CULTS

– Sunday School Notes –

4 The Way International

According to its own definition *The Way International is a biblical research and teaching organization concerned with setting before men and women of all ages the inherent accuracy of the Word of God so that everyone who so desires may know the power of God in his life. The Way is not a church, nor is it a denomination or a religious sect of any sort.*

Power for abundant living – this is what *The Way International* promises its followers. Capitalizing on the lifelessness of traditional churches who failed to fill the spiritual needs of today's society and the enthusiasm of the younger generation *The Way International* purports to give a new light on the Scriptures. This new light, which is taught in various classes offered by *The Way*, is the result of over thirty years of biblical research and teaching by its founder, Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille. In his many books and videos Wierwille demonstrates an impressive use of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic – together with appropriate explanations – to interpret Scripture. However, his style is very dogmatic and critical and – unfortunately – often very far away from orthodox Christian doctrines.

4.1 History

Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille received a Master of Theology degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and served as a minister of the Evangelical and Reformed Church from 1941 to 1957. During that time, he claims, God audibly spoke to him:

> *He spoke to me just as plainly as 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.*

God, he testifies, later gave him a sign in confirmation of his voice. He later received "the holy spirit" (*not capitalized!*) and began to speak in tongues.

For Wierwille, this was the starting point of his true mission. He started broadcasting radio shows, went back to school to receive a doctorate, and began to teach they new truths that he had "received" from God, among which his "*Power for abundant living*" class has become the most popular one.

The Way, the name was taken from **Acts 9:2**, was officially chartered in 1955 and began to grow rapidly in the sixties and seventies. Videos and long-term training programs were developed and translated into several languages. After the death of Dr. Wierwille in 1986, *The Way* went through a phase of re-organization by its current president and experienced a short period of decline. recently, however, membership has begun to grow again and *The Way* still needs to be taken serious.

The organizational structure of *The Way International* is likened to a tree. After taking the basic "*Power for abundant living*" classes, new members (viewed as leaves) join a home bible study group – called a twig – where they meet for worshiping and studying the word – usually guided by videos or audio tapes. Branches, limbs (state), trunks (national), and the root (headquarter) are further steps in the hierarchy of *The Way*. As in the catholic church, this structure has also become a doctrinal hierarchy – the views of *The Way*'s president are often viewed as the only acceptable interpretation of the Word of God.
Although *The Way* has attracted only a few hundred thousand members and lost many again of them after a few years it has attracted the attention of the media in the 1970's because of its rapid growth and became popular particularly among younger people. Like all new religious groups, *The Way* has become subject of various rumors, including brainwashing techniques for acquiring new members and paramilitary training, most of them not being true. As far as size and religious practices are concerned, *The Way* is not a dangerous cult. However, its teachings are a cause for concern, because they attract the spiritually needy but mislead them at the same time – even if they do not become members.

4.2 Major Doctrines – where are the differences?

The beliefs of *The Way International* have been characterized as a mixture of evangelical Christianity, pentecostalism, and a few ancient heresies which *The Way* shares with Jehova's Witnesses and other cults. Many of the teachings of Dr. Wierwille can be seen in accordance to orthodox Christianity. But the few deviations – such as the denial of the trinity, of the deity of Christ, or the personality of the Holy Spirit – are essential and should not be considered as acceptable. So let us look at the specific teachings of *The Way* and compare them to our own articles of faith.

4.2.1 Sources of Authority – anything but the Bible?

The one and only recognized source of authority is the Bible, although it is distinctively re-interpreted by the founder. Wierwille considers the gospels as part of the Old Testament and only the book of Acts and the New Testament epistles addressed to the church are apply to today's believers. The remainder of the Bible is "for our learning" but are not as relevant. This is at least an unusual view because traditionally we consider *all* of the Bible as relevant for today's life. **2. Timothy 3:16** says

> All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness

Wierwille does not brush this verse away, but states that the Word was *originally* God-breathed and has been confused over the centuries by man-made doctrines and traditions. He claims, for instance, that the original text of the New Testament was Aramaic, not Greek, and bases his interpretations on the available Aramaic texts.

