

GARY AND ANNE MARIE EZZO: WHAT IS WRONG WITH THEIR TEACHING ON PARENTING?

The following is adapted from a letter I wrote to John MacArthur, the pastor of Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo. Gary and Anne Marie have developed a series of parenting courses (“Preparation for Parenting” and “Growing Kids God’s Way” are the most popular) which are being taught in an increasing number of churches. These courses are not without controversy. Christianity Today did a disturbing story on the Ezzos, titled “Brave New Baby” in the August 1993 issue. Unfortunately, it only scraped the surface and did not deal with the troubling way in which the Ezzos use Scripture to present a personal philosophy which they purport is a “biblical mindset”.

Over a year ago, I first became aware of Gary’s and Anne Marie’s radio program. The title grabbed my attention—“Growing Kids God’s Way”. I expected solid teaching from the Word of God and instead heard a lot of talk about peripheral issues not even mentioned in Scripture. That prompted my first and subsequent letters, as well as an investigation of the Ezzos’ teaching. I am most disturbed by what I have discovered thus far and feel compelled to bring it to attention of others within the Body of Christ.

Before I outline my concerns, I think it is important that readers know my basic presuppositions regarding the Bible as a source of parenting instruction:

1. I hold the evangelical view of the Bible as the Word of God—inspired, inerrant, authoritative, etc. I believe the Bible contains all we need to know in order to find salvation, obey God, and live holy lives. It is complete.
2. The Bible contains God’s plan for people everywhere—regardless of our race, gender, culture, place in history, economic level, or social status.
3. The Bible contains God’s plan for the family. This plan can be implemented everywhere and anywhere, by anyone at any time in history. It is a truly cross-cultural plan. While various particulars may vary from family to family, there are unchangeable principles and commands that must not vary. These are clearly stated in Scripture.
4. If someone is to present a truly biblical plan for the family, he or she must differentiate between what God actually said and the teacher’s own method of implementing God’s plan. Anything described as a “biblical method” should contain only explanation and amplification of Scripture—and, being biblical, it must be universally applicable.
5. Scripture should be interpreted in light of what God means to communicate to us, not in light of what meaning we might wring from a passage.

While I assume that Gary would agree with me on my first point above, in practice he seems to disagree with my other four points. (For instance, “playpen time”, an important element of his behavioristic plan, presumes access to a playpen. This item might not be found in all cultures and times, and might not be affordable for all families. Another example: our disagreement on God’s message to us in Matthew 27:46 speaks to point #5.) Our major fundamental difference is perhaps how we ascribe degrees of authority to theological statements (or parenting advice that claims to be biblical). In this area, I follow a process like that described by Millard J. Erickson:

1. Direct statements of Scripture carry the most authority, followed by
2. Direct implications of Scripture
3. Probable implications of Scripture
4. Inductive conclusions from Scripture
5. Conclusions inferred from the general revelation
6. Outright speculation (1)

I would argue that Gary Ezzo seems to base his teaching on conclusions and outright speculation, and yet attempts to assign to his parenting philosophy the authoritative weight of direct statements of Scripture.

In my interpretation and study of the Bible, I have adopted a methodology similar to that espoused by Charles Hodge, although we may disagree on some of the nonessential areas of doctrine.(2) In addition, I would agree with much of Daniel P. Fuller’s analysis of various schools of biblical interpretation.(3) I mention all this only so that readers may know better how to interpret my concerns and conclusions.

My intention in writing is not to defend my parenting practices and the biblical foundation for them, nor to clear up Gary’s misinterpretation of my philosophy nor even to counter his charge of exaggeration.(4) Instead I wish to express concern over three major issues:

1. Gary’s insistence on labeling his personal parenting philosophy as exclusively biblical;
2. his misuse of Scripture to support that claim; and
3. his ungracious response to those who would question him.

