

More than a Parenting Ministry: The Cultic Characteristics of Growing Families International

by Kathleen Turner and Elliot Miller

To say that Growing Families International (GFI) is controversial within the Christian community is an understatement. The controversy surrounding GFI, which publishes parenting programs authored by Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, has been reported in *Christianity Today*,¹ *World*,² *The Wall Street Journal*,³ and *ABC World News Tonight*,⁴ as well as numerous smaller media outlets.

GFI has been criticized by a multitude of Christian leaders as well as secular child development authorities. For example, according to a public statement, Focus on the Family (Focus) has received numerous reports of "failure-to-thrive in infants subjected to" the Ezzos' program *Preparation for Parenting (PFP)* and does "not recommend the Ezzos' material."⁵ Grace Ketterman, M.D., a nationally recognized Christian pediatrician, child psychiatrist, and author, believes the program will lead to "a lot more rebellion, a lot more hurt and angry children," and says "the lack of trust that emerges" from the program "is a foundation for family problems."⁶ John MacArthur's Grace Community Church (Grace), where the programs got their start, affirms in a public statement that the Ezzos' teachings demonstrate "a lack of clarity on certain fundamental doctrinal issues," "confusion between biblical standards and matters of personal preference," and "insufficient attention to the child's need for regeneration," as well as a "tendency to isolationism."⁷

A child abuse prevention council's religious task force (including evangelical Christian pastors) investigating GFI programs found that they were not developmentally and age appropriate. It further concluded that the programs did not consider individual temperament, have a balance of loving guidance and discipline, or foster parental discernment.⁸

GFI programs have repeatedly produced division among Christians. Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship, where the Ezzos now attend, took form essentially as a splinter group from Grace—because of controversy

regarding Gary Ezzo. Grace has expressed concern over an "elitist attitude" associated with GFI "which has proved to be a threat to unity in several churches including our own."⁹ They publicly rebuked Gary Ezzo on several points "for the sake of other churches that are ... also in danger of being divided."¹⁰

Debra and Pat Baker were involuntarily "released from membership" and even barred from unofficial church functions after voicing concerns about *PFP* at Covenant Fellowship of Philadelphia.¹¹ Meanwhile, parents can't baptize their infants at Christ Episcopal Church in Plano, Texas, unless they commit to attending the GFI program *Growing Kids God's Way (GKGW)* as part of their baptismal covenant.¹² Other parents can't send their children to the Country Oaks Baptist Church school in Tehachapi, California, unless they have completed the course.¹³

All three original key GFI leadership couples¹⁴ who worked with the Ezzos to develop, teach, and promote GFI's programs (Eric and Julie Abel, Dirk and Cheryl Williams, and one other couple who asked not to be named) have decided to leave GFI at different points in time. The reason expressed by them all: strong concerns about the issue of integrity and the content and impact of the programs.¹⁵

Nevertheless, positive testimonials abound from parents who have used the programs to train their infants to sleep through the night or to raise children who are obedient and respectful of others. Dennis and Dawn Wilson, authors of *Christian Parenting in the Information Age*, compare the emergence of GFI's programs to

the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹⁶

Such conflicting reports have helped make GFI one of the more frequently requested topics of information at the Christian Research Institute. Concerned parents wonder whether the organization is soundly Christian, doctrinally aberrant, or even a cult. After thoroughly reading a variety of GFI materials, interviewing people both inside and outside the GFI system, reviewing a plethora of internet discussions between GFI followers and advisers, speaking with past GFI leaders and followers, and discussing this subject with a variety of experts in child development, psychology, medicine, and lactation (milk production and secretion), we have reached several conclusions. We first of all can unequivocally state that *GFI is not a cult*. By this we mean that on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith the Ezzos' teaching is orthodox. Furthermore, a number of the parenting ideas in GFI materials are sound and have benefited families who have used them. In fact, many parents using GFI's materials and many leaders teaching the classes have not experienced the problems others have noted.

Our research has also convinced us that significant problems do exist. While we share many of the concerns about the Ezzo approach expressed by such observers as James Dobson's Focus, John MacArthur,¹⁷ and Chuck Smith,¹⁸ as specialists in cult research it is our observation that controversy over parenting philosophy alone cannot account for all of the contention and division that have followed in the wake of GFI.

SUMMARY

Parenting programs authored by Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo and promoted by Growing Families International (GFI), including *Preparation for Parenting* and *Growing Kids God's Way*, are both wildly popular and highly controversial. The programs mix sound parenting advice with highly disputable ideas, but this does not fully account for the controversy. GFI has provoked unprecedented public censure from Christian leaders because, although it is not a cult, it has consistently exhibited a pattern of cultic behavior, including Scripture twisting, authoritarianism, exclusivism, isolationism, and physical and emotional endangerment.

Much of it rather stems from a *pattern of cultic behavior* exhibited proactively by the Ezzos and reactively by some (not all) of their followers. GFI is more than a parenting ministry—it is a cultic community. Explaining and documenting this observation will be the focus of this article. But first it is important to understand the historical development, size, scope, and teachings of GFI.

THE RISE OF THE EZZO EMPIRE

The Ezzos have been involved with ministry since at least 1979 when Gary Ezzo was one of the leaders at His Vantage Point church in Laconia, New Hampshire.¹⁹ Unfortunately, their impact in New Hampshire parallels the impact they would later have at Grace. When the Ezzos left New Hampshire to come to Grace in the early 1980s, the church (now called Lakes Region Bible Church) was divided due to controversy over Gary Ezzo, with the church accusing him of exhibiting authoritarianism and isolationist tendencies.²⁰

The Ezzos started teaching parenting classes while attending Grace in 1984. Their first mid-week class for young families was popular, and so more classes followed. The classes were held in a variety of places, from huge gatherings in the Grace sanctuary to various small groups in people's homes.

The Ezzos were able to reach out across the country and around the world with their parenting philosophy through their connections with Grace. Pastors from all over the country attending Grace's Shepherd's Conferences were exposed to the Ezzos through parenting workshops and seminars led by Gary Ezzo and Fred Barshaw, then Grace's Pastor of Family Ministries (a position later held by Gary Ezzo). Gary Ezzo contacted the directors of the *Grace to You* ministries in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and asked them to carry his tapes and books along with those of John MacArthur. He was able to use Grace's employees, mailing lists, and tape duplicating equipment to provide these materials. The Ezzos began hosting a weekly radio broadcast first in Los Angeles and then on stations around the country. They also produced a *Growing Kids God's Way* video that was first distributed in 1986 through *Grace to You*, then later through their home and also through Grace's Bookshack.

In 1987 the Ezzos formed GFI as a nonprofit corporation along with five other Grace couples. In 1989 the Ezzos asked the other couples to dissolve the nonprofit corporation and GFI became a for-profit corporation.²¹

GFI programs are reportedly used in 93 countries, 17 languages, and over a million homes.²² Seventy thousand parents attend GFI classes at local churches around the world every week.²³ These classes are led by volunteers from within the churches, using GFI's videotapes. Leaders are instructed on how to set up and lead a class in accordance with GFI rules and principles through a leader's guide, leadership tapes, and leadership conferences. GFI has also developed an optional leader certification program to further educate and train volunteer class leaders.