He is not entirely wrong with his claims. Churches need to be careful not to confuse the true Word of God with man-made traditions, and parts of the New Testament (the Gospel of Matthew) may have been written originally in Aramaic. But that is exactly what makes the teachings of Wierwille so dangerous. A bit of justified criticism, mixed with partial truths and peculiar interpretations of the Word of God – this catches those who are not already firm in their faith and causes many to view *The Way* as a sound Christian group with a specific mission.
For members of *The Way*, the doctrines taught in the *Power for abundant living* classes have almost the same authority as the Scriptures they are supposed to interpret. Former members report that it was difficult to get justifications for these teachings that are based on scripture alone. The argument "*it simply is so*" is often used to end a discussion when no consensus could be reached. Wierwille claims to have received his insights directly from God, but many of his teachings were actually inspired by various books that he read in the thirties and forties.

4.2.2 God

Like Jehova's Witnesses *The Way* teaches that God the Father is the only true God and Creator of heaven and earth. The doctrine of the trinity is vehemently rejected. The clearest New Testament verse, **1. John 5:7**

> For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.

is viewed as one example where a doctrine made its way into the text of the Bible. This is probably correct, because this verse is not found in any Greek manuscript that is older than 500 years. The use of the plural word *Elohim* in the Old Testament is explained as indicative of supremacy and lordship – a plural of majesty. This is certainly a possible, though not very likely interpretation of the use of the plural word *Elohim* for God. But Wierwille ignores the fact that there are many other biblical evidences for the doctrine of the trinity that cannot be re-interpreted otherwise. Among those are verses that clearly point out the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit.
We have talked about the doctrine of the trinity several times already but but Wierwille's counter-arguments raise a few new issues that need to be addressed.

4.2.3 Jesus Christ

In 1975 Wierwille wrote a book with the title *Jesus Christ is not God*. This book summarizes the key points in *The Way*'s doctrine.

1. *God is eternal while Jesus was born.* Jesus did not coexist with God, neither as spirit nor in any other form, before his human birth. John 1:1 is interpreted as:

   > In the beginning was the Word *(that is God the father)*, and the *revealed* Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2. Jesus Christ is the *created Word*, that was with God *in His foreknowledge* from the beginning.

So there are three forms of the Word – the *original Word* (God himself), the *written Word* (the Bible) and the *created Word* (Jesus). The latter two are what Wierwille calls the *revealed Word*, which God gave in order to communicate with mankind.
So Jesus Christ is the Son of God, brought into existence by God in Mary's womb, the perfect man; the promised Messiah, who died as a substitute for our sins and was raised again by God on the third day – but *he is NOT God himself*.
Scriptures like **John 10:30**, where Jesus clearly states "I and my Father are one" are brushed aside by re-interpretation. Wierwille holds that this would mean only "*one in purpose*". But this argument completely ignores the violent reaction of the Jews – they certainly took it as much more than one in purpose and Jesus adds to his claim in **John 10:38**, when he says "the Father is in me, and I in him".
Other verses like **Hebrews 1:2** or **Ephesians 3:9** which explicitly state that all things were created *by* Jesus Christ are re-interpreted as "created *for* Jesus Christ". While the original text may allow such an interpretation, the immediate context does not justify it. So again we see that Wierwille's arguments for his peculiar doctrines are quite deceiving and not so easy to refute unless you know the context of Bible passages very well.
There are a few other peculiarities in *The Way*'s teachings about Jesus Christ. They claim that Jesus Christ died on a Wednesday and was raised exactly 72 hours later on a Saturday. Like Jehova's Witnesses they say that Jesus died on a stake, not a cross. Also there were four men crucified with Christ – two thieves (according to **Matthew 27:38**), and two malefactors (according to **Luke 23:32**). The Aramaic words Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? in **Matthew 27:46**, translated as "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" are re-interpreted as "*My God, my God, for this purpose was I spared, for this purpose was I kept, for this purpose I came into the world*", which takes the unique relation between Jesus and God the father away from this verse.
Neither of these peculiarities have any significance for *The Way*'s teachings other than to support Wierwille's claim that he alone is able to accurately interpret God's word. But There is no sound scriptural basis for these teachings and the traditional doctrines are much better supported by the overall context of the Bible.

4.2.4 The Holy Spirit

The Way strongly rejects the doctrine that the Holy Spirit is an independent person. In his interpretation of the Bible Wierwille distinguishes between the person of the Holy Spirit, which is just another name for God, and *holy spirit* (uncapitalized), which is a gift of God to the believers. The latter is not a person but a manifestation of God's power in a person.

