

Why I Had to Escape a Fundamentalist Cult

By Charlene L. Edge

I was a born-again college freshman in 1970 when sincere Christians recruited me into The Way International, founded by Victor Paul Wierwille. He marketed his organization as a biblical research, teaching, and fellowship ministry, but it was a fundamentalist cult that grew to about 40,000 graduates of Wierwille's classes worldwide. I had only wanted to know, love, and serve God and understand the Bible—what harm could that bring? After 17 years in the cult, I realized some of the harm it had brought me. The harm originated with Wierwille's character—he was a charismatic, authoritarian fundamentalist, a dangerous mix—and his nonnegotiable belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, for which he used fear to compel others to share. While working at Way headquarters during 1984 to 1987, the final years of my involvement, I awakened to the reality that Wierwille did not teach "the accurate Word of God" as he'd claimed, nor was he the man of God I had believed in. For my own well-being, I had to escape.

How I Got in The Way

In college I was searching for more than a degree in English. I wanted truth. At the time, college campuses around the United States were coping with student demonstrations protesting the Vietnam War. A protest at Kent State University in Ohio, a few months before I entered college, had ended in tragedy. The National Guard opened fire, killing four students and seriously injuring nine. Outrage, confusion, and fear ensued. Concurrently, an active Jesus movement in pockets around the nation attracted young people seeking answers in a world gone mad. "Jesus freaks" spread a message of love and peace and Bible reading. The Way followers I met on the East Carolina University campus were different. They said their group was a serious, organized, nondenominational ministry doing significant biblical research. It was a nonprofit organization; that appealed to me. So did the members' friendliness and certainty about God's Word having all the answers for life.

About The Way International

Victor Paul Wierwille (1916–1985) started The Way in 1942. During the late 1960s, the organization was tearing across America thanks to hippies recruited in San Francisco, Kansas, and New York, and college students in North Carolina systematically spreading its message. The basic outreach tool used to promote The Way was Wierwille's 2-week Bible class "The Foundational Class on Power for Abundant Living." Wierwille taught what he called special keys to unlock the true interpretation of the Bible, "the accuracy of the Word." He quoted Scripture verses to support everything he said. He acted and sounded convincing.

My Initial Trauma

What made me vulnerable to The Way? I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith. In 1968 when I was 16, my mother died of cancer. Devastation overtook me, and I fell into a pit of grief. Infuriated by my father's Catholic platitudes of "God took your mother," I began to ask questions. "What kind of God takes away mothers?" I needed her more on earth than God needed her in heaven! My father grew distant, struggling to process his own grief. With my older sister married and living far away and no other relatives around, I felt lost, alone, and abandoned.

Growing up Catholic, I had taken for granted that the authority on how to live for God and what to believe as true was partly the Scriptures, but really the Pope and 2,000 years of tradition that formed our esoteric rituals at Mass, and righteous attitudes, such as believing Protestants were damned. Since it augmented the Church fathers' authority, I knew only a

little Scripture. Instead of the Bible, in Catholic school I internalized questions and answers carved in the stone tablet of the Baltimore Catechism, the standard tool for converting young minds to the doctrines of the One True Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church founded by St. Peter. My parents were devout. So was I. Until my mother died.

A year after my mother's death, a high-school girlfriend introduced me to Young Life, an evangelical group for teens. I was still grieving for my mother and also upset over a recent breakup with my boyfriend. I was a vulnerable, ideal candidate. The kids in the group seemed happy. They made me think Jesus could help me. Someday I would understand why my mother died. I became convinced that the Bible held answers to every problem and every question. When my friend told me I was "born again," I wept and asked Jesus to be my Lord. My life began anew.

Encountering Protestant Fundamentalism

The Way followers I met in college took Young Life's message and behavior to the next level with Wierwille's dogmatic Bible classes and an agenda of influencing me to make one commitment after another. Wierwille, they said, taught people how to have a more-than-abundant life—only follow his teachings. I gobbled up every word.

I had not heard much, if any, Christian church history from any point of view. It would have been helpful for me to understand how Wierwille was using Protestant fundamentalism for his own purposes.

Eventually, I learned that the term *fundamentalism* applied to Christianity comes from a series of publications called *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915), which stated basic beliefs that *real* Christians must agree to, such as the virgin birth of Jesus, miracles, Jesus's resurrection, and biblical inerrancy. Biblical inerrancy was the foundation of Wierwille's beliefs and teachings. He explained it like this: The Bible had to be perfect because God was its author and He was perfect.

