

Excerpted from a defense of the GFI ministry by a class leader at a church that had enjoyed the GFI ministry for many years, and was now considering dropping the classes due to complaints by one family. The entire paper addressing many other critics as well can be viewed on the page "Others Respond to the Critics."

2.1 "Evaluation" by the Christian Research Institute

A lot of the theological criticism against the Ezzos' ministry is based on the evaluation done by Kathleen Turner at the Christian Research Institute (CRI), which can be found on their web site at <http://www.equip.org/free/DG233.htm>. Kathleen Turner, M.B.A., was a research associate of the Christian Research Institute and has been researching GFI's materials for two years. She published three articles with CRI on her research and was also the author of an article that appeared in October 2000 in Christianity Today (CT, see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/013/6.70.html>) which essentially rehashes her earlier articles with CRI. Since she apparently never wrote for CT before or after, I have to conclude that she was not part of CT's journalistic staff and was simply given CT's platform to voice her views. Since her analysis seems to be a recurring theme in the chorus of critical voices, it is important to the contextual framework of this letter to evaluate her criticism.

2.1.1 The Christian Research Institute (CRI)

CRI is a Christian apologetics and counter-cult organization founded in 1960 by Dr. Walter Martin (1928 - 1989). According to their web-site, <http://www.equip.org/>, they exist to provide Christians with carefully researched information and well-reasoned answers that encourage them in their faith and equip them to intelligently represent it to people influenced by ideas and teachings that assault or undermine orthodox, biblical Christianity. They are a so-called apologetics ministry. Their business is essentially to provide answers to cults and sects from a Biblical point of view. CRI is led by Hank Hanegraaff who has no theological degree but was nonetheless promoted to lead CRI after Dr. Martin's passing. Since then many (including Dr. Martin's surviving family members and dozens of former CRI staff members as well as people on the outside) have questioned Mr. Hanegraaff's contention that he was the hand-picked successor to Dr. Martin (see <http://www.xmark.com/focus/Pages/hank.html>). Apparently this individual has left a trail of broken lives in his wake. He has also been caught in questionable financial practices involving dealings between the not-for profit CRI and his own for-profit company. An unbiased account of many of these issues have been published by apologeticsindex.org here: <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/h13.html>. The controversy about Hanegraaff's blatant plagiarizing of Dr. James Kennedy's "Evangelism Explosion" which was documented by the well-known apologetic Robert Bowman (<http://www.atlantaapologist.org/COPYCAT.html>) was what I had known about CRI even before realizing that CRI was one of the main critics of GFI. Obviously, CRI's own ethics problems do not necessarily preempt their criticism of the Ezzos. However, it may be permitted to apply the same strict standards to them as they apply to GFI.

2.1.2 Kathleen Turner's article

Kathleen Turner's article entitled "More than a Parenting Ministry" can be downloaded from CRI's web site at: <http://www.equip.org/free/DG233.htm>. To make it easier to distinguish direct quotes from the article from my own comments, I will not only place the quotes within quote marks but also in italics fonts. According to the article she has an MBA degree. Apparently she has not earned a degree in theology. In the summary of her article Kathleen Turner lays out what she is after. She states: *"Parenting programs authored by Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo and promoted by Growing Families International (GFI), including Preparation for Parenting and Growing Kids Gods 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."* Clearly, it is what she terms the "cultic behavior" which is described as " ...including Scripture twisting, authoritarianism, exclusivism, isolationism, and physical and emotional endangerment," that is the main focus of the article. Turner then goes on to try to convince the reader that GFI is not a cult *per se* but a cult-like organization because in her judgment GFI exhibits these characteristics. The Ezzos have actually responded in public to the allegations leveled at them from Turner. Their defense appears to me well reasoned and I am therefore submitting their two articles to this letter as attachments (see "The Community Perspective - A Special Report" written to counter CRI's article [3], and "A Response to Christianity Today" dated November 13, 2000, written to counter Turner's CT article [4]). I encourage the committee to read and consider these attachments. Rather than repeat what the Ezzos themselves have written there I have added some of my own observations below.