GFI Programs

GFI programs are geared to Christian parents of infants through the teen years. GFI also markets secular book versions of the infant and toddler programs, called *On Becoming BABYWISE* (BW) and *On Becoming BABYWISE — Book Two* (BWII). *The Wall Street*

Journal reported that BW was the most frequently requested parenting title at Ingram Book Co., the nation's largest trade book distributor, the week before their 17 February 1998 article, while BWII was ranked sixth.²⁴

The purpose of GFI is described as helping "parents raise morally responsible and biblically responsive children."²⁵ Their materials focus on such issues as infant and toddler eating, sleeping, and wake-time behavior; the importance of the marriage relationship to family life; the need for children to respect nature, property, authority, peers, and parents; the need for first-time, immediate, and complete child obedience to parents; how and when to chastise (spank) and what to do afterward; Christian mealtime etiquette; and what terms and descriptions are acceptable when parents discuss sexuality with their children.

THE QUESTION OF CULTIC BEHAVIOR

Given the skyrocketing influence of GFI within evangelicalism and the culture at large, any cultic characteristics within the group should be a cause for serious concern. It is important first to differentiate between the terms *cult* and *cultic*. Evangelicals generally use theology as the primary criteria for identifying a cult, with behavior as a secondary criteria consequent to the first. Accordingly, the primary definition of a cult is a group that claims to represent true Christianity while denying essential doctrines of the historic, biblical faith.²⁶ It is also understood that out of these theological deviations flow behavioral deviations that vary from group to group but typically include authoritarianism, exclusivism, and isolationism.²⁷

Unfortunately, however, such cultic behaviors are sometimes found in groups that are genuinely Christian. These groups affirm the core doctrines of Christianity but are deviant at some other level of their theology (usually including their approach to Scripture and their own leaders), and thus the manner in which they operate mirrors that of the cults. Because of their true Christian profession, such groups should not be classified as cults, but they can

rightfully be identified as cultic (cultlike).

While some are using the term *cult* to categorize GFI,²⁸ in our estimation this is clearly not warranted. Unfortunately, however, GFI's behavior does parallel the characteristics of cults in significant ways, including the following:

1. *Scripture twisting and de facto assertion of extrabiblical revelation.* Scripture is often used without regard to context to justify unbiblical or extrabiblical doctrines. Teachings not found in the Bible (on child rearing) are accorded the status of divine revelation ("God's way"). Theological confusion and legalism follow from these abuses.

2. *Authoritarianism.* The Ezzos' word on parenting seems to close the matter irrespective of the evidence. Individual interpretation on that subject is not allowed. The Ezzos appear to be unaccountable to anyone outside their own group and to suppress any attempt to question them from within the group.

3. *Exclusivism.* The Ezzos are considered virtually the only ones who are teaching biblical truth on their subject. Those who follow the Ezzo way are believed to raise morally superior children. Some esteem the Ezzo philosophy of child-rearing to be so essential that they treat it almost as though it were the gospel. It is promoted with missionary zeal, resulting in division among churches, families, and friends. In fact, Christian outsiders are sometimes viewed and treated as sub-Christian.

4. *Isolationism.* Members of the GFI "community" have been shielded from teachings and opinions contrary to the Ezzo way. Full knowledge of GFI teachings has been withheld until *after* one becomes involved with the program.

5. *Physical and emotional endangerment.* As an unintended but natural consequence of following GFI teachings, babies are sometimes left to cry for hours and some newborns are underfed and underdeveloped. Child development experts—many of them Christians—voice concern about the long-term effects of the program on children raised under it.

To keep things in proper perspective, we should reiterate that GFI has many good things to contribute to the subject of Christian parenting, such as teaching children to be responsible, obedient, and respectful of others (although, as we shall see, there are problems associated with their teachings even in these areas).

The cultic tendencies in the movement, however, help actualize any potential weaknesses in the program. For example, scheduling infant feedings is practiced with apparent success by many parents, but when a scheduling program is followed religiously as "God's order for your baby's day," the potential for injurious neglect of the infant is maximized.

Of course, it is one thing to allege that GFI has cultic characteristics and another thing to prove it. To this task we now turn.

Scripture Twisting and Extrabiblical Revelation

To say that GFI is guilty of Scripture twisting and asserting extrabiblical revelation is not to say that they are guilty of these errors on a level with the cults. If they were, then they themselves would be a cult (since this particular practice affects theology) and not merely cultic. We do contend that they teach extrabiblical doctrines as though they have the authority of Scripture. But nothing suggests to us that they would consciously and explicitly claim that they are receiving new revelations from God to be placed alongside the Bible. Furthermore, by comparison to the blasphemies of the cults, the unbiblical teachings of GFI seem almost trivial.

Why then make an issue out of less-than-heretical biblical deviations? First, our standard of comparison must be Scripture and not the cults. As we shall see below, some of GFI's teachings affecting essential doctrines are troubling, albeit not heretical, and thus are far from trivial to doctrinally discerning Christians. Second, GFI's apparent disregard for the context of Scripture (and thus for biblical authority) paves the way for other cultic characteristics. In other words, their belief that their own distinctive parenting philosophy is mandated by Scripture and is "God's way" provides seeming justification for their authoritarianism, exclusivism, isolationism, and physical and emotional endangerment.

The Reverend Lance Quinn, a second-year Ph.D. candidate in theology at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium, was ordained at Grace and served there for 13 years, 10 as the senior associate pastor and

personal assistant to John MacArthur. While developing GFI's materials, Gary Ezzo worked directly under Quinn for five years. It is Quinn's opinion that Ezzo "never approached his material first from a biblical, theological viewpoint." Instead, according to Quinn, Ezzo "added Scripture to baptize what he would like to say."²⁹

If the Father did it ... Focus on the Family identifies this misuse of biblical texts as a "cause for serious concern." They say the Ezzos have "repeatedly cited Matthew 27:46 — '...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'—in support of their teaching that mothers should refuse to attend crying infants who have already been fed, changed, and had their basic needs met. 'Praise God,' writes Gary Ezzo on page 122 of *Preparation for Parenting*, 'that the Father did not intervene when His son cried out on the cross.' We see no way to make such an application of this verse without completely disregarding its original context and purpose."³⁰

Sobermindedness vs. Maternal Instincts? Not only does GFI take Scripture out of context in an effort to lend biblical support to its own views, but also the views themselves are often controversial and potentially dangerous. For example, they teach that maternal instinct is an unbiblical concept and therefore imply mothers should ignore any intuitive alarms they may hear when following the GFI program (e.g., to pick up their crying babies when the program would tell them to let the babies cry).

It is perhaps natural to think that parenting is a talent or unlearned skill spontaneously acquired. That is true for animals, whose lives are regulated by behavioral instinct, but not so for people, who are given reason and truth Reason and assessment, not feelings, are the basis of healthy parenting. Statements such as, "Do what your heart tells you," "Follow your natural instincts," and "Do what feels natural" sell an image of motherhood that is incompatible with Scripture. Those appealing but misleading clichés come from Darwin and Rousseau, not Jesus Christ. Scripture calls mothers to careful evaluation, not unchecked emotionalism.³¹

In the section, "What Should I Do When My Baby Cries?" the Ezzos write:

Mothering decisions without assessment are dangerous. Such noncognitive responses violate the Bible's call to sobermindedness. (Biblical references to "sober-minded," "sober," and "soberly" are found in Acts 26:25; Romans 12:3; 2 Corinthians 5:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8; 1 Timothy 3:2, 11; Titus 1:8; 2:2, 6, 12; 1 Peter 1:13; 4:7; 5:8.) Yes, even in parenting you must be soberminded.³²

None of the biblical references to sobermindedness cited by the Ezzos pertain specifically to parenting. In fact, none of them even set forth general principles that can rightly be applied to infant care. Rather than contrasting reason or assessment with feeling or intuition, they contrast soundness of mind or self-control with insanity or immorality.

