

The Way, International

By James K. Walker

Founder: Victor Paul Wierwille

Founding Date: The Way traces its roots to Wierwille's radio broadcast, the "Vesper Chimes," which first aired on WLOK in Lima, Ohio on October 3, 1942.

Official Publications: *The Way Magazine, Jesus Christ is Not God, The Bible Tells Me So, God's Magnified Word, The Word's Way, The Rise and Expansion of the Church.*

Organization Structure: The Way's hierarchy is structured like a tree with the international headquarters in New Knoxville, Ohio, serving as the "roots," national offices forming the "trunks," states comprising the "limbs," regional or area organizations serving as "branches" and local congregations of 3 to 30 followers meeting in home study groups called "twigs." Individual members are the "leaves."

Unique Terms: W.O.W. or Way over the World Ambassadors (missionaries) recently replaced by Disciples of the Way Outreach; the Way Corps (leadership training program); "The Teacher" or "Doctor" (Wierwille); *Power for Abundant Living* (original introductory course and book) now replaced by Martindale's, *The Way of Abundance and Power.*

HISTORY

The Way, International founder, Victor Paul Wierwille, was born December 31, 1916 on his family's farm in New Knoxville, Ohio. After high school, he graduated from Mission House College, studied at the University of Chicago, and received a Master of Theology degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. Although his followers referred to him as "Doctor," he had no earned doctorate. His bogus doctoral degree was purchased from Pikes Peak Bible Seminary, a diploma mill.¹

Wierwille entered the ministry and served as pastor of Evangelical and Reformed Church (United Church of Christ) in Van Wert, Ohio until he resigned his position to avoid dismissal. He had begun to reject much of his traditional Christian beliefs after claiming that in 1942, "God spoke to me audibly, just like I'm talking to you now. He said He would teach me the Word as it had not been known since the first century, if I would teach it to others."²

In some ways, his new beliefs were not that unique. Nor did they come directly from God's lips. Much evidence exists that Wierwille borrowed theories from George Lamsa³ and plagiarized portions of his foundational books from the writings of others such as E. W. Bullinger and E. W. Kenyon.⁴ Ultimately he did deny most of the traditional Christian doctrines he had once held as an Evangelical and Reformed pastor. For example, his views on the Trinity doctrine and Jesus were similar to those of Jehovah's Witnesses. Although nearly every element of his theology was not new in itself, Wierwille's movement did become a unique blending of eclectic and disparate doctrines.

The Way formally began in 1967 on Wierwille's family farm in New Knoxville, Ohio. Although they hold services, commission missionaries, perform weddings, and other functions associated with churches, technically, the Way does not consider itself to be a religion or church. "The Way International is a biblical research and teaching organization

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concerned with... the inherent accuracy of the Word of God...The Way is not a church, nor is it a denomination or a religious sect of any sort.”⁵

Under Wierwille’s dynamic leadership, the Way grew tremendously in the two decades following its humble beginnings in 1967. As Keith Tolbert pointed out:

Wierwille founded and parlayed his new church into a multimillion-dollar empire, operating two colleges, two ranches, and a publishing concern. In recent years the group has shown a net profit of at least 26 million dollars...Over 100,000 people in all 50 states and 40 foreign countries have taken [the Way’s introduction course, Power for Abundant Living] PFAL.⁶

The organization built an effective missionary program and recruited heavily on college campuses and through their annual Rock of Ages gathering that functioned as a concert and conference. At its zenith, the organization is estimated to have had at least 35,000 active followers. By 1995 that number had already plummeted to about 20,000 by some estimates.⁷

After the 1985 death of Wierwille, however, the Way has seen over a decade of decline and splintering amid charges of mismanagement, authoritarianism, intolerance, plagiarism, and adultery. Some criticism has focused on the founder. During his lifetime, Wierwille had been elevated to the level of a living legend in the minds of his followers according to former adherents. Many members, including some who have held key leadership positions, are reevaluating some of the “Doctor’s,” claims.