1. "Scripture Twisting and Extra-biblical Revelation"

Temer states in her article "We first of all can unequivocally state that GFI is not a cult," yet goes on to suggest later that they may be guilty of the heresy of Pelagianism: *"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. Armenians, who believe in the freedom of man's will, would probably not go so far as to compare the Ezzos' view with Pelagianism. But Armenians 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."*

Having gone through the GKGW class at least four times, we have yet to find any evidence or even remote suggestion that the Ezzos would promote that salvation can be obtained through one's own will or asceticism. Let me quote from edition 5 of GKGW how the Ezzos teach about man's fall and free will (see GKGW, pp.16-17):

"Theologically, depravity is referred to as the sin nature, a condition of human nature passed on at conception from generation to generation. Depravity reflects the fact that man, by his own merits, can never achieve righteousness with his own efforts. Great is the grace of God to save unsavable man.

We do want to be careful how we define depravity and sin nature. When we say that an infant is born with a sin nature, we are not referring to his ability to make right and wrong moral choices. Newborns do not make such cognitive decisions, but the propensity of sin lies within their natures. Every child is subject to base elements of depravity. Depravity is not a barren state of corruption wherein man can do no good thing, but it is a condition of our humanity separating us from God.

Training the Heart

The primary consideration in early parenting is the child's heart and not simply outward behavior. There is something about the human heart that requires attention, and that is the focus of early training. ...

The general goal of heart training, the portion that parents can impact, is to help a child gain personal selfcontrol. Self-control in turn helps the child with controlling his tongue and his actions, handling negative emotions, and making sound judgments."

Further down GKGW states (pp. 22-23):

"Only by the Grace of God Can the Task of Parenting Be Achieved

The duty of Christian parents to instruct their children in the knowledge of God cannot be achieved apart from His grace. We know this in our own family...

As a parent, you want many things for your child. But the most important issue must be your child's salvation. You may wonder what you can do to influence your child's decision. "Isn't salvation a personal issue?" you ask. "I certainly don't have the power to make it happen." This is true. Salvation occurs, as the Bible says by grace alone, through faith alone. Yet many parents wrongly conclude that dependency upon grace means they should relinquish all responsibility or "let go and let God." The belief follows this logic: Why should parents bother to develop the moral character and conduct of their children if grace and salvation, the supreme goals, are not the direct result of moral training? ...

The simplest answer to that question is that God requires the training of children. Proverbs 22:6 calls parents to, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." ... "

It seems to me that Mrs. Temer didn't read these statements or didn't believe that the Ezzos meant it when they were writing them, as she compiled her article. In fact even when considering the passage that Ternner cites as proof of the Ezzo's Pelagianism, such an allegation can only be made by wildly interpreting into the passage what is not there. Such behavior (reinterpreting content and concealing opposing material) attests to ill will and at least to this reviewer demonstrates that Temer went about her review with her mind already made up.

2. "Authoritarianism"

One of Turner's contentions is that the Ezzos would limit the discussion of the students in class, citing the Ezzo's "Starting a Parenting Ministry" audiotape: *"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." ... "*

This contention is in stark contrast with the way we have always held our classes and with the way we feel the Ezzos wanted us to teach our classes. In order to understand Gary's statements it might have helped to provide some context. The "General Guidelines in Preparation for Class" [5, see attached] which were given to us and which we distributed to all class facilitators states among other things:

"...Group Discussion (approximately 15-30 minutes) - Group discussion is critical to clarification and practical application. Review the outline for the night's lesson and consider sharing some of the "Possible Discussion Topics" from the Session Guides section. Again, encourage participation from all students. Students should be told that there will be no arguments during class time. Disagreements regarding class material should be discussed at another time in private between the class leader and individual students. Feel free to contact Growing Families International or your Regional Representative for advice regarding difficult situations or questions."

From this it should be clear that arguments and argumentative discussions should be avoided in the class. This is a general rule for small group discussions and which incidentally our Family Groups also try to follow. Having been Family Group leaders in the past we have attended a few training sessions at [church] where questions have come up about unruly and/or argumentative behavior of participants. The consensus was to deflect arguments by funneling them into a personal discussion between the group leader (or assistant leader) and the person in question, or in difficult cases to get counseling ministers from [church] involved.

