

Eric Abel was part of the GFI ministry from the late eighties to the mid nineties. His most visible role with GFI was when he and his wife Julie helped with the wrap up at the end of each teaching session on the first video version (4.0) of *Growing Kids God's Way*.

At one point after their departure from GFI, the Abels posted information regarding their involvement with the GFI ministry on their family website. Most of it was critical of the ministry and intellectually dishonest considering Eric's involvement with GFI and his friendship with the Ezzos. Why he changed so is a mystery that only Eric can answer, but we can share some of his personal thoughts about the Ezzos after his departure that gives some evidence of their friendship. A short note to the Ezzos read: "Julie and I want you to know – We thank God for you often. You should be aware, that despite our separation, we are still very grateful to you and Anne Marie for your past influence. Thank you for pointing us in the right direction." This was written after his resignation letter which was also very supportive of the ministry teaching.

The many false statements from Eric's website give us some idea of why it was necessary for the Ezzos to separate from him. We have reviewed his statements about GFI teachings and the Ezzos personally and our responses are detailed in these pages. Eric's statements (excerpted from his comments posted on his old website) are in bold, and are followed by our responses. While Eric has chosen to remove his website, Steve Rein has kept it before the public by providing a link to an archived copy from his anti-Ezzo site, hence the need for a detailed response.

1. "As God would further have it, we parted company with this organization in 1994."

Response: Actually, Eric did not "part company with this organization in 1994" as his statement asserts. While his leadership role at GFI ended in 1994, he remained an employee of GFI until February 2nd, 1996 in the graphic arts department. Nowhere in his public response does Eric provide this information, or correct the false impression that he totally disassociated himself from the ministry in 1994. Payroll records confirm this employment period, and it is overtly dishonest for Eric to claim to have "parted company" with GFI in 1994 without providing further clarification. This type of slanting or twisting of facts is found throughout his public response regarding GFI. This provides the reader with objective evidence of at least one of the reasons the Ezzos finally felt compelled to ask Eric to step down from GFI leadership, despite their longstanding ministry partnership and personal friendship.

2. "It was 100% our decision to step down from the leadership of this organization in 1994."

Response: Why Eric would claim this when a paper trail proves the opposite is a mystery. Eric joined the staff of GFI as Director of Ministries and chief advisor to the Ezzos in 1992 and was *asked* to step down from his leadership position in 1994. It was

not “100%” his decision as his statement asserts. In a letter from Gary Ezzo to Eric dated August 28, 1994, four days before Eric submitted his resignation as Director of Ministry with GFI, Gary stated in part: “...maybe it is best to bring our public ministry partnership to a close. This is not an easy statement for us to make....” Eric then submitted his letter of resignation on September 1st, 1994. Curiously, in his letter of resignation, Eric expressed his support of the GFI ministry with the following statement: “This withdrawal [from ministry leadership] does not stand as a denial of my support for the ministry—quite the contrary is true! Not only do I endorse the Ezzo’s [sic] personal ministry to young families, but I can wholeheartedly recommend the curriculum they promote.”

3. “...the impression they (the Ezzos) give is that somehow parents are responsible for changing a child’s heart...”

Response: We have taught GKGW over 18 times and we can’t figure out how Eric arrived at that conclusion. From the Foundations chapter of GKGW (p. 11) “...parents cannot raise godly children apart from regeneration. The Bible warns against this.” And then, (p. 17) “The general goal of heart training, *the portion that parents can impact*, is to help a child gain personal self-control.” (Emphasis ours.) Yes, the goal of training and disciplining our children is certainly to reach their hearts with the truth of the gospel – that apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, there is no hope for us as sinners, that apart from God’s grace, not one of us can live a holy life; but nowhere in GKGW or any other GFI materials do we see parents being made “responsible for changing a child’s heart” as Eric has claimed.

4. “... parents are encouraged to rely on outward compliance as a key to heart training.”