Nonetheless, the Ezzos are surely right that in mothering, unchecked emotionalism and decisions without assessment are dangerous. It is appropriate for them to contrast sobermindedness with emotionalism, but not with emotions themselves. When the Bible calls us to sobermindedness, it is never to the exclusion of utilizing emotion, instinct, or intuition as sources for information and decision making.

The Bible does not deny the existence of human instinct, and the Ezzos' suggested disjunction between the cognitive and the noncognitive is not found in Scripture. Rather, Scripture (e.g., Matt. 16:15-17; 2 Kings 5:25-27; Acts 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 14:24-32; Rom. 8:16; 2:14-15; Exod. 25:2, 35:21) and common experience alike confirm that human beings gain knowledge and make decisions from both rational and nonrational processes (whether the latter are attributed to direct impressions of the Holy Spirit or to the leadings of instinct, intuition, or emotion). The key is that all of this nonrational input must be tested against reason and Scripture. To set up a situation where following the GFI program is equated with "reason" while following a mother's Godgiven sensitivities to her baby's needs is equated with "unchecked emotionalism" is perhaps as or more dangerous than unchecked emotionalism itself.

Theological Confusion.

One of the defining characteristics of the cults is that they preach a "different gospel" than that which is based solely on the redemptive work of Christ (2 Cor. 11:4). Although the Ezzos affirm the true gospel, their central emphasis on the redemptive role of "biblical chastisement" (a particular method of spanking) has led them into murky theological waters. To be sure, much of what they have to say about chastisement is biblically sound. But other things they proclaim on the subject seem to undermine biblical teaching on the sinfulness of man, the atonement of Christ, and the necessity of regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

The Ezzos speak to the felt need of Christians in our permissive society to raise disciplined, godly children. They stress the importance of training children to honor their parents' authority by observing a standard of first-time, immediate, and complete obedience to parental directives. In cases where children deliberately disobey the standard, discipline must consistently follow, and the Ezzos dogmatically affirm that spanking is the appropriate form of discipline. Its claimed effect is both to cleanse the child of guilt and to instruct him (or her) in the way he should go.

Of the first benefit, the Ezzos comment: "A child knows when he has broken the rules, and his guilt continually reminds him of his violation. Guilt is the reminder of sin. Chastisement is the price paid to remove the guilt thus [*sic*] free the child from his burden. If the parents do not remove the guilt, the child lives under the weight of sin. When an offense calls for chastisement, parents should chastise. If they substitute a lesser punishment, the guilt remains, and the child will suppress it. That, in turn, leads to more antisocial behavior."³³

Note that the indispensable and exclusive role of the blood of Christ in removing the guilt of sin (Heb. 9:14, 22; 1 John 1:7) is not mentioned. Neither are parents instructed to teach their children that their guilty consciences can be absolved only by accepting Jesus as their Savior and then regularly confessing their sins to God (1 John 1:9). Surely the Ezzos do not believe chastisement is the price

paid to remove the guilt of a child's sin *in the sight of God*. It seems more than coincidental, however, that they failed to qualify such a potentially misleading assertion.

Throughout their programs the Ezzos stress the responsibility of parents to instill in their children the moral fortitude necessary to live by Christian behavioral standards. Very little instruction is given on leading children into a saving relationship with Christ, where the *Holy Spirit* would become the guiding force of their moral development (using, but not limited to, their parents). The Ezzos' focus is so strongly on what the *parent* must do to shape Christian character that when they do occasionally mention the role of God in the process, it comes across as an afterthought—unnecessary to their parenting philosophy but thrown in to maintain theological correctness. All of this can be seen in Gary Ezzo's teaching on the second purpose of chastisement (instruction) in the audiotape companion to *GKGW*:

It is not the will of the child that is corrupt, but the nature that drives the will. It is the flesh that is corrupt. The will itself is morally neutral....Children are born autonomous, that is, self-legislating. By nature, they don't have the moral capacity for right or wrong. But they are autonomous, which means they will make moral decisions. They are by nature self-willed, self-indulgent, self-directed. The weakness inherent at birth is the lack of moral fortitude that can bring fleshly impulses under control. The job of the parent is not to eliminate the child's autonomy or break his will but help him become morally autonomous so he can properly exercise his will What is your goal then? What are you trying to achieve? It is to help your child eliminate acts of self-rule guided by unregenerate flesh and replace it with acts of self-rule guided by moral principle, yes, ultimately, guided by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.³⁴

Within the Ezzos' teaching, that which most Christians consider innocent (e.g., an infant's total focus on having his or her needs met) is spoken of in terms of the "flesh" or human moral depravity, while that which many Christians consider depraved (i.e., the will) is spoken of in terms of moral neutrality. Thus at times when the Ezzos speak of the flesh they

mean by it something different than most Christians would assume. Since for the Ezzos the child's will is not corrupt, with proper parental training from early infancy on (e.g., teaching the crying infant that the world does not revolve around him or her by not responding to his or her cry; teaching the pretoddler proper "highchair manners" with "a light to moderate squeeze or swat to the hand"³⁵), the child can eventually learn to bring his or her "flesh" (natural human self-centeredness, with or without moral understanding) under subjection to biblical morality. This is why the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping Christian character truly seems nonessential (although certainly helpful) in the Ezzos' system.

The Ezzos' unbalanced emphasis on the parents' role seems to flow out of their theology of the will. Coming from a Calvinist perspective, the Grace statement links their view with Pelagianism (while not calling it outright Pelagianism), a fifth century heresy that denied the doctrine of original sin and taught that man could be righteous by the exercise of free will alone.³⁶ Arminians, who believe in the freedom of man's will, would probably not go so far as to compare the Ezzos' view with Pelagianism. But Arminians also believe in man's utter need of the gospel to be righteous, and so they too would likely find the Ezzos' lack of emphasis on the grace of God disturbing.

Such disturbance would not necessarily be assuaged even when the Ezzos do teach on the grace of God. This is because of their stress on the necessity of human works to receive that grace: "To obtain for our children the spiritual and saving blessings comprised in the gracious promises of God's Word, we must believe and be faithfully obedient. Without faith, we have no title to any blessings of promise. Without obedience, we cannot expect the favor of God and the communication of His grace on our children or on our efforts. God is not obligated to extend His grace to those who know to do right but fail to do so."³⁷ Essentially the Ezzos are suggesting that if parents faithfully "grow their kids God's way," God will be obligated to save their children, for the parent can train the child to a point where he or she will be receptive to the

gospel. This is a serious confusion of grace and works (Rom. 4:4-5; 11:6; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5).