Furthermore, I'd like to direct your attention to Dr. [name]'s testimony [6, see attached] in which he states among other things: *"It's (the parenting course's) strength is in enabling parents to build support groups in which to listen to the Ezzos teach biblical parenting principles, and then discuss those principles with each other in the group setting. The principles are then applied at each of the families' homes and the group gets back together to discuss the results."* As Dr. [name] points out one of the strengths of this course is that the principles are discussed in the group setting which mediates and prevents falling into extremes: *"Where mistakes occur in the teaching of GKGW or in the application of GKGW, the group support system of the course should step in to help correct those problems."* It is obvious from both the Ezzo's point of view as well as from Dr. [name]'s and our own that group discussion is essential in helping the young parents digest and properly apply the concepts learned. It is also quite obvious that contentious arguments would disrupt the learning process, and should have no place in a small study group.

Let me also add the following excerpt about the "Do's and Don'ts in Leading a Class" which we received at a GFI workshop held in Columbia, SC, in January of 2000" [7, see attached]:

- "1. Do not start without church leadership approval. Do keep your church leadership informed.*
- 5. Do not be a legalistic leader. Do hold your class to the standard.*
- 6. Do not think you need all the answers or your children need to be perfect. Do walk in humility as required of spiritual leaders.*
- 7. Don't rush the fruit. Do give your parents a chance to grow.*
- 8. Do not let your class members think they have arrived. Do teach them humility by your example."*

These exhortations seem to me the exact opposite of authoritarianism either by the Ezzos or by the class facilitators.

3. "Exclusivism"

Terner starts off this paragraph with the statement: *"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.' ... "*

First of all, the name Growing Kids God's Way is just that, *i.e.*, a name. If we were to subject all Christian ministries to the same type of criticism of practicing exclusivism, we would for example have to question the Crown classes which are currently held with great success and support from [church]'s leadership since a variant of their financial stewardship classes is called "Discovering Gods Way of Handling Money Course." We would also have to warn people against reading books like Beverly LaHaye's "The Joy of Marriage God's Way," Kay Arthur's "Free from Bondage God's Way," or "Greater Health God's Way" by Stormie Omartian. Just check out amazon.com with the key words "God's Way" and you will find many more. Such criticism, which by the way also is seen in Dr. Dobson's statement, comes across as extremely petty and narrow-minded. If this is the best Terner can do in demonstrating GFI's exclusivism I am thoroughly under-impressed. By the way, the Ezzos have renamed their course material, which clearly shows that they don't put excessive emphasis on the name.

Regarding the second statement Terner makes in the above quote, it might be instructive to quote the whole context from which it is taken (prep, p. 21): *"It should not surprise us that the non-Christian holds a world-view on parenting that is fundamentally humanistic or man-centered in origin and purpose. But what is particularly alarming is the number of Christians who hold similar thoughts. In their thinking, they are Christians up to a point. Although they acknowledge the sufficiency of God and the Bible, they do not see a need to subject their personal opinions, reasoning, and emotions to the guidelines of Scripture in all areas of life. That creates a false dualism, the notion that there are sacred and secular sides to life. Dualism fosters the belief that God's Word is sufficient in the realm of religion but lacking in other areas "*

When read in context, it becomes clear that the Ezzos are not criticizing Christians and claiming that they are "Christians to a point" for holding divergent parenting philosophies. Rather they criticize the tendency to emulate the world's approach to parenting, rather than allowing themselves to be guided by God's Word.

Let me further comment on another one of Terner's "findings" which she describes as follows: *"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.' "*

The word *"countless"* is extremely misleading, as Terner certainly did not indicate that she ever made an attempt to actually count the number of these people. It clearly refers to anecdotal evidence she may or may not have collected personally and which can conveniently be exaggerated by referring to them as "countless." Yet, it serves her purpose to point out what she deems a general problem with GFI, divisiveness in the church. We certainly cannot exclude the fact that somewhere in the thousands of churches where GKGW are being or at one point have been taught in the past, there may be some zealots (in German we would probably call them "hundertfiftypercenters") who discredit the program by their arrogant behavior. However, let me state quite clearly, that both in the GKGW video courses and during their leadership conferences the Ezzos clearly point out that leaders and alumni are expected to lead humble lives, not to brag about the program, and only speak of it when asked, *i.e.*, when invited in someone else's life to share their parenting experiences. As a family we have always followed this advice. I know that the [names] have, too, and I am confident that I can make this statement for all parents at [our church] who have gone through the program. We have certainly never been accused of rejecting people who have not gone through the program. In fact some of our closest friends in [our town] have not only not gone through the program but decided it was not for them. On the other hand, it might actually be interesting to see how much divisiveness has been brought into churches by the agitation of people like Steve Rein, the owner of the ezzo.info web site. I do not have numbers but [name], the regional GFI rep in [city] has assured me that we are not alone in having to defend our use of GFI materials against people who consider it their duty to purge it from their churches discipleship courses.