Response: This is the exact opposite of what GFI materials teach. The outward behavior does not always mirror what is going on in the heart. If a child complies with instruction but has a poor attitude, the parents have compliance—but the child has not truly obeyed in his heart. A child may sit down “on the outside,” but may be standing up (in rebellion) “on the inside.” Outward compliance in no way assures that a child understands the moral or even practical “why” of the instruction he has been given. (Lesson one GKGW, How to Raise a Moral Child.) GKGW parents are encouraged to do the hard work of moral instruction as often as it takes for that moral truth to take root...so that eventually the child will come to the place where they do right out of love of virtue, not out of fear of reproof. Outward compliance may be necessary in the early years as a schoolmaster to bring the child to an understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, but the eventual goal is that the child’s own inner moral conscience will be developed and sensitized to the moral truths of scripture so that the child has self-generated initiative to do what is right—because it is right and because it pleases God.

Also, many examples are also given describing how two children may have exactly the same behavior, and for one child it is wrong, while for another it is not—the motive of the heart and the presence or absence of previous instruction along with a host of other

issues such as characterization of behavior and age of the child come into play here. So outward compliance can certainly not be the primary focus—or all similar behavior would be treated the same.

5. “God’s word and the Holy Spirit must be in the equation if real change is going to occur. Both of these elements are seldom addressed in any GFI curriculum.”

Response: GFI material is saturated with biblical references and references to the necessary work of the Holy Spirit. The Foundations chapter in GKGW is a treatise on the role of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of regeneration process, and how this is critical to the training of moral principles. We see the primary emphasis of GKGW (especially) to be that of rightly understanding the biblical principles associated with Christian living. We do NOT see a great emphasis on conformity to practice as Eric suggests. The practical suggestions (or vehicles) to deliver the biblical principles are clearly taught as such and separated from the biblical principle itself. We wonder if Eric would have the same criticism of James Dobson as he makes practical Christian living suggestions. In his book, Dare To Discipline, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned once in the entire book. It was full of ideas for parenting but does not touch the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. In writing to a Christian audience, perhaps such things are assumed, but apparently Dobson didn’t choose to include that in his discussion. The Ezzos felt compelled to include it in theirs.

GKGW is also not intended to be a treatise on the Christian life and sanctification in general...it is specifically for the purpose of training parents in passing along moral truths and moral instruction to their children. The work of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Word of God on a child’s heart are hopefully things that a parent will be instructed in adequately in the teaching from the pulpit in his church and from other sources. Unfortunately, few churches adequately address the particulars of the moral training of children, which is where GKGW fills such a critical need in our culture today.

5. “GFI claims that parents can avoid the “terrible twos” and teenage rebellion with proper child training.

Response: The Ezzos claim no such thing. Eric is simply mistaken. Again, from the Foundations chapter of GKGW (p18) “From our experience, we have identified three major periods of conflict in the life of a child. The first period is between 14 and 40 months, the second between 9 and 12, and the last between 19 and 22 years.” (p19) “Parents should expect conflict during this primary stage and should consider it a time of growth for both parent and child.” We have heard the Ezzos state that rebellion is a part of the human condition, and that it occurs throughout a child’s life. They do stand in opposition to the idea that the “twos” and “teens” are tumultuous periods of a child’s life that parents must simply *endure* and that they should not try to train through the

difficulties. I think the Ezzos would say (and we agree) that consistent, early training will go a long way toward diminishing conflict in the “twos” and consistent building of relationships with the pre-teens will diminish conflict in the teen years. But, we have never heard them say that a parent can somehow avoid a child’s rebellion at any age.

6. “GFI promotes pride and exclusivity.”

Response: We disagree. Some people who have a wrong understanding of what GFI teaches may exhibit pride and exclusivity, but such behavior is HIGHLY discouraged by the Ezzos. Scripture itself clearly does not teach pride or exclusivity but we see this behavior in all realms of the Christian community. (We also see it characterizing those Christians intolerant of the view promoted by the Ezzos.) Because Eric may have observed pride and exclusivity in *some* people exposed to GFI teachings does not allow him to conclude that the teaching is at fault, any more than you can logically conclude from the same behavior seen in a church member that the church’s teaching is at fault. We are all at a different place in our Christian walk. Because of this, when we sit under various teachings we will not always hear the full truth of what is being taught. Should we stop teaching because some misunderstand and behave in an ungodly way? Perhaps we should just trust in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of those people in His good timing.