Most of the criticism by former Way leaders, however, has been directed at current president, L. Craig Martindale. Wierwille, fighting cancer, installed Martindale as president in 1982. Born in 1948, Martindale had served as youth minister in a Southern Baptist church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma and been president of both the local Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Baptist Student Union at the University of Kansas before joining the Way in 1971.⁸

Dissidents have questioned and even rebelled against Martindale’s leadership amidst violent turmoil and shocking controversy that has drained the active membership to less than 10,000 today. Especially troubling to many former members are

...widespread reports of rampant adultery and promiscuous sex in The Way, including the highest levels of leadership. One ex-member said the [Way] Corps’ resident training was sometimes like a ‘bordello,’ with promiscuity, adultery, orgies, wife-swapping, and even gang-rape.⁹

The Way has also battled charges of rampant homosexuality. In 1994 the Way cancelled plans to commission hundreds of volunteer WOW (Word Over the World) Ambassadors at its annual Rock of Ages after it was discovered that almost 10% were homosexual. Martindale’s restructuring of most of the sect’s traditional programs may be intended in part to deal with this issue. Martindale said, “We have flushed homosexuals and ‘homo’ fantasizers and sympathizers out of our Way Corps and Staff.” One Way staffer reported that by January of 1995 “163 sodomites had been purged, marked and avoided.”¹⁰

Amid these and other charges, the loss in followers has been paralleled by a drop in finances. Martindale has taken drastic efforts to improve the Way’s financial picture by eliminating \$29 million in debt by mid 1995 through “sale of assets, reduction of overhead, smaller corp classes,...staff purges, and the sale of The Way College of Emporia, Kansas.”¹¹

Many former Way members are flocking to break-off organizations some of which are led by well-known and respected ex-leaders. Prominent splinter groups include Christian Educational Service (CES) led by John Lynn, Pacific West Fellowship, Great Lakes Fellowship, and The Way of Great Britain headed by Chris Geer.

DOCTRINE

Trinity: The Way, International denies the Trinity and teaches a doctrine of God similar to the Arianism of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Technically, their theology is called Dynamic Monarchianism.¹² They correctly believe that there is only one God but wrongly conclude that God is limited to one Person. They believe that only the Father is God, denying the deity of Christ and the third Person, the Holy Spirit.

Father: According to the Way, the Father only is the one true God. He created all things including Jesus and "holy spirit."

Son: Wierwille believed that Jesus Christ had no preincarnate existence except in the mind of God the Father. He taught that Jesus was a perfect sinless man but he was never God. In his book, *Jesus Christ is Not God*, Wierwille explained, "In other words, I am saying that Jesus Christ is not God, but the Son of God. They are not 'co-eternal, without beginning or end, and co-equal.' Jesus Christ was not literally with God in the beginning; neither does he have all the assets of God."¹³

Holy Spirit: Wierwille denied the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit. To circumvent obvious biblical references supporting the deity of the Holy Spirit, the Way arbitrarily provides two different meanings to the term Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Wierwille argued that in some texts the term should be translated capitalized and in other verses with all small letters. According to Wierwille, the term Holy Spirit (capitalized) is another name for God the Father (just like Bob is another name for Robert). The term "holy spirit" refers to an impersonal force that is given by the Father (Holy Spirit) to empower His believers. Thus, holy spirit is the gift (inanimate force) and Holy Spirit (God the Father) is the giver.¹⁴

Salvation: Rather than emphasizing salvation through faith *in* Christ, Wierwille artificially separated "faith" from "believing." He taught a very mechanical view of faith in Christ – a mere intellectual or mental assent to biblical, historical facts. He also redefined repentance as just confession and belief. Thus, salvation does not involve repentance of sins but only doing "the will of God."¹⁵ Like Jehovah's Witnesses, the Way also teaches that the soul is the body's life force which is in the blood and that the dead cease to exist.¹⁶

Immutable Laws: Wierwille taught that God instituted unchangeable principles to be appropriated and obeyed by Christians. God's law of Tithing and "Abundant Sharing" requires that believers give a 10% tithe of their gross income (which is owed) and any additional voluntary donation (called "abundant sharing") to Way headquarters. Failure to follow this law can result in a violation of the reciprocal "law of prosperity" which can affect one's personal wealth and health.¹⁷

