



STATEMENT DF010

Family Entertainment Network Moves to Dispel Controversy over New Testament Videos

The producers of a popular series of New Testament videos for children are hoping that speculation and controversy over their product's Mormon connections will soon be put to rest.

The set of twelve videos, called "Animated Stories from the New Testament," has been praised for its high quality animation, appealing musical score, and engaging renderings of New Testament events and parables. The total cost of the set, which is marketed nationally by Family Entertainment Network, Inc. (FEN), is roughly \$400.

For some, however, there is more to the cartoons than meets the eye. As early as April 1991, members of ex-Mormon groups began to raise concerns about Mormon influence over the videos' production. It was learned that FEN is a for-profit corporation started in 1988 by Mormon businessmen Jared Brown and Seldon Young. The two had earlier founded Living Scriptures, Inc., a Utah-based, Mormon-oriented firm.

Living Scriptures, which was the first firm to market videos from the New Testament series, also promotes companion animated series for children based on stories from the Book of Mormon, Mormon church history, the Old Testament, and "Animated Hero Classics," among other items. FEN markets all but the Book of Mormon and Mormon history video series.

In the months that followed, many discovered that nearly all the key creative personnel behind both the Book of Mormon and the New Testament series are prominent Latter-day Saints (LDS), including Richard Rich (animation), Orson Scott Card (screenplays), Lex de Azevedo (musical scores), and Carol Lynn Pearson (lyrics). BYU professor Ivan Crossland provides the voice of Jesus in both series.

Despite FEN's assurances that the doctrinal content of the New Testament videos is sound — and despite the presence of a well-advertised Executive Advisory Board "to insure biblical accuracy" — some Mormon concepts nevertheless found their way into the videos.

For example, FEN has sold thousands of copies of the video *He Is Risen*, featuring a song about Jesus that originally said: "He paid the price for me, there in Gethsemane, And He suffered willingly so I could live again." The doctrine that Christ atoned for our sins as He agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane is peculiar to Mormonism.

Christian Research Institute and other countercult ministries have received complaints from FEN customers claiming that when they inquired about the company's Mormon ownership and creative involvement, FEN representatives either evaded their questions or flatly denied any LDS connections. Some, feeling betrayed, have sought to return the videos and get refunds, and a number of Christian bookstores have stopped carrying the products.

Controversy over the firm's Mormon connections has also contributed to the decision of at least one member of FEN's Executive Advisory Board to step down. The former board member, who asked not to be named, told the JOURNAL that he was not informed of FEN's Mormon business connections until after he had joined the panel, adding that when he accepted the post he was unaware that the videos' main production team was also LDS.

FEN has been stung by criticism from other quarters. In September 1991, B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Center publicly expressed their concerns about characterizations in the videos which the latter said "systematically reinforce dangerous stereotypes about the Jewish people."

Then, in January 1992, prominent ex-Mormon Ed Decker of Saints Alive in Jesus agreed to join FEN's advisory panel and conduct a thorough review of all the videos, workbooks, and other related materials in order to identify and purge any doctrinal errors —Mormon or otherwise. For many, Decker's credentials as an uncompromising opponent of Mormonism were established

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

through the film *The God Makers*, and he was among the first to sound a warning about the videos. But though Decker's product review was intended to still the controversy, both he and FEN found themselves under fire from a number of counter-Mormon ministries.

FEN chose not to take all such criticism lying down. Bill Major, a lawyer for the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board, confirmed that in early 1992 FEN threatened Utah Missions, Inc. (UMI) — an Oklahoma-based ministry to Mormons — with legal action. Although Major declined to explain the nature of FEN's grievance, until April UMI had severely criticized the videos in its newspaper, *The Utah Evangel*, and sought to persuade bookstores and other outlets to boycott the series.

In April, Decker submitted an 18-page review of the materials, and on July 15 he issued a statement, saying: "I am pleased to report that FEN has enthusiastically implemented my recommendations and the products now stand clean of any Mormon or other non-orthodox influence. As such, I endorse them as products of the highest quality and I confidently recommend them to Christian families and churches." The next day Decker told the JOURNAL that after a visit to FEN's Dallas headquarters he was satisfied that revised videos were now available and being shipped to new customers.

FEN president Steve Griffin told the JOURNAL that only four videos — *He Is Risen*, *The Good Samaritan*, *Forgive Us Our Debts*, and *Bible Songs* — needed modification. The company is now offering replacement tapes, at \$4 shipping and handling each, to customers wanting to exchange their copies of the original versions. At Decker's insistence, all FEN sales personnel are now to be given standardized information in order to respond accurately and consistently to prospective buyers' questions on the videos' Mormon background.

FEN's efforts to resolve its Mormon problem may reassure Christians who are sensitive to increased efforts by the Mormon Church and its members to gain acceptance among evangelicals and exploit Christian media. And, while some might worry that by purchasing the New Testament video series, Christians provide capital for LDS businessmen Brown and Young to create more children's videos promoting Mormonism, Griffin — who attends an independent Bible church — states "unequivocally" that such concerns are unfounded, since all profits are being reinvested in FEN itself.