This behavioristic implication that parental training can determine a child's decision regarding Christ also ironically conflicts with the Ezzos' apparent belief both in free will *and* the sovereignty of God. Overlooking the child's own "autonomous" personality, other environmental influences besides the home, and the hidden purposes and workings of God, it seems to unreasonably place the entire burden for the child's eternal destiny on the parents—a burden that committed Christian parents of unconverted children find grievous to bear.

Extrabiblical Revelation.

While GFI takes Scripture out of context to prove that some of its teachings are from God, it does not shy away from according a similar divine status to other teachings that clearly have no biblical support whatsoever. On the one hand, GFI materials acknowledge that "God is silent on the topic of infant feeding"³⁸ and that "the Bible is not specific" on how to "produce a morally responsible child."³⁹ On the other hand, their infant care book is subtitled "God's Order for your Baby's Day" and their child-rearing book is titled "Growing Kids God's Way." Contrary views — even those advanced by Christians — are labeled non-Christian.⁴⁰ The overriding tone of the books is dogmatic and authoritative. They are full of feeding, sleeping, and playtime schedules and rules and "nonnegotiable mandates,"⁴¹ for parents to follow. Issues that the Bible is silent on and that Christians generally consider matters of convenience or personal or cultural preference become matters of Christian morality: how well a child sleeps is discussed in terms of the parents' spirituality;⁴² directing a pretoddler's behavior in the high chair is called "moral training";⁴³ an appendix in *Growing Kids God's Way* teaches that a child's behavior at the table is "an extension of Christian character."⁴⁴

This appendix, titled "Christian Etiquette and Mealtime Behavior," includes eight "General Courtesies" (e.g., "Do not lean on the table",⁴⁵), as well as "Specific Guidelines, Standards, and Principles" for five different mealtime situations (e.g., in a buffetstyle dinner in one's home,

"The oldest guests go through the line first"⁴⁶). Although many of GFI's standards seem reasonable or even commendable, there is nevertheless no biblical basis for suggesting they are God's principles or *Christian* standards. To suggest that they are puts Christians under a legalistic yoke.

Aimee Natal, a previous follower of PFP, says, "It was the closest I've ever come to being in some form of bondage until I let up on it... When I tried implementing all the rules in their books (so detailed I had to keep several charts to remind me) I had to keep fighting with these ideas...I had to win, I had to have control [over the baby], PERIOD."⁴⁷

The end result of making such claims for mere human teachings can be seen in the confession of Anne Marie Mingo, a mother from Japan: "It's been a while since I've had a devotional because I don't feel I trust my discernment any more. Any interpretation I get I question whether I understand it right ... Instead of measuring against the Bible I'm measuring against GKGW."⁴⁸

Authoritarianism

The Ezzos have faced challenges to their materials on every front—theological, medical, and child development—much of it from pastors, doctors, nurses, and lactation and child development professionals considered experts in their fields. (In fact, we know of no professional organizations within these fields that endorse GFI.) Yet the Ezzos have said there is "no basis"⁴⁹ for the concerns and have dismissed them as "unsubstantiated hearsay."⁵⁰ The infant program they developed warns parents of the dangers of demand feeding,⁵¹ the infant feeding practice strongly recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.⁵² GFI describes the research supporting putting infants to sleep on their backs as "not conclusive, and the method of gathering supportive data questionable"⁵³ — despite the fact there has been no less than a 30 percent drop in the number of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) deaths in the United States since the "Back to Sleep" campaign began.⁵⁴

The Ezzos describe themselves as “professionals”⁶⁵ and have said they are replacing others as the “authority” on child-rearing.⁶⁶ Yet they lack much of the background experience and education found in many of the very critics they are dismissing.⁶⁷ They have claimed to have a “network” of “hundreds of pediatricians” who provide them with “expert medical advice,”⁶⁸ but they have refused to provide the list when asked.⁶⁹ There is not one Internationally Board Certified Lactation Consultant on staff, though the materials give explicit breast-feeding instruction. These paradoxes may exist partly because of the Ezzos’ apparent lack of any true accountability to either church elders or a board of directors⁶⁰ and also because they actively discourage questioning both inside and outside the GFI system.

No Debate in Class. The Ezzos set up specific class rules that limit debate. The Ezzos’ tape “Starting a Parenting Ministry” discusses “four basic rules” for a GFI class. Gary Ezzo explains one: “We tell them that there are no debates in the class....We will not debate an issue in the class....We do not accept any debates in the class” (emphasis in original).⁶¹ He goes on, “Part of it has to do with the attitude of teachability....guide their questions but do *not* entertain debate because debates rob the people of time and it belittles the leadership” (emphasis in original).⁶² Anne Marie adds, “Be praying for people who have open and teachable spirits.”⁶³

Gary describes the next rule: “If they [class participants] commit themselves to the class, one of the rules ... is that they will not initiate a conversation about the parenting principles they are learning in the class. That was *do not* initiate....This has to be an absolute guideline” (emphasis in original).⁶⁴ The Ezzos justify this with an explanation that others are often not open to parenting advice.

This poses a rather serious dilemma. Where *are* parents to debate the materials? Although GFI does allow questions after class, one wonders how much true questioning can go on before the parent is labeled “unteachable.” Indeed, Gary Ezzo advises class leaders to list as their goals for the class: “The coming together of new

relationships as a result of meeting together for a number of weeks, the *checking on each other* and the high accountability and the *likemindedness* and the encouragement’⁶⁵ (emphases added).

Questions Unanswered or the Questioner Attacked. People requesting information from GFI have been told they could look up the information for themselves. GFI has questioned their belief system, ability to interpret Scripture, and need to know the information. Some have been told their concerns would be forwarded to an appropriate person or that they would receive something in the mail—but nothing followed.⁶⁶ A journalist who asked for research citations was told in writing, “The research is available. But you will need to take the time to pull it together, if you are really interested.”⁶⁷

Ezzo has written to people who question him, calling them “primitivistic,” “marsupial.....prideful,” “disgruntled,” and “theologically naive,” among other adjectives.⁶⁸ After reading PFP thoroughly, Joel and Kathryn Kuhlmann wrote the Ezzos with questions, quoting liberally from PFP and the Bible. Their letter was returned with Gary Ezzo’s handwritten margin comments, including “silly conclusion” and “[makes] no sense to you but apparently has made plenty of sense to over half a million other parents.”⁶⁹ The Kuhlmanns wrote back, explaining there must have been a mixup in his correspondence department since they didn’t get a regular letter back and his notes in the margins did not include “specific answers, as we requested” Ezzo replied with another handwritten note, saying, “There was no mistake—this is the response. Your letter although I’m sure sincere was so badly flawed in its assertions that any other type of response was rendered useless....What follow [*sic*] simply lacked intellectual honesty.”⁷⁰

Exclusivism

GFI materials make it clear that the Ezzos’ parenting philosophy is superior to others. GFI’s programs are described as “God’s Way” and “biblical.” Christians with different parenting philosophies are said to be, in their thinking, “Christians up to a

point.”⁷¹ When the Kuhlmanns wrote to Gary Ezzo about their belief that attachment parenting (a parenting philosophy practiced by many Christians that includes demand feeding) is “a viable parenting option for Christians,” Ezzo responded, “It’s not. It is word for word of what came out of humanistic writing of the 1940s.”⁷² In PFP he describes attachment parenting as “neoprimitivistic” and based on “superstition.”⁷³

Parents are told that children raised on GFI’s system will turn out superior to those who are not. The Ezzos demonstrate this by introducing fictional characters at the beginning of their books (GFI children and non-GFI children who are demand fed and attachment parented), stating that their differences in development are factual,⁷⁴ and then contrasting them throughout the material. For example, “Stevie,” a non-GFI child, will wake up twice a night for two years, shoplift, push children off swings, “grow up ill prepared for real life,” “have difficulty with siblings and peers,” and “suffer in school and at work.”⁷⁵ In contrast, “Ryan,” the child raised by GFI principles, will sleep seven to eight hours a night between the fifth and eighth weeks, obey his mother’s instructions at the grocery store, stand close to his parents’ side, be “prepared to respond according to principle,” and “learn to move in and out of new and expanding social relationships with flexibility and emotional comfort.”⁷⁶ Yet the Ezzos provide no legitimate research to support any of these claims.

