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Christianity Today, Week of March 19

Babywise Publisher Plans Contract Cancellation

Multnomah editor now considers Ezzo book "dangerous."

By Corrie Cutrer | posted 3/23/01

Multnomah Publishers, a small Christian publishing company in Sisters, Oregon, has begun severing ties with one of its most profitable and controversial authors, Gary Ezzo, according to a reliable company source.

A household name among many Christian parents with newborns, Ezzo has been unable to shed doubts about the child-rearing methods in his popular book On Becoming Babywise. In addition, church leaders with past ties to Ezzo describe him as "disqualified" for Christian ministry and his parenting materials as "fraught with danger" (CT, Nov. 13, 2000, p. 70).

A central element of the Ezzo plan is feeding newborns on a structured schedule controlled by parents, rather than "on-demand," whenever an infant indicates hunger. Ezzo's program teaches that in order to develop respectful, obedient, and godly children, parents must exercise restrictive control. Ezzo and his Growing Families International (GFI) organization report that more than 500,000 infants have been trained to sleep soundly through the night through the method.

Yet many breast-feeding mothers have reported a failure to produce an adequate milk

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reported a failure to produce an adequate milk supply when following the program. Some pediatricians see inadequate weight gain, dehydration, and failure to thrive among newborns on the program. Ezzo has also instructed parents of the importance of leaving infants alone in their cribs so the infants will experience periods of solitude. Many parents have admitted, however, that they left their children crying alone for too long while trying to follow Ezzo's recommendations for scheduled feeding and nap times. Critics also question other Ezzo emphases, such as introducing a form of spanking in children younger than 2.

Multnomah's decision to break ties with the author came after years of persistent controversy regarding Ezzo's professional and personal integrity. Several churches that Ezzo and his wife, Anne Marie, have attended have publicly rebuked the author for his lack of truthfulness and failure to distinguish between his preferences and biblical teaching.

Despite having no medical training or health-care certification, Ezzo first published his methods in *Preparation for Parenting*, a book that contained many biblical references. Later, he removed the religious references and renamed the book *On Becoming Babywise*. Robert Bucknam, a Colorado physician, is listed as coauthor of *Babywise*, although no substantial changes were made to the original text or to the methods taught after Bucknam signed on.

Multnomah began investigating the allegations by contacting physicians and other professionals qualified to discuss early childhood development. The inquiry itself was a reversal for the publisher. About a year ago, Multnomah issued a lengthy statement defending Ezzo and his parenting philosophies. But ongoing public pressure from journalist Frank York, one of Ezzo's former employees, as well as Matthew Aney, a pediatrician affiliated with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), prompted the company to take a deeper look. Aney wrote a detailed article, published by the AAP two years ago, listing the potential dangers of Ezzo's methods.

Multnomah's Jeff Gerke, who has edited several of Ezzo's books, spearheaded his company's investigation. In early March, when

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Aney became convinced that Multnomah was not prepared to fully disclose its findings, he contacted *Christianity Today*. Aney provided CT with several e-mails between Gerke and himself.

Gerke told Aney that he initially investigated the allegations believing that Ezzo had been unfairly attacked, but later changed his mind. "I'm personally convinced Gary Ezzo and his infant care materials are dangerous," Gerke wrote. "He has no medical training and therefore no business writing medical books—or disregarding the advice of bona fide medical professionals."

Later, after a meeting when Multnomah executives decided to sever ties, Gerke e-mailed to Aney: "The bomb has been dropped." According to Gerke, Multnomah vice president Kyle Cummings called Ezzo in mid-March to inform the author of the company's decision. "Gary was instantly broken," Gerke wrote Aney. "He was very hurt that we would have to sever ties with him."

Christianity Today contacted Ezzo at his southern California office, but Ezzo refused to discuss Multnomah's decision, claiming there was more to the story. Ezzo told CT he was planning to meet in person with Multnomah executives. But in an interview with CT, Multnomah president Don Jacobson said an official statement would be released within weeks. "This [investigation] has been under way for quite some time and has reached a new height and level," he said.