7. “GFI has told followers that they can expect division from friends and family. They promote the phrase ‘biblical ethics divide’ as if striving for a higher standard may bring some sort of suffering for righteousness sake...”

Response: Scripture itself is clear—that IS the life of a Christian. We are to live “in” the world but are not to be “of” the world. We can expect that if we choose to live by biblical standards, we will make some people uncomfortable (because they live by a different standard), and there may be relational tensions and struggles. As we grow in our Christian walk, we also commonly tend to gravitate towards those who think the same as we do. That is the natural relationship building process. Surely Eric has his own friends, his own personal preferences, and actively engages in relationship building with people that the Lord has brought into his life for a specific purpose. We parents need to be not only the guardians of our children’s hearts (as God’s agents) but also protectors of their physical, emotional and spiritual health. Choosing those with whom we will spend a great deal of time on a regular basis is all part of that process. Jesus spoke on these matters in Matthew 6:22, 10:34, and 19:29. It is for the sake of obedience to the Lord that a parent would choose to train their children in the way of the Lord, to diligently instruct them in God’s moral principles, and to require that “higher standard” that Eric mentions. It is very difficult to parent against the tide of culture. The Ezzos encourage parents to fortify themselves with healthy relationships, and to find mentors who understand their Christian parenting goals so they can “bear one another’s burdens.” “Like-mindedness,” by the way, is a virtue to be sought after according to Paul (Phil 2:2). Parents do have a right to exercise good judgment in their choice of friends for

themselves and their children – that is not exclusivity, nor is it separatism. It is just making wise choices for the family. That may involve difficult choices regarding family, friends, or even the church we attend.

8. “...GFI presents other practices as inferior.”

Response: It is understood by GFI that there are many ways to parent. Just look at the hundreds of books and tapes that are available about parenting. It is the job of any author to clearly present his case, and how it might be different (yes, and perhaps even better) than the others. To teach biblical parenting is to naturally infer that methods other than those that are biblical are contrary to God’s purpose. However, there are certain parenting preferences that have biblical underpinnings, but may be different in application. From p. 8, GKGW, *“Therefore, parents, guided by their own convictions have the ultimate responsibility and duty to research parenting philosophies available today and then make an informed decision as to what is best for their family.”* I can’t see how it can be made any clearer that the Ezzos do not promote that theirs is the only way to parent effectively. We have many friends that have raised very godly families and have not gone through GFI materials. The Ezzos material is a just a tool, not unlike other practical helps used by many Christians.

9. “The various titles such as Growing Kids God’s Way” implies what students are about to read is more than just somewhat biblical.”

Response: Clearly, the title is descriptive of what the Ezzos are planning to present – biblical ethics for parenting. Eric knows that throughout the text of GKGW parents are encouraged to distinguish between the moral principles found in God’s Word, and the practical application of those principles. The two are never confused, nor do the Ezzos claim to have the inside track on “God’s Way” of parenting. This criticism certainly seems petty, especially in light of the many other publications that have similar titles. A random search on amazon.com to see how many books used “God’s Way” in their title produced staggering results. There were over 150 titles including such notable authors as Stormie Omartian, Charles Stanley, and Kay Arthur. There is even *Golfing, God’s Way*.

10. “GFI stresses that the ‘friendship phase’ should be the end result of parenting. This non-biblical perspective caused us to disregard an early relationship with our children...”

Response: If Eric disregarded an early relationship with his children, then he disregarded all the discussion in GKGW about learning his children’s love languages, about building trust and treading carefully in a child’s private world, about spending quality and quantity time with the children, about transitioning through the middle years with relationship building efforts and leading by influence instead of authority. The friendship “phase” of parenting really defines a time when the child has become morally mature. Relationship building with one’s children begins from day one. The three earlier phases all are in

preparation for this final phase. A goal to relate to our children as morally responsible young adults does not seem to be “non-biblical.” We count our children among our best friends even though they range from 1 to 15. We cannot think of anyone we would rather spend time with than our children. However, that does not mean that they are all ready for a “peer” relationship with us. That will come in time as they move through the teen years to full moral maturity, ready to move into the adult community.