Reaching the World? As we’ve stated, GFI materials clearly mention that salvation is through Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the GFI program itself is granted missionary zeal. They describe taking or leading a GFI class as “reaching the world one family at a time.”⁷⁷ Their regional leaders, who “answer your questions on leading classes utilizing the GFI curricula, leadership training, and starting a parenting ministry in your local church,” are described as “faithful saints” who are “full-time missionaries, raising much of their own support.”⁷⁸ Gary Ezzo says of one family using his materials for infants, “They are one of us. We’re all proud of their testimony, and the strength of their resolve to do more than just tell the world about the

wonderful grace of Jesus, but show the world His grace through biblical parenting.”⁷⁹ When this missionary zeal to plant GFI in churches is combined with their exclusive and elitist attitudes, it can easily result in significant division among Christians.

The GFI “Community.”

Countless parents have described feeling like outsiders in their own churches, being rejected by people who used to be their friends, and being made to feel less spiritual, all because they were not part of the GFI “community.”⁸⁰ The Ezzos themselves have directly contributed to this we/they mentality. Gary Ezzo, in his *Reflections of Moral Innocence (RMI)* tapes, admonishes parents: “You *Growing Kids God’s Way*, you *Reflections of Moral Innocence* people, you ‘Prep’ and ‘Toddler’ people, you have the possibility of a moral community. Stay within your moral community.... Take advantage of the subgroup you’re already in.”⁸¹

Some might think this would refer to other Christians, but the word “community” typically has a different meaning within GFI circles. The ministry newsletter of the Ezzos is *The Community Perspective*. The heavily restricted place to come meet “likeminded” GFI parents on GFI’s website is called “The Community.” The school founded by GFI that up until recently invited only GFI children to attend is called The Community School. A GFI follower was told that in order for a local community to be ready for a GFI Community School, “GKGW needed to be taught consistently for 5-7 years to develop the necessary level of like-mindedness.”⁸²

Others “of the World.”

Kathy Eshleman, whose husband, Paul, heads the Jesus Film Project for Campus Crusade for Christ, explains why GFI followers sometimes distance themselves from other Christians within Campus Crusade for Christ: “These women have a very strong understanding that they are to avoid communication with people who have a different philosophical view of child rearing ... they believe they are doing the best thing for their children.”⁸³ When another mother among these fulltime Crusade staffers demand-feeds her children, “she is lumped into a

category of people who are of the world.”⁸⁴

Isolationism

One of Grace’s key concerns pertains to the result of such thinking: “GFI parents tend to insulate their children from other children—including Christian children—who are not part of the GFI ‘community.’...GFI parents have been known to sever all relationships with non-GFI families. To some degree, GFI teaching is directly responsible for encouraging this attitude.”⁸⁵

In fact, GFI even advises parents of newborns to delay the timing of visiting grandparents, saying such a visit “can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on your relationship and just how like-minded you are ... A husband can help by shielding his wife, protecting her from unwelcome intrusions.”⁸⁶ This advice may predispose the new parents to distrust the opinions of those who suggest an alternative viewpoint to that of GFI — even the baby’s own grandparents.

A Closed System. Parents are also shielded from the advice of other parenting experts. Despite the vast array of books available from experienced, educated, and well-respected Christian parenting authorities, GFI lists only six non-GFI child-rearing books on its recommended reading list. The first three of these are from the 1800s, effectively narrowing the field in terms of competition for the Ezzos as parenting authorities.⁸⁷

While many Christian leaders recommend that mothers with questions seek out an older, experienced, “Titus 2” woman in their church, GFI mothers often refer to GFI “contact moms.” GFI contact moms are mothers who use and understand GFI materials and are willing to advise other mothers on a volunteer basis, but they are not necessarily older, more experienced mothers. In fact, given the relative newness of GFI’s ministry, some contact moms have only one or two young children.

A Closed Forum. This isolation from a variety of parenting ideas extends into GFI’s Forum as well. Created for parents to participate in parenting discussions, the GFI Forum area on the internet is “only open” to those “like-minded” parents who

have not only completed a GFI class but who also “agree with, and are actively applying” the material.⁸⁸ Controversial messages have been deleted,⁸⁹ and in several cases Christian parents have been permanently banned for not being “like-minded.”⁹⁰ As a result, participants are shielded from debate and the concerns of others.

Isolated from the Materials.

In addition to limiting exposure to outside influences, GFI also shields its followers from up-front exposure to the materials themselves. They are not given them until the second week of class⁹¹—after they have signed an agreement to attend for a set number of weeks. Even then they are only given one chapter at a time, after it has already been presented in class.

Physical and Emotional Endangerment

Another controversial aspect of GFI is an emphasis on parental control from infancy on—control that has been associated with infant failure to thrive cases and has raised concerns about the potential for hurt and angry children. A number of experts and professional organizations in the fields of medicine, child development, and lactation have taken the *unprecedented* action of publicly warning parents about the potential dangers of GFI programs.

A committee from the Division of Pediatrics at Forsyth Memorial Hospital in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, alarmed by a problem case in their hospital, outlined 11 areas in *PPF* that are inadequately supported by conventional medical practice and warned the local church teaching it.⁹² The Santa Clara Valley Breastfeeding Task Force (affiliated with the Santa Clara County Public Health Department) issued a letter to local Christian leaders voicing concern about GFI’s infant feeding program after becoming aware of several infants on the program who were experiencing problems associated with poor weight gain.⁹³ Pediatricians from seven states and Puerto Rico recently endorsed an AAP resolution that outlined concerns with *PPF* and *BW*, cited reports of failure-to-thrive, and asked the Academy to investigate *PPF* and *BW* and “alert its

members, other organizations, and parents of its findings.⁹⁴

Based on the assumption that “orderliness is a biblical virtue”⁹⁵ and that “order speaks of routine and scheduling,”⁹⁶ the Ezzos instruct parents to feed newborns every three to three-and-a-half hours (described as two-and-a-half to three hours from the end of a 20 to 30-minute feeding).⁹⁷ According to this feeding plan, called Parent Directed Feeding (PDF), parents are also instructed to enforce naptimes of one-and-a-half hours or more before feedings.⁹⁸

GFI does claim, “With PDF, a mother feeds her baby when he is hungry,”⁹⁹ and further qualifies, “There will be times when you may need more flexibility due to unusual circumstances....Consider the context of each situation.”¹⁰⁰ The examples of flexibility provided almost always relate to the convenience of adults, however, not the needs of the infant.