4.2.5 Man

The Way's doctrine of Man is orthodox: man was created in God's image, sinned and experienced spiritual death. All humans have a sinful nature and need redemption.

4.2.6 Salvation

Salvation is by faith in Christ. Any person who confesses Jesus Christ as his Lord and believes that God raised him from the dead is born again and a member of the body of Christ. This is essentially the orthodox doctrine but weakened by the denial of the deity of Christ. In fact, Wierwille goes as far as writing that "*If Jesus Christ is God and not the Son of God, we have not yet been redeemed*", because this would degrade God from his supreme position. But without the deity of Christ, the atonement would not have been the perfect sacrifice and perfect substitute for the sins of all men.
For *The Way* there are two immediate consequences of salvation: the deliverance from the powers of darkness and the gift of holy spirit.
Wierwille teaches that "*when we have salvation, we have wholeness – even physical wholeness if we simply accept it.* Complete healing from any sickness or disability is available to all believers. Although this is not a matter of extreme emphasis, it is often pointed out as an additional incentive for those who are searching. Ironically, Dr. Wierwille himself suffered from various diseases in the last years before his death. This fact was well hidden from the public but revealed after his death in 1985. He died after a long and hopeless battle against cancer – apparently not even "the chosen instrument of God" had not enough faith to become physically whole, but he was to stubborn to admit that he was wrong.
Speaking in tongues is another major issue that *The Way* shares with the pentecostal movement. An individual, so it is taught, receives the gift of holy spirit when he is saved, which comes in all 9 manifestations listed in **1. Corinthians 12** (tongues, interpretation, prophecy, word of wisdom, discerning spirits, faith, miracles, and healing). Speaking in tongues is viewed as the visible sign of salvation and *The Way* encourages every believer to use that gift for his own and the other's edification.
There are two problematic aspects with this teaching. First, the Bible nowhere teaches that every believer receives the gift of speaking in tongues. **1. Corinthians 12:10** lists it as one possible gift. Members of *The Way* who cannot speak in tongues will always doubt whether they are really saved. Secondly, the speaking in tongues is no unique sign of salvation. In fact, it was practiced by many pagan religions which had nothing to do with the only true God. Accepting tongues as a sign for salvation will give some people a false sense of assurance.

4.2.7 Things to come

The Way's views of the Things to come is no different from the orthodox doctrines. Jesus Christ will return personally, the just and unjust will rise and be judged, resulting either in eternal life or eternal punishment.

4.3 Special Aspects

There are, however, a few peculiarities that deserve a brief discussion. *The Way* shares with the pentecostal movements a strong emphasis on tongues and healing, which usually is very fascinating for unbelievers, and a strong belief in authority and "church hierarchies". While the Bible does teach us to respect and support our leaders, it nowhere says that we have to believe all they say.

The fact that the strong authoritative structure of *The Way* is merely an issue of "power" became quite obvious after the death of Dr. Wierwille in 1985. There was a brief struggle for leadership and the current president quickly purged the organization from opponents, apostates, and any connection to the name Wierwille. *The Way* is now the "kingdom" of Reverend Craig Martindale – concerning both leadership and official teachings.

For a certain time, it was unofficially taught that extra-marital sex is not sinful but could actually be profitable for spiritual growth. This view was based on the old Corinthian belief that bodily practices do not affect the spirit of a person. Although this was never taught publicly, it made adultery an acceptable practice, which again made *The Way* more appealing for today's society than traditional churches who clearly refused any tolerance of sexual misconduct.

The fact that *The Way* deviates from orthodox Christianity only in doctrines that are not immediately important for the spiritually needy, makes it more dangerous than cults that are clearly distinct from Christian beliefs. There are many people in this world who try to get right with God and organizations like *The Way* make it easier for them to find a spiritual home than most of the traditional churches. They notice that the water they drink contains some impurities, but they are so thirsty that they take it anyway.

The success of pseudo-Christian cults should be a lesson for the bible-believing churches. Are we ready to fill the spiritual needs of the unbelievers? Or are we so holy that we don't associate with them before they come into our church and turn to Christ? Paul said it this way (**1.Corinthians 9:20–21**)

> And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

There are thousands of people out there in Ithaca alone who need us. Let us reach out to them and give them the pure water before they get the contaminated one.