



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 9 Number 14
April 9, 2014

Whatever Happened to The Way International?

By Tal Davis

The late 1970s and early 80s were exciting times of growth in evangelicalism. On the heels of the Jesus Movement among young people in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many new Christian organizations sprang up, particularly among Pentecostal and Charismatic communities. As with virtually every revival in Christian history, not only are new Christian churches, denominations, and missions organizations birthed, but inevitably counterfeit movements ride the tide deceiving many new believers. One such counterfeit group was The Way International (TWI) founded by a self-proclaimed Bible scholar named Victor Paul Wierwille (1916 -1985). In this article we will examine the history and current status of TWI and analyze its doctrines from a historical Christian perspective.

History of The Way International

Victor Paul Wierwille was born in New Knoxville, Ohio, on December 31, 1916. He and his family were members of an Evangelical and Reformed Church (ERC). The ERC is now the United Church of Christ, perhaps the most liberal Protestant denomination in America. He attended Mission House (Lakeland) College and graduated in 1941 from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Wierwille claimed that on October 3 of the next year (1942), he heard God speak to him audibly. God told Wierwille that He would guide him to understand and interpret the Bible more accurately than anyone since the apostolic age. As a result, Wierwille claimed he dumped 3,000 of his theological textbooks into a trash heap and set on an independent study of Scripture.

In 1948 Wierwille received a Doctor of Theology degree from the unaccredited (and now defunct) Pike's Peak Seminary in Colorado. In 1951 he visited a Pentecostal evangelist named J.E. Stiles and learned his technique for teaching people to speak in tongues.

In 1953, Wierwille developed and began teaching his "Power for Abundant Living" (PFAL) classes, a series of lectures highlighting his unusual doctrinal views. In 1955, Wierwille incorporated his ministry as The Way, Inc. in New Knoxville. A few years later he formally withdrew from the Evangelical and Reformed Church denomination. Over the next few years Wierwille took the title of "Teacher" as his theology increasingly deviated from orthodox Christianity, particularly his views of the Trinity and the nature of Christ.

As we mentioned, Wierwille's influence grew as a result of the late 1960s "Jesus Movement." A number of former hippies were attracted to his authoritative teaching style and experiential emphasis on spiritual gifts. In the early 1970s the group adopted the name The Way International (TWI) and began holding annual "Rock of Ages" music festivals at Wierwille's farm in New Knoxville. In 1975 The Way College was opened in Emporia, Kansas with 350 students.

During the 1970s, the movement grew rapidly reaching a maximum of about 20,000 attendees at the 1982 Rock of Ages festival.

That same year Wierwille officially retired as president of TWI. He was followed by his hand-picked successor, L. Craig Martindale. Martindale was a former Baptist Student Union and Fellowship of Christian Athletes leader at the University of Kansas where he

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played football in the early 1970s. After his retirement Wierwille's health deteriorated rapidly. He died of ocular cancer on May 20, 1985, at age 68.

Following his death, several former leaders of TWI leveled charges against Wierwille and TWI trustees including accusations of extreme authoritarianism, plagiarism, false teaching, and even adultery. As a result, the group lost many followers, had to sell its college in Kansas, and spawned several like-minded splinter groups led by former TWI staffers. Those included Christian Educational Services and Pacific West Fellowship.

The movement continued to dwindle and in 1995 the annual Rock of Ages festivals were suspended. In 2000, amid charges of sexual improprieties, L. Craig Martindale resigned as TWI president and was succeeded by Vice President Rosalie Rivenbark.

Current Status

In recent years the group has been led by a Board of Directors headed by Rivenbark as Chairperson. It is still headquartered in New Knoxville, Ohio. Twig groups continue to meet in this and other countries. TWI claims as many as 100,000 followers worldwide, but that number is likely exaggerated.

Ministries associated with The Way International include American Christian Press (ACP), The Way of Abundance and Power Classes (formerly PFAL), and The Way Corps (TWI's officially commissioned cadre of ministers and missionaries).

TWI's key publications include The Way Magazine and books written by Victor Paul Wierwille (all published by ACP). His books included *The Bible Tells Me So* (1971), *The*

New, Dynamic Church (1971), *The Word's Way* (1971), *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today* (1972), *Are the Dead Alive Now?* (1973), *Jesus Is Not God* (1975), and *God's Magnified Word* (1977).

Beliefs and Practices

Authority and the Bible

The Bible, as God's inspired and infallible Word, is regarded by TWI as "God-breathed" and perfect as originally given. The King James Version is usually quoted in TWI literature. However, Victor Paul Wierwille taught that most Hebrew and Greek texts used by Bible scholars have been distorted, and thus textual research is needed to clarify certain passages and doctrines. He relied heavily on the controversial biblical research and Bible translations of the late Turkish-Armenian Aramaic scholar George Lamsa (1892 - 1975). (For more information on Lamsa and his Bible translation go to <http://www.equip.org/articles/george-m-lamsa>.)

Victor Paul Wierwille's interpretations, as stated in his writings are authoritative for all TWI students. Wierwille taught an extreme dispensational interpretive method which regards only portions of the New Testament (Paul's letters to the churches and the Book of Acts) as relevant to Christians. The Old Testament, the four Gospels, and Paul's letters to individuals are regarded as nonessential.