Unfortunately, the book also instructs that even a *two-week-old* baby who falls asleep during the middle of a feeding and wakes up hungry two hours later should not be fed: “Babies learn very quickly the laws of natural consequences. If he does not eat at one feeding, then make him wait until the next one....Do not feed him between routine mealtimes.”¹⁰¹ Lactation experts disagree. Pediatrician Marianne Neifert, author of the “Dr. Mom” parenting books, says, “Some babies... could handle the schedule. But a small baby with a mother who’s got a marginal milk supply....Those babies could be put in jeopardy on a schedule.”¹⁰² Lactation experts cite research explaining why such a schedule works for some babies, but not for others.¹⁰³

While GFI’s infant program includes charts for parents to monitor wet diapers, they do not have instructions to check for stools, a key factor in determining if a baby is getting adequate nutrition. One lactation consultant reported, “This week I had 2 Ezzo feeding problems come in....One baby is 2 mos. old—still at two week weight....The other....baby began vomiting at seven weeks....was 5 oz. below birth-weight. She was immediately taken to the hospital and remained for 5 weeks due to intestinal [tract] shutdown. This baby came home this week and is on prescription

formula and has a central line IV—came very close to death.”¹⁰⁴

Some might argue that the percentage of reported problems associated with GFI infants is low. Others correctly point out, however, that *any* cases associated with following the Ezzos’ advice are a cause for concern. Indeed, the occurrence of several professional organizations independently raising concerns about failure to thrive cases associated with GFI indicates that an unusual and significant problem exists.

Excessive Crying. Far more common are cases in which enforcing *PDF*’s feeding and nap schedule results in excessive infant crying that overwhelms even the parents. One parent appealed for advice on GFI’s website because they were “desperate for answers,” saying, “From the day he came home from the hospital I have tried to have him fall asleep on his own. We have listened to him cry for an hour and a half at a time and then never fall asleep because I finally get him up for his next feed....It’s difficult to listen to him cry so much. If I felt it was accomplishing something—such as falling asleep on his own—I would be more able to listen to him and not feel quite so bad.”¹⁰⁵ The contact mom’s reply acknowledged that difficulty is not unusual: “Many of us have been where you are at one time or another. Sometimes the first few weeks are the PITS! But you need to get back to the basics with the *PDF*. It will not work any other way.”¹⁰⁶ She specifically admonished the parents to strive to feed no more often than every three hours with a one and a half hour nap minimum.

Hurt and Rebellious Children? A number of Christian child development experts have raised concerns about the emphasis in GFI’s materials on parental control and the materials’ insensitivity toward children’s God given needs. They believe in some cases the program will produce outwardly compliant but inwardly angry or depressed children who see God as a Tyrant.

Dr. Bruce Narramore explains that parenting needs to first be rooted in understanding and meeting our children’s God given needs. Controlling misbehavior comes second. When this order is reversed children may be well

behaved—at least until they hit late adolescence and young adulthood, but they may be inwardly isolated, angry, or emotionally depressed. Since research indicates that there is a significant relationship between a child’s attachment to his/her parents and their experience of God, I am afraid that children raised by [GFI’s] approach may have difficulty experiencing the love and nurturing of God and that they might experience Him more as someone who wants to control them.¹⁰⁷

Katharine West, a registered nurse and lactation consultant who has been working with GFI followers for 10 years, acknowledged that although many of the children turn out well, depression is not unusual. She said of a baby on the Ezzos’ program who was not gaining weight well: “I’ll lay dollars to donuts this baby is clinically depressed and somewhat withdrawn (has already learned that the world does not come when needed, so no longer cries when there are needs), yes? I’ve seen it too many times.”¹⁰⁸

Moral Innocence? A number of health care professionals have also raised serious concerns with *Reflections of Moral Innocence*, the Ezzos’ tape and video series that discusses how and what sexual information should be passed on to children. The Ezzos advise parents not to use exact or descriptive words for genitalia. Children are not to be told the details of sexual intercourse, even the night before the wedding, but instead are to be instructed in sex education using the diagram of a flower.¹⁰⁹ The Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County describes how such teaching will not only “encourage children to seek answers to their questions from outside the home” but also limit children’s ability to “protect themselves from sexual abuse or exploitation.”¹¹⁰

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

Although some concerned Christians have labeled GFI a cult, we have seen that it affirms the fundamental doctrines of historic Christianity. Furthermore, it teaches some biblical principles for raising children, and its followers mainly appear to be genuine

More than a Parenting Ministry: The Cultic Characteristics of Growing Families International

Christians who are nobly attempting to raise godly children in an ungodly age. For all of this, GFI is to be praised. Unfortunately, however, we have also seen that GFI does indeed exhibit the five cultic characteristics outlined above. This fact goes a long way toward explaining the controversy and criticism that have dogged GFI almost since its inception. The only antidote to this chronic condition would be for the Ezzos and their followers to recognize and correct these cultic tendencies in their ministry. For their part, pastors and parents should pray, listen to the Holy Spirit, consult the Bible, seek wise counsel, and then make their own decisions about whether to use GFI materials.

Many parents relying on the Holy Spirit's guidance have been blessed by using some of the good ideas in these materials. Parents and church leaders, however, need to be aware of the risks associated with a teaching environment where Scripture is used out of context, questioning is actively discouraged, rules and schedules become part of one's "testimony," even other Christians are considered "humanistic," division results and the leaders do not seem to be receptive to constructive criticism.

One of the key original leaders was accused after she left of being overzealous. Her response: "Why weren't we corrected? And why were we exalted to leadership and teaching and used as examples?"¹¹¹ Some have blamed GFI'S problems on followers who take things too far, but it is clear that Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo must assume some responsibility.

Kathleen Turner, M.B.A., is a research associate of the Christian Research Institute and has been researching GFI's materials for two years.

NOTES

¹Randy Frame, "Growing Criticism—Groups Back Away from Preparation for Parenting," *Christianity Today*, 9 February 1998, 96-97.

²Roy Maynard, "The Ezzos Know Best—Controversial Parenting Curriculum Is Sweeping the Church," *World*, 25 May-1 June 1996, 18-19.

³Barbara Carton, "Striking Behavior—The Ezzos Sell Parents Some Tough Advice: Don't Spare the Rod," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 1998, A1, A8.

⁴ABC World News Tonight report on Growing Families International with Peter Jennings and Peggy Wehmeyer, 11 July 1996: transcript.

⁵Focus on the Family statement from Earle Morgan received via e-mail on 8 December 1997 (Focus statement).

⁶30 October 1997 phone interview with Dr. Ketterman.