The idea of a perfect Bible as the product of a perfect God comes from trying to force logic on the Bible, not from the Bible itself. Fundamentalists such as Wierwille shove round pegs of contradictions in the Bible into the square hole of perfection to make the Bible appear without error. Rarely does anyone call them on it; their spiel is too rapid and convincing.

Wierwille's fundamentalism made sense to me when I was a teenager, given that I wanted to learn the real Word of God, not somebody's interpretation. Once introduced to Wierwille's thinking, I thought the Catholic Church had let me down since it had not insisted that the Scriptures should be the centerpiece of my faith. Young Life was great, but it had not offered in-depth Bible instruction like The Way offered. I loved God and wanted to serve Him, as the nuns had said I should, and fundamentalism disguised by Wierwille as "the accuracy of God's Word" seemed the avenue God wanted me to take to fulfill that purpose. It seemed to offer a safe, godly, and solid perch in a world swirling with confusion.

Two months after Way recruiters swept me into their cult, I dropped out of college for what became a 17-year commitment to the group (1970 to 1987). I was a zealous believer and eventually became a leader with unwavering loyalty. I loved my Way leaders, my Way believer friends, and most of all, the Word of God we taught. I believed, as surely as I believed the sun would rise each morning, that being part of this group was God's plan for me.

I rejected every warning. A college friend warned me that Wierwille was a con man. My father told me I would end up in the gutter. My adoring boyfriend feared Wierwille would brainwash me. I saw these people as obstacles in my fervent pursuit of God and abandoned them for a Way-centered life.

In 1973 I graduated from The Way's 2-year leadership-training program, The Way Corps, conducted at Way headquarters property, the renovated Wierwille family farm at the edge of New Knoxville, Ohio. Supervised by Wierwille himself, our training was heavy indoctrination. We lived in trailers, worked at assigned jobs, and functioned as a unit. For those 2 years, I lived in one bedroom with five bunks, 10 women, and one bathroom. I loved it. Wierwille said this arrangement would teach us to live together as Christians; if we couldn't learn to love each other there, then we'd have trouble helping and loving God's people when we went back into the world. He also said we would be turning our backs on God if we left.

After Corps graduation, I married a man from my Way Corps group, and Wierwille ordained him. For a time we were The Way's leaders in California. We had a child. Wierwille was our "father in The Word" directing our every move. His authority was firmly planted in my mind, not only from his Bible teachings, but also from his alleged special revelation: "He [God] said He would teach me the Word as it had not been known since the first century if I would teach it to others" (p. 178). I had believed that assertion with all my heart. God still spoke to people today as He had in Moses' time.

I imagine now that I had wanted that so-called revelation to be true because I had been seeking correct Bible knowledge. Wierwille also claimed that his ministry was the first-century church in the twentieth century, and I trusted and followed him as the first Christians followed the Apostle Paul.

Over time, Wierwille trusted me to become one of his biblical researchers. During my Corps training, he assigned me to an Aramaic project. I believed this project would help us discover more of the accuracy of God's Word, which would help believers to experience more of the abundant life Jesus Christ promised.

In 1984 that powerful belief shattered like a pane of glass.

My Undoing

In August 1984, I moved with my then husband and our daughter back to Way headquarters, our "spiritual" home. Wierwille, whom we called "our father in The Word," had retired in 1982 but still lived there, as did other leaders. By this time, about 500 staff also worked there in a massive office building—a small city under one roof. The ministry had grown into a worldwide organization with fellowships in every state in the United States and 36 other countries. It was a multimillion-dollar business that received income from believers' donations, book sales, and class fees. In 1985 alone, The Way reported \$30 million in income, which in 2015 would be about \$67 million. Our goal, God's Word over the world, was becoming a reality. Thousands of Way Corps members around the globe spearheaded the movement. The Way owned other significantly large properties in Indiana, Kansas, Colorado, and Scotland where Way Corps members were trained.

My assignment in 1984 was to help complete *The Concordance to the Peshitta Version of the Aramaic New Testament* and work on the elite Biblical Research Team that had formed in recent years. Wierwille had wanted to expand his biblical research efforts, so he'd encouraged some Way Corps graduates to attend universities and learn biblical languages to further his aims. Researchers had to be Way Corps grads first, their trustworthiness ensured, before they might be invited to join the Biblical Research Team. We were a group of about eight people from a ministry of tens of thousands.

Besides the Aramaic project, I also helped prepare weekly Bible studies. I was convinced I was doing God's will and certain Wierwille was God's special man of God until, in 1984, I began to see for myself that Wierwille fabricated and often plagiarized his biblical research and teachings.