The publishing company could face legal repercussions for its role in promoting Ezzo's materials. Gerke admitted to Aney that Multnomah did not have a medical editor who reviewed Ezzo's manuscripts. "Besides these [*Babywise*] books, we don't do any medical books," Gerke wrote. Moreover, the AAP has issued a statement saying that Ezzo's infant feeding schedule is inconsistent with the academy's own feeding recommendations for newborns.

Aney believes Multnomah should issue a public apology for misleading the public for so many years. "They're publishing a medical book with medical information in it, and they couldn't even spend the money and time to get a medical consultant to review the book and get

a comment," he told CT. "It's insane. Multnomah should recall [the books]. They should acknowledge that they've been deceived by Ezzo. They are an accomplice and a victim. But they're not innocent."

In the process of gathering research, Aney says, he discovered multiple cases of children suffering because of Ezzo's methods: "It was literally an endless web of information regarding medical problems associated with it." Aney has documented the ten most serious cases.

In defending *Babywise*, Ezzo has dismissed reports of problems as poor parenting, inability to follow *Babywise* methods, or infant problems unconnected to *Babywise*.

Frank York was GFI's editorial director for two years before the organization fired him. York said he was instructed to examine the complaints being made against *Babywise*. Yet when he presented his findings to Ezzo, York says, the author appeared aloof and claimed certain parents were exaggerating their problems.

Although GFI told York he was being fired because he did not meet the company's editorial needs, York believes differently. "They realized I was not a Gary-worshiper," he said. "I pointed out all sorts of medical problems. I was very honest in the report. Gary does not like to be told that he's wrong."

York wrote an open letter to Multnomah last January strongly urging an investigation.

It is unclear whether GFI or Ezzo himself will gain control of the copyrights to the *Babywise* materials. "There are babies who are still going to be harmed," Aney said. "Churches are still going to want to teach it."

Hundreds of church leaders have distributed Ezzo's materials in their congregations to first-time parents. Others have parenting classes using *Babywise* methods. "The more people find out about Gary's character, he's losing influence gradually," York said. "Multnomah has had a reputation for integrity in the past, but they have been deceived by Gary for years. It seems that they have finally come to the conclusion that Gary lacks personal integrity. This has been a long time coming, but here

This has been a long time coming, but I am gratified that Multnomah is choosing integrity over profits."

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Christianity Today's earlier coverage of Gary Ezzo and Babywise includes:

[Unprepared to Teach Parenting?](#) | Two churches long associated with *Babywise* author Gary Ezzo denounce his character and fitness for Christian ministry. (Oct. 27, 2000)

[On The Record: Gary Ezzo](#) | The controversial creator of *Babywise* speaks to *Christianity Today*. (Oct. 27, 2000)

[Growing Criticism](#) | Groups back away from *Preparation for Parenting*. (Feb. 9, 1998)

[The Brave New Baby](#) | Does a new curriculum for families build up the parent-child relationship, or put infants at risk? (Aug. 19, 1993)

[Are Ezzos Culturally Insensitive?](#) (Aug. 19, 1993)

Susan Wise Bauer [reviewed](#) *Babywise* and other parenting books for *Christianity Today* sister publication *Books & Culture*.

At press time, [Multnomah's Web site](#) still promoted Ezzo's books.

Steven and Kateri Rein's "[Concerns about the Ezzos' Preparation for Parenting Class](#)" site offers criticism of the Ezzos from theological, biological, historical, and other perspectives. It also [reprints and links](#) to several articles in the mainstream press. It has a copy of [York's open letter](#) to Multnomah and [Aney's AAP article](#).

Ezzo [responded to CT's earlier coverage](#) on

the [Growing Families International](#) site.

[World](#) magazine also profiled Ezzo's techniques, resulting in an controversial [response](#) by Ezzo.

"Two major evangelical publishers are focusing on physical health from a Christian perspective," reports [Publishers Weekly](#). "[Thomas Nelson](#) and [Zondervan](#) are leading the charge into the health category, and they predict others will follow."

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