The "law of believing" is Wierwille's twist on positive/negative confession. The Way followers' own faith will cause whatever they believe (good or bad) to come true. Wierwille even claimed that a boy's death in an automobile accident was actually caused by his mother's fear that he may be hurt.¹⁸

Speaking in Tongues: Speaking in tongues (or SIT) is virtually equated with confirming one's salvation. Wierwille took a very strained and mechanical approach to tongues. "The holy spirit field – that's the field God raised me up for...And there's no one I can't lead into speaking in tongues if they are Christian and want to do it."¹⁹ Wierwille taught "tongues" by having his followers relax, inhale "holy spirit" through "heavy breathing" which he claimed was a more accurate translation of "mighty rushing wind" in Acts 2:2.²⁰

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

While much of the Way's theology contains serious errors and deviations from traditional evangelical beliefs, of greatest concern is their denial of the Trinity doctrine through their rejection of the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible calls Jesus Christ God (John 1:1; 5:18, 8:58, Titus 2:13). Jesus is said to have created all things (John 1:3, Colossians 1:6, Hebrews 1:10) and the Bible teaches that God created all things (Genesis 1:1). Jesus taught that God only is to be worshipped yet He received worship (Matthew 14:33, 28:9-17, John 9:38).

To support his position, Wierwille contends that the deity of Christ was a late invention of apostate Christianity and was never taught during the first three centuries of church history.²¹ Josh McDowell and Don Stewart refute Wierwille's claim:

Ignatius, (A.D. 50-115), an early Church Father and disciple of the Apostle John, *clearly* writes of Christ's, deity. Irenaeus (A.D. 115-190), another Church Father, makes clear reference in *Against Heresies* X. 1 when he calls Christ Jesus Lord and God. The apologist Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) calls Christ the God of God. Also Hippolytus, Origen and Lucian of Antioch, all clearly refer to Christ as the one God.²²

The Bible also teaches that the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person from the Father. The artificial distinction between "Holy Spirit" and "holy spirit" is arbitrary and has no support from Greek grammar. The Holy Spirit has the attributes of personality. Just one example can be found in Acts 5:3-4. Unlike an inanimate "force," the Holy Spirit can be lied to and is referred to as God.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Integrity and Accuracy of The Way's Word by Douglas V. Morton and John P. Juedes. Originally published in 1980 in *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, this paper discusses the history, theology, and scripture twisting of Wierwille's Way. 48 pages.

Will the Real Author Please Stand Up? by J. Juedes and J. Valusek. This booklet presents clear evidence that Wierwille plagiarized much of the material in the Way's foundational books. Parallel columns compare Wierwille's writings with those of J. E. Styles, E. W. Kenyon, and E. W. Bullinger. 50 pages.

Notes

¹ See, *From "Vesper Chimes" to "The Way International,"* 10-11.

² *The Way: Living in Love*, 178.

³ *The Quarterly Journal*, Personal Freedom Outreach, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1989, 1.

⁴ *The Integrity and Accuracy of the Way's Word*, and *Will the Real Author Please Stand Up?*

⁵ *This Is The Way*, pamphlet.

⁶ *Christianity Today*, May 1988, 44.

⁷ *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, "The Way: After a family breaks up, questions arise about group," October 15, 1995.

⁸ *Profile: Rev. L. Craig Martindale*, published by the Way, Int.

⁹ *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1996, 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² See *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, "Arianism," and "Monarchianism."

¹³ *Jesus Christ is Not God*, 5.

¹⁴ *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today*, 1-5.

¹⁵ *The Bible Tells Me So*, p. 18; *Jesus Christ Is Not God*, 238-57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 258-90.

¹⁷ Watchman telephone interview with Way spokesman, Bill Green, October 11, 1996; *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1988, 11.

¹⁸ *Power for Abundant Living*, 37-44.

¹⁹ *The Way: Living in Love*, 201.

²⁰ *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today*, 61-62.

²¹ *Jesus Christ is Not God*, 12.

²² *Handbook of Today's Religions*, 107-08.



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