The critical instance that opened my eyes to this reality was a metaphor in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. Over the years, Wierwille had taught that the armor described in chapter 6 was not really armor, such as soldiers wear, but instead it "had to be" athletic gear. Why? Because Wierwille said Christians were athletes of the spirit, not soldiers for the Lord. But about this context of Ephesians he was wrong. The Greek word for *armor* really means *armor*. It could not be ignored. But because Wierwille insisted that Christians were athletes, not soldiers, he insisted on changing the text. He "spiritually knew" he was right.

I could not veer away from the fact that he was making this up. He would not acknowledge what the text actually said. I was more than baffled. I felt as if the ground broke open and a sinkhole was swallowing me. I was falling like a loose pebble. All those years, about fifteen, I had not been promoting God's Word after all. I had been propagating Wierwille's twisted interpretations.

What would I do now? I was devastated and alarmed. I had been deceived. The feeling was like that of a wife upon discovering that her husband has been cheating on her—a swirling mix of hurt, confusion, anger, and disorientation. I broke down crying, I lost sleep, I feared I could not get my emotional balance as wave after wave of realizations hit me. Wierwille was not "our father in The Word." He was the emperor with no clothes.

Wierwille's Death

Wierwille died in May 1985 while I was on the Biblical Research Team. Secretly I was glad he was dead; he could no longer hurt or confuse anyone with his twisted teachings in the service of inerrancy and himself, but soon I was shattered again when a Biblical Research coworker was mysteriously banished. Our leaders were fighting for power; paranoia reigned. Murmurs of sexual abuse by leaders, weapons caches, and financial indiscretion spread. Grasping for sanity, I resigned my Biblical Research job, was reassigned to another department, and enrolled in a nearby college, despite veiled threats from former friends who feared I'd blow the whistle.

My Escape

My then-husband, our daughter, and I managed to escape before I was unmasked as a traitor. One August morning in 1987, we fled headquarters before anyone discovered we'd turned our backs on the ministry. We had planned this quietly, not wanting to rouse the leaders into escorting us (off the property under armed guard, as they had done with someone else who had confronted their evil doings—such as when they were conducting a secret sex ring of adultery that Wierwille had initiated. I did not want to run around the 147-acre headquarters to persuade people to leave with me. The friends I had tried to talk with about research errors would not listen. Today, some of my former friends remain in the organization, others formed off-shoot ministries, and others, like me, consider Wierwille to have been an arrogant fraud, and we've rejected him and his teachings altogether.

My Recovery

His Holiness the Dali Lama says your religion should make you a better person. Although some good came of my association with The Way, its fundamentalist beliefs were not making me a better person. They stifled my freedom to think and speak. They usurped my creativity and funneled it into The Way's propaganda machine. They made me afraid of life because they taught that the Devil was always after me.

When I gave up The Way's teachings, I felt sure I was on the right track, but I was confused about God's place in my life. My beliefs had been hammered by a switch in realities: from thinking God wanted me in The Way, to then having to reject it. I was lonely and confused, struggling to do what I thought was good for me. I was also terrified, not because I thought the Devil would ruin me for leaving The Way, but because I feared the larger world where I

would have to live and make sound decisions without the concept of a God who planned my life. I leapt off a cliff, hoping for solid ground.

Gradually I healed from having lost hundreds of friends and the certainty about God's will I had felt for so long. I grew more comfortable with the uncertainty of life. I finished my formal education and developed new loving friendships. Literature and philosophy helped me discern propaganda and find my own voice. Over time I gained understanding about fundamentalism and the cult phenomenon I had experienced. Mindfulness, a Buddhist practice, keeps me grounded and grateful to share my story.

Reference

Whiteside, Elena S. (1972). *The Way: Living in love*. New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press.

About the Author

Charlene L. Edge was a follower of The Way International, founded by Victor Paul Wierwille, and marketed as a biblical research, teaching, and fellowship ministry. It became one of the largest cults in America with about 40,000 followers. Her quest for truth began in Salisbury, Maryland, her hometown, when, feeling alienated from the Catholic Church, she turned to Protestant Evangelicalism. In college, she was drawn into the fundamentalism of The Way. Post-Way, she earned a bachelor's degree in English from Rollins College and for years worked in the software industry. She is a poet and fiction writer. Her essay covering a bit of her Way experience was published in *Shifting Gears: Small Startling Moments In and Out of the Classroom*, Red Pepper Press. 2004. Her book, *Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International*, is near publication. She is a member of ICSA. crledge@earthlink.net, charleneedge.com

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