⁷Quotes from "A Statement Regarding Gary Ezzo and Growing Families International" (Grace statement), issued 16 October 1997 by Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California. The Ezzos issued two website responses to Grace's statement: "Grace Church and GFI—In Response" (Response One), 26 October 1997, and "In Response To: Grace Community Church 'Statement' Regarding the Ezzos and Growing Families International—Pan Two" (Response Two), 11 November 1997. These statements can be persuasive until one reads the detailed response to them written by Grace elder Phil Johnson. ("Questions about Growing Families International, Grace Church and Gary Ezzo," 11 December 1997.) Two examples: In Response One the Ezzos promised a "thorough examination" of the issues by their own elders at Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship. Response Two was "reviewed" and "approved" by those elders. None of the elders, however, even contacted Johnson, the author of the Grace Statement, to discuss Grace's concerns. Also, in Response Two Gary Ezzo claimed to be "dumbfounded" by Grace's citation of an e-mail he had written to a Grace donor. Grace cited the e-mail as evidence that Ezzo had made several accusations about Grace that were not "remotely true," but Ezzo maintains that the issue had been "fully resolved." Yet John MacArthur had warned Ezzo in a 1 September 1996 letter, "if you don't act to set the record straight immediately, I will be forced to tell people the truth about these lies to protect them."

According to Johnson, Ezzo had apologized to MacArthur on being confronted about the issue, but never followed through with his commitment to set the record straight by apologizing to the people he lied about or admitting to the donor that the statements he made were lies.

⁸Religious Parenting Programs: Their Relationship to Child Abuse Prevention," Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County [CA] (OCCAPCR), 14 May 1996.

⁹Phil Johnson, "A Statement Regarding Gary Ezzo and Growing Families International," released for distribution 20 March 1998.

¹⁰Johnson, "Questions."

¹¹21 September 1993 letter to Pat and Debra Bake, and 3 December 1993 letter to Pat Baker from Covenant Fellowship of Philadelphia.

¹²25 November 1997 telephone interview with Betty McClure, Baptism Coordinator at Christ Episcopal Church, Plano, Texas.

¹³24 November 1997 telephone interview with pastor Andy Walker of Country Oaks Baptist Church, Tehachapi, California.

¹⁴Five couples formed GFI with the Ezzos in 1987. These three were given the lion's share of responsibility.

¹⁵1 and 18 November 1997 e-mails from the Abels, 4 and 11 November 1997 and 16 April 1998 e-mails from the Williamses, and 25 November 1997 e-mail from the third key original leadership couple. All three couples agreed to this joint statement during telephone interviews between 11-13 December 1997.

¹⁶Dennis and Dawn Wilson, *Christian Parenting in the Information Age* (West Jordan, UT: TriCord Publishing, 1996), 204-5.

¹⁷In a 7 November 1997 interview with journalist Jay Grelen, MacArthur said, "I know exactly what the [Grace] statement says and I agree with it. Every elder to a man agrees."

¹⁸On his daily Southern California radio program (KWVE-FM), *To Every Man an Answer* (9 January 1998), Chuck Smith began a five-

minute negative response to a caller's inquiry about GFI by affirming, "I not only don't support it, I'm against it. I think that it's wrongly named. I don't think that what they advocate is really 'growing kids God's way.' I believe that God's way is the way of love. And they seem to have a very strict, legalistic kind of regimen in the growing of kids, and your child almost becomes your enemy."

¹⁵March 1998 letter from James Rhodes, a member of the church who began attending in 1979.

²⁰(10 March 1998 letter and 19 and 21 November 1997 telephone interviews with John Wentzel. Also, 5 March 1998 letter from James Rhodes.) The split was sparked when John Wentzel, currently a Deacon and the Minister of Education at Lakes Region Bible Church, had asked a teacher from another church to volunteer at the church's school. He says Ezzo "wanted us to be a church of its own...almost no outsiders." In response to Wentzel's decision, Ezzo attempted to close the church down, but the church held a meeting and voted him out as a pastor. The result, Wentzel said, was a "scattering of the people...some of the people believed that it was wrong to remain here...some people don't even go to church [at all] any more."

²¹December 1997 e-mail from Eric Abel.

²²Information derived from 12 November 1997 printout from Leader to Leader on GFI Forum, GFI brochure, and GFI 16 February 1998 website response to the 9 February 1998 *Christianity Today* article.

²³Mike Aquilina, "THE FAMILY—Do the Ezzos Know Best?" *Our Sunday Visitor*, 5 April 1998, 7.

²⁴Carton, Al.

²⁵GFI brochure.

²⁶See, e.g., Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Anniversary Edition, Hank Hanegraaff, gen. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 17; Norman L. Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 10-11.

²⁷See, e.g., Geisler and Rhodes, 11-13.

²⁸E.g., 18 and 19 April 1998 posts on AOL Christianity Online Message Boards; 25 December 1997 post on Usenet alt.support.breastfeeding area; GFI is classified under "Family Living Cults" at Balaam's Ass's website: <http://www.balaams-ass.com/journal/warnings/helthclt.htm>.

²⁹14 December 1997 e-mail from Lance Quinn.

³⁰Focus statement.

³¹Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Preparation for Parenting: Bringing God's Order to Your Baby's Day and Restful Sleep to Your Baby's Night (PPF)*, 5th ed., 4th printing (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International, 1993), 139-40, 51.

³²Ibid., 151. See also 179-80, where the Ezzos reject the concept of mother-infant bonding because it would suggest that instinct exists in "rational man" as well as in the animals.

³³Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Growing Kids God's Way: Biblical Ethics for Parenting (GKGW)*, 4th ed., 11th printing (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International Press, 1996), 212.

³⁴Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Growing Kids God's Way: Guidelines for Chastisement* (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International, 1994); audiotape.

³⁵Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Preparation for the Toddler Years (5-12 Months)*, 4th printing (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International Press, 1994), 51. In GKGW (16) the Ezzos instruct, "Right from the start, train your children in the precepts to biblical morality....The fact that a child has no moral understanding as to why food should not be intentionally dropped from his high chair does not mean we hold back instruction and

More than a Parenting Ministry: The Cultic Characteristics of Growing Families International

restriction....Children first learn how to act morally and then they learn how to think morally.”

³⁶Grace statement.

³⁷GKGW, 214.

³⁸PFP, 26.

³⁹GKGW, 18.

⁴⁰E.g., “Women who demand feed say they love their children because they tend to their every need. That is not biblical love; it’s idolatry.” (Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Preparation for Parenting: A Biblical Perspective*, 3d ed. [Northridge, CA: Growing Families International Press, 19901, 67.] They declare demand feeding is based on “an existential philosophy that denies man is made in the image of God and now exists in the condition of depravity” and “the theory of evolution”; it “de-sanctifies the message of Christian motherhood” because “a Christian woman [cannot] testify to biblical motherhood while parenting with secular philosophies that are the antithesis of biblical truth”; and it “works off the hedonistic drives of the child by supporting ongoing immediate gratification.” (Ibid., 66-67.) Though these statements—which provoked widespread criticism—were revised in following editions, they set the tone for the movement and have never been retracted. Rather, in the introduction to subsequent editions the Ezzos clarify: “We assure you that the changes in this edition are merely practical, not theological or philosophical. Our guiding premises did not change because God’s character does not change.” (PFP, 5th ed., 11; emphasis added.)

⁴¹GKGW, 89; PFP, 120, 135.

⁴²PFP, 49.

⁴³GKGW, 26-27.

⁴⁴Ibid., 305.

⁴⁵Ibid., 301.

⁴⁶Ibid., 304.

⁴⁷E-mail from Aimee Natal, 21 July 1997.

⁴⁸E-mail from Anne Marie Mingo, 31 October 1997.

⁴⁹GFI 26 October 1997 website response to Grace statement.