11. “Unfortunately, GFI is a para-church organization, a for-profit venture, accountable to no church leadership, accountable to no board of directors, and as such, controversy is inevitable.

Response: There are many para-church ministries that serve the Body of Christ and the Church Universal, without being a ministry of a particular local church. Navigators, Focus on the Family, CRI, Ligonier, just to name a few. There is no scriptural basis that we know of for asserting that para-church organizations are anti-biblical or unbiblical. As a matter of fact, many churches are very happy to have these organizations available as ministry partners. As long as the leaders of the organization are members of a local church, and are accountable to their church leadership, they are covered under the biblical authority structure. The Ezzos fulfill the biblical mandates in this regard.

True, “GFI” is an organization, not a person and therefore is not accountable to anyone. However, the Ezzos as leaders of GFI, have always placed themselves and their teachings under the authority of their local church leadership. They also have many counselors and advisors, not the least of which are their team of National Ministry Overseers (a current and former pastor are on that team). They provide accountability, council, guidance, and spiritual support to the Ezzos. Controversy is inevitable, not because GFI is a para-church organization and not because of a lack of accountability, but because of the spiritual battle that rages around us and the fact that Satan uses men for his own devices to try to sow division in the Kingdom. He delights in dividing families and any attempt to bring families under biblical authority can be expected to be met with his resistance.

Eric may need to be reminded that Christianity itself is controversial. Controversy is not inevitable because of the structure of GFI. It is inevitable because the ministry is doing Kingdom work and lives are being directed to God’s Word, and this places the ministry squarely in the battle zone. The tax structure of the GFI ministry (choosing to pay taxes instead of avoiding taxes as a “not for profit”) was the best organizational arrangement to keep the ministry completely above reproach with all the taxing entities. Eric is no doubt also aware that shortly after he left GFI, *someone* made a complaint to the State of California about GFI’s organizational structure. The State investigated and only had high praises for their meticulous record keeping and organizational structure. (Letters on file.)

We hope these responses answer some of Eric Abel’s statements about GFI. We cannot judge Eric’s heart motivation for making such erroneous and hurtful remarks about the

Ezzos and their ministry. However, we can be sure that he will stand before the Lord to give an accounting. Sadly, the type of public comments that Eric made reveal far more about Eric's character than anything GFI or the Ezzos might share. At one time, he was sincere in his praise and support of the GFI ministry (well beyond when he left the organization), and now he is sincere in his disapproval of the same. Sincerity does not have any bearing upon truth or error. Many people are sincerely wrong in their opinions on many topics. Because some of what Eric wrote is clearly opinion and cannot be proved or disproved, and much of what he wrote is clearly refuted from a close look at the actual teaching itself, it is hard to see how any credibility has been given to Eric's comments regarding the GFI ministry. Those who are not seeking to support their own biases will read Eric's comments with some skepticism, and will perhaps be able to understand some of the concerns about Eric which led the Ezzos to call for his separation from GFI.

The Ezzos have clearly tried to protect Eric and his family from embarrassment over the years since Eric's original posting. Despite the erroneous and inflammatory statements made by Eric, the Ezzos have never responded in kind.

However, since his comments continue to be posted on the Internet and used as "evidence" that some of the "original" families involved in the ministry have turned against the Ezzos, many friends of the GFI ministry feel that a little more of the story needs to be told so that those seeking to evaluate the GFI ministry and its materials can take a fair look at both sides of the story.

In conclusion, Eric's attitudes toward the Ezzos do not characterize the attitudes of the rest of the couples who were a part of the early years of ministry. We have met many of these early couples and all are intensely grateful to the Ezzos for their teaching and the godly influence they had on their families—and many are still very actively involved in the ministry. In fact, *THE* "original" couple, who first started asking parenting questions in the Ezzos' living room over 20 years ago and started the whole idea of teaching on parenting, has attended the GFI National Alumni and Leadership Conference now for the last two years, teaching workshops and offering keynote addresses.