a fairly antagonistic person talking to you about things or quotes that they've read, is to demonstrate their own lack of time that they've spent on the thing that they claim matters. "Well you know, Brigham Young said this, and this, and this." And the response can be okay, what sermon did he say that in?
- John Bytheway: 14:32 Yeah.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 14:32 When did he say it? What else did he say? "Well, I haven't read the whole thing." I know you haven't, actually, that's the whole point of the conversation, is you haven't read the whole thing.
- John Bytheway: 14:43 I do that all the time. When did he say it? Who was recording it? Was that his own monograph, or did somebody else write that in their journal?
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 14:51 Brigham Young did say some things that, to modern ears, are going to be odious. There's no question about that. But at the

same time, even those things that are recorded that way that he did say, because he was a product of his time the way we're products of ours, they are not who that person is. Brigham Young has, what, 1600 sermons that are available that people could read. There are literally millions of words that people could study to learn about Brigham Young. So when someone presents something like that, "Well, he said this," my guess is you haven't even read that sermon. So you're making a judgment about something, that you're saying has all kinds of import, that this is going to drive who I am, but without actually coming to a full understanding at all.

- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 15:42 Every person we study from the past is going to have aspects of their character, and especially their culture, that are reprehensible to us. If you want to feel better about yourself, if you want to be able to slap yourself on the back about what a great boy or girl you are, then you can study history that way and you'll come away, "Ah, I'm just so much smarter and better than people in the past." But, you won't actually understand why they did what they did, or who they really were. 100 years from now, people are going to be looking at you saying, "What a terrible, odious person. I can't believe they did this, that they said this, that they ... "
- John Bytheway: 16:20 If they're talking about you, at all.
- Dr. Gerrit Dirk...: 16:22 Which they won't be.
- John Bytheway: 16:23 That's what I love about this whole Joseph Smith story. That Moroni tells him, "Your name's going to be had for good and evil in 200 years." Any teenager says that to you today you'd be like, "Oh, sure." Look at what we're doing today, it's amazing.