

## **From GFI Response to Christianity Today**

### **Attachment Five: The Ezzos' Departure from Living Hope Cyberspace Rumors and the Ezzo's Church Status**

We would like to address the unfortunate and hurtful rumors floating through cyberspace related to our church status. At the heart of these rumors is an assertion that we are currently under church discipline by the elders of our former church. If there were any biblical merit to this, we could not be members in good standing of a well respected evangelical church, sitting under normal elder accountability, and given the freedom to minister our gifts, as is presently the case.

These unfortunate rumors began last March (2000), shortly after we withdrew our membership from Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship. The decision to leave our little church was not an easy one, but it was necessary. We were informed of some disturbing information related to the pastor and some elders. (The original elders that helped start the church are no longer with the church.) We privately investigated the matter, and confirmed the reports. After sharing our concerns, and observing the elder's response, and given the weight of evidence, we felt it would be best for us to quietly leave and turn the entire matter over to the Lord. And so we did.

A week later, in a type of riposte to our departure, the elders handed us a letter that claimed while still a member, Gary falsely accused the pastor and his wife, and a third party of gossip. Instead of agreeing to sit down and talk about these claims, they gave us one week to unconditionally accept allegations as true, or else immediately face church discipline for not "repenting." The elder's actions seem a bit drastic and vindictive. The Pastor knew exactly what he was doing. Any hope to understand the immediate issue was made difficult with the pastor's staunch refusal to talk, or provide explanation or substantiation for the mysterious charges to anyone including us, even to this day.

In an attempt to explain our departure from the church, the pastor told his congregation that he and the elders had pursued the Ezzos privately for months on sin issues, and our departure was the result of them beginning a church discipline process with us. He then warned his congregation that they must "trust their elders," not to talk to the Ezzos, or they would be in "rebellion against God." Fortunately, there were enough spiritually mature people that did personally investigate the matter.

As Living Hope members and others began to press for answers, the truth and circumstances of our departure did finally come out. There was no pursuit of the Ezzos, let alone for months and months as the elders first claimed, no misconduct, or questionable character, and no real charges. There was just a young elder board that made some small mistakes and then tried to cover them up. Six weeks after our departure while we were enjoying the fellowship of our present church family, and without any ecclesiastical authority, the former pastor declared us dismissed from his fellowship. From this action the rumors began.

There have been four independent reviews of the Living Hope incident, involving more than fifteen Godly men living locally and around the country. Each review added to the following conclusions: 1) The pastor failed to substantiate any of the charges made against the Ezzos; 2) the elder's response to the Ezzos' departure failed to meet the most basic criteria for bringing an accusation against a brother, (Matt: 18:15; 1 Tim 5:19), let alone initiating a "church discipline" process (Matt. 18:17); 3) The elders themselves were not above reproach in their dealings with the Ezzos and other members who shared similar concerns, and finally, 4) the elders acted arbitrarily. They had no ecclesiastical authority to claim the "right" of discipline on a nonmember of their church. Thus the rumor "the Ezzos were excommunicated from their church" lacks all historical factualness, biblical basis, and authority.

Epilogue: Many months have passed since the Living Hope incident took place. We have since moved on in ministry with the encouragement and support of the GFI Regional Administrators and our pastor. Although we are members of a great church, we will never forget the joy we had ministering among the wonderful families of Living Hope. We have no regrets for lending support for the start-up of this church, nor do we question our final decision and need to separate from it. We continue to pray for reconciliation of those involved in this unfortunate matter.