⁵⁰Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo in a 3 December 1997 letter to Paul and Kathy Eshleman responding to a 10 February 1997 Letter of Concern to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

⁵¹PFP, 55-61, 66-70, 76.

⁵²American Academy of Pediatrics, *Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk (RE9729)*, Pediatrics 100 (December 1997): 1035-39.

⁵³PFP, 184.

⁵⁴25 March 1997 e-mail from Dr. James McKenna, SIDS researcher.

⁵⁵PFP, 50, GKGW, 66.

⁵⁶Carton, A8.

⁵⁷The Ezzos do have some relevant training and experience, but it simply does not match their lofty claims. The covers of GFI materials claim Anne Marie Ezzo has a “background in pediatric nursing” but provide no details. Although Anne Marie’s nursing license is current, the hospital where she claims to have worked in pediatrics can confirm only that she worked there about three years and left in 1977—over 20 years ago. (5 March 1998 phone interview with Loretta McAdams in Human Resources, Concord Hospital, Concord, NH.) GFI materials also refer to Ezzo as a “graduate of Talbot Theological Seminary.” This is true, but his degree is an M.A. in Ministry that

gives credit for life experience, does not require study in the original biblical languages, and requires no previous college degree. (10 December 1997 interview with Marilyn Heiman in Talbot’s registrar’s office.) As for his undergraduate education, although Ezzo did take “several classes” at Mohawk Valley Community College in New York, the registrar’s office there stated that they do not even have an associate’s degree on record for him. (18 and 19 November 1997 interviews with Rosemary Spetka.)

⁵⁸Gary Ezzo, “The War against Moral Truth.” GFI website response to 11 July 1996 ABC *World News Tonight* report.

⁵⁹Reporter Kelly Griffith asked Gary Ezzo in writing, “If you had a list of [medical] advisors, will you provide that?” Ezzo responded, also in writing, “Can you have our list? No, these people are too important to be bothered with the trivia served up by the critics.” (Kelly Griffith, “Raising Babies ‘God’s Way’ May Not Be the Right Way,” *Bradenton Herald*, 26 April 1997, Well Being section, 9-10.)

⁶⁰The Ezzos have claimed they are “under the care and guidance and spiritual authority of the elders” at Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship—Nick Carter, Dave Maddox, and Jim Dunning. (26 October 1997 GFI website response to Grace statement; 3 November 1997 interview with Dave Maddox.) Yet Carter is on the GFI payroll as Vice President of Operations and International Ministry Support and reports to the Ezzos’ son-in-law. (28 October 1997 GF, “Meet the Staff” web page; 8 November 1997 e-mail from Eric Abel.) Maddox has worked for GFI and at the time of Ezzo’s statement was still listed on GFI’s “Meet the Staff” web page. (3 November 1997 interview with Maddox.) While Dunning does not work for GFI, in the past he has admitted his inability to hold Ezzo accountable. (11 December 1997 e-mail from Phil Johnson.) The Ezzos are not accountable to a board of directors either. GFI is a for-profit corporation and its only officers and directors are Gary Ezzo; his son-in-law, Robert Garcia; and his wife, Anne Marie. (State of California Statement by Domestic Stock Corporation.) A small portion of the Ezzos’ business falls under their not-for-profit arm, GFIES (Growing Families International Educational Services). The only officers for GFIES are Gary Ezzo; his son-in-law, Robert Garcia; and his accountant, Bob Gaby. (State of California Statement by Domestic Nonprofit Corporation.) An 11 November 1997 e-mail from Julie Abel describes Gaby as the accountant for both GFI and GFIES.

⁶¹Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Starting a Parenting Ministry* (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International, 1994); audiotape.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Helps for Your First Night of Class* (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International, 1994), audiotape.

⁶⁶Letters and e-mails on file at CRI.

⁶⁷Griffith, 9.

⁶⁸Correspondence between Gary Ezzo and various concerned parents, on file at CRI.

⁶⁹18 August 1996 letter from Joel and Kathryn Kuhlmann with Gary Ezzo’s handwritten notes.

⁷⁰22 September 1996 letter from Joel and Kathryn Kuhlmann with Gary Ezzo’s handwritten note.

⁷¹PFP, 21.

⁷²18 August 1996 Kuhlmann letter with Ezzo’s notes.

⁷³PFP, 44, 48.

⁷⁴PFP, 15; GKGW, 13.

⁷⁵PFP, 58, 25, 32-33.

⁷⁶PFP, 67,33; GKGW, 44-45,51-52.

⁷⁷*The Community Perspective (TCP; GFI’s newsletter)*, Summer-Fall 1997, 2.

⁷⁸TCP, Spring 1997, insert.

⁷⁹TCP, Summer-Fall 1997.

⁸⁰Three critics alone conservatively estimate receiving at least 550 unsolicited reports of such division over GFI programs.

⁸¹Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Reflections of Moral Innocence (RMI)* (Chatsworth, CA: Growing Families International, 1995); audiotape, session five.

⁸²Post on GFI Forum, 8 July 1997.

⁸³29 October 1997 phone interview with Kathy Eshleman.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Grace statement.

⁸⁶PFP, 185.

⁸⁷See “Recommended Reading List,” Growing Families International.

⁸⁸6 September 1997 e-mail from Jeff Hathaway, pastoral advisor, GFI Forum.

⁸⁹E.g., 20 November 1996 e-mail from Kate Hallberg, a mother who describes instances where her posts and those of other mothers were deleted. Jeff Hathaway explains: “We monitor our Forum very closely to insure the integrity of the Forum with regard to accomplishing its purpose.” (1 September 1997 e-mail.)

⁹⁰E.g., 6 September 1997 e-mail from Hathaway, 31 July 1996 e-mail from Frank York at GFI.

⁹¹*Growing Kids God’s Way Leader’s Guide* (n.p., n.d.), 21.

⁹²*Preparation for Parenting*—Reviewed by Division of Pediatrics,” Forsyth Memorial Hospital committee report, 22 January 1997.

⁹³23 January 1998 letter from the Santa Clara Valley Breastfeeding Task Force.

⁹⁴AAP Resolution no. 22T (98), “Investigating the Ezzo Program and the FTT Infants Associated with It.” Endorsed by AAP District 4 on 8 February 1998.

⁹⁵PFP, 57.

⁹⁶Ibid., 54.

⁹⁷Ibid., 113-16.

⁹⁸Ibid., 133-35.

⁹⁹Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 120.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 194.

¹⁰²Claire Martin, “‘Let ‘Em Cry’ Technique Criticized by Doctors,” *Denver Post*, 14 September 1997, sec. D.

¹⁰³Lisa Marasco, BA, IBCLC and Jan Barger, MA, RN, IBCLC; *Examining the Evidence for Cue feeding of Breastfed Infants* (unpublished paper, 1997).

¹⁰⁴E-mail from Debby Kearney, IBCLC, 17 April 1997.

¹⁰⁵Post on GFI Forum, 7 July 1997.

¹⁰⁶Post on GFI Forum, 8 July 1997.

¹⁰⁷77 November 1997 e-mail from Dr. Bruce Narramore.

¹⁰⁸1 November 1997 public post to Lactnet (internet discussion group for lactation consultants).

¹⁰⁹RMI, session seven.

¹¹⁰OCCAPCR, 13.

¹¹¹25 November 1997 e-mail.