I am not the only one who has voiced the first two concerns. One woman wrote to her pastor:

...the Ezzos’ thesis, in my opinion, is based on a serious misinterpretation or misrepresentation of a basic foundational truth to our whole rationale as Christians.

...while the Ezzos are criticizing certain behavioristically-based child-rearing techniques, labeling them humanistic, they are, at the same time, promoting other behavioristically-based techniques, labeling them Biblical. A humanist's problem is not the behavioristic techniques he uses, whether that means either directly manipulating the child's environment (much like the Ezzos' approach), or the other extreme, "democratic" non-involvement. His problem is the basis on which he uses those techniques, i.e., in a universe without a Moral Absolute (that is, God), man, if properly conditioned, will become morally acceptable. The Ezzos' approach is exactly the same. The basis on which they use their own brand of behavioristic techniques is that in a universe with a Moral Absolute (that is, God), man, if properly conditioned, will become morally acceptable. Grace is not seen as a practicable or viable option in developing a parenting style...

The Ezzos stress the concept of "original sin", as well they should, that being foundational in a proper understanding of grace. Calvinism asserts that because of "original sin", every man is totally depraved and can do no good work unless he is assisted by God's grace. I assume your theological stance is Calvinistic, therefore, you must agree that although we don't live in a moral vacuum, nor would we want to, grace is essential in allowing each of us personal access to God...since relationship with God is our goal, moral conformity is not, nor in fact would it contribute in any way to that goal. (5)

I might add that holiness is an entirely different matter. It is interesting that while Gary seems to stress that our children should be "morally upright", that their behavior conform to our standards, and that we should desire to bring about a (in my mind totally unbiblical) state of "spiritual inertia" in our children, nowhere does he stress the doctrine of sanctification or the pursuit of personal holiness.

Perhaps readers might be interested in some of the testimony presented at Lake Avenue Congregational Church when the leadership re-examined and ultimately rejected the "Preparation for Parenting" course that was being taught there.

One father wrote: "...the spirit in which the Ezzos deliver their methodology is elitist and divisive. They insist that their way is the only way to raise children...NO WHERE do I see anything in the Bible which allows this sort of claim to exclusivity in child-raising..." He went on to comment ominously, "One of the first steps toward a cult is a unilateral claim on exclusivity." (6)

Another couple wrote, "It is our opinion that the Ezzos are teaching their own personal parenting techniques, and labeling them as biblical truths...The real danger is that they are indoctrinating an entire age group of young christian parents by calling their teaching biblical. Time and time again we came away from the Ezzos' classes trying to figure out how they could 'stretch' biblical meanings of scripture verses to justify and accommodate their own techniques and opinions...we feel they are promoting a type of cult. Gary and Anne Marie personally taught the first seminar we attended. They emphatically stated...that we should not discuss anything we learned in class with

outsiders...Gary and Anne Marie worked to make us feel as though we would be 'Godly Parents' by cutting a new path and that this path would be opposed by many people....The Ezzos teach that their parenting method is the only one that is truly God's way". (7)

Yet a third letter says, "Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo state that their parenting techniques are truly and unequivocally 'God's Way' for rearing children. Not only this, but they make it quite clear that other parenting styles, especially opposing ones, are not biblical and are not 'God's Way'...Once young couples are initially committed to the Ezzo program(s)...they are specifically told not to discuss what they will be learning with outsiders, nor to be concerned with their opposition or conflicting viewpoints. Gary Ezzo claims these viewpoints are societal and cultural in nature and that they have no biblical basis. These kind of cultic overtones are very alarming to me." (8) These three letters were from parents who had been through the "Prep" course and included honors graduates of both colleges and graduate schools, a university professor, and leaders within the church.