4. "Isolationism"

Terner writes: *"One of Grace's [John MacArthur's Grace Community Church'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.*

This statement is very inflammatory and certainly untrue for our own church. Again, we don't want to give the impression that this could never happen with some hundredfiftypercenters out there, but to imply that this behavior is a result or even encouraged by the Ezzo's teaching is preposterous. Nowhere in the GFI material have we found any encouragement to pull back from other church families who do not follow the same approach. However, if Terner's criticism is to be taken literally, why stop at ostracizing the Ezzos and their followers. In line with the same argument perhaps we should rethink our approach to Christian private schools and homeschooling in general? Isn't it clear that many Christian parents, certainly a great number of families in TFC, use these avenues to allow their children to get a solid education while sheltering them from the damaging influence of worldly influence thus creating an "insulated community?"

The Ezzos encourage GFI graduates to continue to meet after they are done with their classes, to reinforce their efforts in parenting their children. We believe that this is not only a reasonable suggestion but probably comes naturally for any group or class where people have accompanied each other on a discipleship journey, and is certainly reflected in the way our Family Groups are clinging together. Finally, from a personal perspective as a parent: It is indeed much more easy to invite friends over whose children play well with ours and respect our property and theirs. Conversely, it is difficult to invite others when time and time again our children are in tears about their trashed rooms and toys after the friends have left. Yet, in none of the latter cases have we ever tried to "convert" these parents to the GFI program. Rather, we have explained to our children, that they have to take responsibility for what they allow their friends to do or not to do when they visit their rooms, and that they have the freedom to not share certain toys that could become damaged.

5. "Physical and Emotional Endangerment"

In this bullet Terner asserts: *"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. "*

This criticism obviously targets the Prep class for which I have already submitted my opinion (please refer to my letter from October 23 and its attachments, [1]). Let me add to what I have already written that Failure to Thrive (FTT) is not so uncommon among newborns. In a recent comment in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* 33 (2004) 847-848, Dr. Peter B. Sullivan from the John Radcliffe Hospital at the University of Oxford, England, states: *"The population prevalence of FTT has been found to range anywhere between 1.3% and 20.9% depending on the definition of FTT that is used."* and *"There is, in fact, little objective evidence to support this putative link with poverty [a link between poverty and FTT that has been suggested in some of the older literature]. "* *Recent studies suggest, in fact, that the majority of children with FIT come from the larger population of more 'average' income backgrounds "*

The Ezzos' critics often contend, based on anecdotal evidence, that *Prep for Parenting* and the Ezzos' *Babywise* book is responsible for thousands of FTT babies. While these numbers are obviously not researched, let me simply point out that even if they were true, it would represent a stellar record for GFI. Based on the *Babywise* book sales and the numbers of families that have gone through *Prep* a total of approximately up to 5 million babies may have been raised according to these principles. Assuming only the most conservative estimate of FTT babies of 1.3% this would translate in an expected number of $1.3\% \times 5 \text{ mio} = 65,000$ FTT babies over the years if the rate were the same as that of the general population. I readily admit that these numbers have no scientific relevance whatsoever, but they show that in order for the critics to do a better job criticizing the program with numbers, they should claim that hundreds of thousands of babies have suffered FTT due to the program.

I realize that in the above section I have not dealt with every single criticism that is presented in Terner's CRI (and CT) articles. Honestly, I don't think it is necessary to "drink the whole barrel to find that it is vinegar rather than wine" and have therefore only picked a couple of perhaps the most egregious examples of Terner's process of "fact-finding," *i.e.*, taking the Ezzos out of context, and conveniently leaving out pertinent information.