Readers might also be interested in knowing how some professionals in the field of lactation are responding to the "Preparation for Parenting" course. One wrote to a pastor:

You may be aware that there is great controversy within Evangelical churches as to the validity of the program in general. Recently Lake Avenue Congregational in Pasadena voted on accepting it. In case you are unfamiliar with that church, it's a large conservative, Evangelical body located within blocks of Fuller Seminary. The night that this program was presented, they voted it down, based on strong objections brought by professors from the School of Theology, School of World Missions, and School of Psychology. Additionally, a 17 year veteran pediatric nurse practitioner, who is a world renowned authority on breastfeeding, among other things, stood and said, "Please be aware that if you implement this, you WILL in the future be sued when a baby is injured or dies. I've personally recently seen four Failure to Thrive babies in my practice that were a direct result of the teaching in the 'Preparation for Parenting' portion of the program."

I have a particular interest in Failure-to-thrive, as I've developed a specialty in working with these babies. They are literally dehydrating and malnourished and often wind up in hospitals. This is caused by inadequate breastmilk intake, which happens for a variety of reasons. Though Mrs. Ezzo has an RN, the fact is that nursing schools do not train students in management of the breastfeeding mother and infant. The information that the Ezzos [teach] about feeding schedules is absolutely incorrect...Let me restate that this is NOT a matter of opinion but of FACT and the results are turning out to be devastating to the families of the babies who have more sensitive systems and no reserve to deal with these inadequately prescribed "schedules"...You might also wish to know that at this conference I attended...approximately 100 health care providers were strongly warned about this program and how badly babies and families are

suffering...It had enough of an impact that hours later it was still THE topic of disturbing discussion... (9)

I have now heard that least a dozen babies in Southern California have been diagnosed “failure to thrive” as a result of their parents’ implementation of the Ezzo method. At least one baby required hospitalization and was expected to live only hours, but survived. Another lost 25% of body weight within two weeks of birth. What bothers the professionals involved is the evasive answers they are being given by some of these parents as to how often the baby nurses, whether the baby is nursing at night, etc. Only when the parents realize how serious their baby’s condition is do they become completely forthright. As a result, some professionals are now beginning to ask routinely if parents have taken any parenting classes or seminars; so far parents seem willing to admit if they have taken the “Prep” course. I am appalled that Gary and Anne Marie would appear to encourage parents to be evasive with their pediatricians and other health care providers. I cannot help but question the honesty and motives behind such a stance. Whose best interests do the Ezzos have at heart—theirs or the babies?

I am told that one county in Southern California has considered declaring this to be a public health issue. How does this reflect on the Body of Christ and on what the Bible really does teach? How am I to counter those who would claim that, given these tragic results, “biblical parenting” must be abusive at worst, misinformed at best? Why is it that Gary feels his “parent-controlled feeding plan” is “God’s Way” and thus the only way? Why does he teach behaviorism and attempt to claim this is God’s plan?

The issue that has troubled a number of people who have read my series of correspondence with the Ezzos is my third concern: Gary’s ungracious response to those who would question him. What is readily apparent to those that have read our correspondence is that Gary has not demonstrated what I believe to be some of the character traits and qualifications of ministers (see Hebrews 5:2, Titus 2:1,7, James 3:1,17-18, I Corinthians 4:12, Malachi 2:7, II Tim 3:16 among others). He has not demonstrated compassion, humility, meekness, or wisdom. I could not hold him up as a good example of sound teaching or of how one should respond to questions or criticism. In fact, I feel he has violated II Tim 2:24-26: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.” (I assume Gary sees me as being taken captive in this manner; his letters give that impression.) I write this accusation with trembling. It is a serious thing to say that a minister has violated Scripture. I am reminded of I Timothy 5:19, 20: “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.” I don’t know if I am the first “witness” to approach Gary’s pastor with these concerns, or if there have been others. (I attempted to bring other “witnesses” with me by quoting them earlier in this letter regarding my first concerns.)

It is interesting that Gary feels compelled to resort to ad hominem arguments. (He has done this in his letters to me and in at least one other letter that I have read as well.) Thus, according to his letters, I am basing my parenting on the “primitivistic marsupial mother approach”; I “tend to exaggerate”; I’m merely a “young mother in the process”. Gary also came to some conclusions that those to whom I have shown his letters find laughable. He concluded that I slept with Isaac, that I believe “cribs and playpens should be banned from existence” (I own both, and even addressed the usefulness of playpens in one of my letters!), that I have no predictability in my life, that I believe God is “sitting on the edge of His throne waiting to jump up at our every cry trying to prove He loves us”—in short, that I subscribe to a philosophy and practice that I defended nowhere in my letters—a philosophy that is mostly foreign to my way of thinking. Gary also presumes to make conclusions regarding my theological training, Bible knowledge, and even my age. I can only shake my head in bewilderment and wry amusement. (Perhaps, given the way our culture prizes feminine youthfulness, I should take “young mother” as a compliment. Alas, I don’t think flattery was Gary’s intent.)

In my early teens I grappled with issues of Scriptural inspiration and inerrancy, and I often flung my probing questions at my pastor father. Never once did he say, “I doubt any of my answers will satisfy you, Rebecca. There are too many differences in our starting points, premises, theological training, years of experience, and Bible knowledge. There is no way we can have meaningful dialogue.” Instead, he got out his Bible and showed me why he believed what he did. He taught me that his faith, based on God’s Word, could withstand the most intense and careful scrutiny. He welcomed my questions because he knew they would guide me to the truth. I have, perhaps somewhat naively, expected the same sort of response from others who would presume to teach within the Body of Christ. That is why I have been so troubled by Gary’s letters, both to me and to others who have written him.

I cannot help but conclude that Gary is incapable of a logical, biblical defense of his parenting philosophy (in part because I believe that no such defense exists). Perhaps that is what causes both the tone of his responses and their lack of true substance: his teaching cannot withstand scrutiny. My father won both my intellect and my heart with his life, ministry, and teaching. Gary has responded in a manner that other readers of his letters have described as “rude” and “arrogant”. (My husband was surprised to discover the Ezzos are grandparents. He somehow expected a grandfather would exhibit more wisdom and courtesy.) Although Gary is described as “warm” and “sympathetic” in public, his relationship with his detractors paints a completely different picture.

I would appreciate any information or knowledgeable opinions from readers. Please feel free to address e-mail to RUMPELST. (If anyone would like to know how John MacArthur purportedly responded to my letter, I will answer questions via e-mail.)

ENDNOTES

1. Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 79-80
2. Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B. Eerdmans, reprinted 1989) Vol. I, pg. 10-17. Especially relevant is Hodge's statement on page 13: "...if the Bible asserts that Christ's death was a satisfaction to justice, the theologian is not allowed to merge justice into benevolence in order to suit his theory of the atonement." I might add that we also must not merge parenting analogies and discipline into the picture either, merely to suit our theories of either the atonement or the correct response to our babies' cries. (See my letter of 22. April 1993 and Gary's response.) Hodge writes, "We must take the facts of the Bible as they are, and construct our system so as to embrace them in all their integrity." I do not see how Gary has done so.
3. D. P. Fuller, "History of Interpretation", The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1982. I too "insist on discovering the consciously intended meaning which the author or redactor of a text wanted to share with his readers." Similarly disenchanted as was O. Cullman in his early years, I find troubling any attempts "to make the facts of Scripture fit a modern philosophical view." This, I might add, includes every modern view, be it humanism, behaviorism, or any other philosophy not derived from Scripture.
4. My "exaggeration" was merely an attempt to mimic what Francis Schaeffer termed "taking the roof off" by showing the absurdity of a conclusion logically derived from Gary's statements. I offered apology and explanation in my response to his first letter, which I know he received because it was followed up by a phone call from Cheryl Williams, on his staff.
5. letter on file
6. letter on file
7. letter on file
8. letter on file
9. letter on file; the writer is a lactation professional as well as the wife of a pastor