Biblical Response: The Bible is indeed God's infallible and inerrant Word as given in the original autographs. The textual integrity of the Bible is well established; however, no one translation and no one interpreter are regarded as infallible. Many of Wierwille's interpretations of certain passages are incorrect, and his extreme dispensationalist approach must be rejected. Both the Old and New Testaments are relevant to Christians when studied in context, utilizing sound principles of interpretation (see Luke 24:27, 44-45; 2 Tim. 3:15-17).

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God Is One

Like other cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Oneness Pentecostals, the historic Christian understanding of God as Trinity is rejected by TWI. God is regarded as a unitary being who is the creator of the universe. The Trinity is deemed unbiblical and reflects the influence of pagan Roman emperors and the creeds of 4th and 5th century church councils.

Biblical Response: There is only one true God (see Deut. 6:4; Isa. 43:10-11). However, the doctrine of the Trinity is taught in Scripture. The church creeds affirmed the biblical teachings and did not create them. God is one in three and is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is one God in three Persons (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:3-14).

Jesus Christ Is Not God

TWI maintains that Jesus Christ did not actually preexist, but was only conceptually "The Word" in the foreknowledge of God. Thus, He was totally created at His miraculous physical conception. Nonetheless, He was born a perfect man whose soul was specially created by God and given "holy spirit." Therefore, Jesus can be regarded as the "Son of God" but not "God the Son."

TWI affirms that Jesus lived a sinless life but, in agreement with Jehovah's Witnesses, claim He was crucified on a stake, not a cross. TWI also argues that Jesus was executed between four criminals on Wednesday, not Friday. It says he was crucified with "two thieves" on one side (see Matt. 27:38; Mark 15:27) and "two (additional) malefactors" on the other side (see Luke 23:32).

TWI also says Jesus was resurrected physically on Saturday (not Sunday).

Biblical Response: Jesus is the eternal, preexistent Word of God. He is

the second Person of the Holy Trinity. He was, is, and always shall be God. In His earthly life, Jesus had two natures: human and divine. He lived a perfect, sinless life and was crucified on a Roman cross between two thieves (i.e. malefactors) as a substitutionary atonement for mankind's sin. Jesus rose from the dead physically on the third day (the first day of the week: Sunday [the Lord's day]) and ascended to heaven (see John 1:1-18; 5:17-18; 8:56-59; 10:30-33; 17:5; Col. 1:15-17; 2:9).

Holy Spirit and "holy spirit"

The term "holy spirit" is used in two distinct ways in Scripture according to TWI. Holy Spirit (capital letters in TWI literature) is merely a synonym for God. It is a name of God describing His nature as Spirit (see John 4:24). The other use of the term "holy spirit" (not capitalized in TWI literature) refers to the gift of God given to believers by the Holy Spirit. It is the power of God given on the inside of the believer but manifested on the outside by speaking in tongues (SIT).

Biblical Response: The New Testament indicates that the Holy Spirit is both a person and fully God. He is capable of speaking, teaching, grieving, and being lied to (but not being fooled). There is no distinction made between "Holy Spirit" and "holy spirit" as maintained by TWI (see Matt. 12:31-32; 28:19; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:12; John 14-16; Acts 5:3-10; 13:2-4; Rom. 8:4, 26-27; 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 2:18-19; 4:30; 5:18-21).

Mankind's Problem: Lost "Spirit"

According to TWI, mankind consists of a three-fold nature: body, soul, and spirit. God created Adam with a body and soul (mind), to which He added spirit. This is the essence of the image of God. Adam lost "spirit" when he sought knowledge through the soul.

Jesus thus made a legal transaction to redeem mankind from Satan by taking the sins of the world upon Himself at His crucifixion. This made “holy spirit” available to mankind by believing in Jesus Christ (see Acts 2:38).

Biblical Response: All have sinned and are lost without Christ (see Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Jesus’ death on the cross was a substitutionary atonement to pay fully the debt of sin (see Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 3:18). Only by putting one’s faith in Christ alone and receiving Him as Savior and Lord can a person be saved (see Eph. 2:8-9).

No Need for Water Baptism

TWI teaches that water baptism is not needed in the church era. That was for Israel only and ended with John the Baptist and at Pentecost. The reference to baptism and the Trinity in Matthew 28:18-19, TWI claims, was probably not in the original text. Other references in the New Testament to baptism are likewise rejected.

Biblical Response: Water baptism is a symbol of the believer’s identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the act of Christian initiation into the body of Christ (see Acts 8:12, 36-39; Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:12). All credible biblical scholars agree that the textual integrity of Matthew 28:18, 19 is fully affirmed.

The New Birth and a Renewed Mind

TWI says that the new birth initially comes by verbal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. A person “renews” their mind for abundant life, however, only by taking TWI’s “Way of Abundance and Power” class. The sign of the renewed mind for all believers, according to TWI, is the nine manifestations of the gift of holy spirit as outlined in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

TWI states that the primary and necessary expression of holy spirit manifestation is speaking in tongues (SIT). Only by verbally speaking in tongues can one see outward, visible proof of the inward power of holy spirit. SIT is not a spontaneous experience. Students are taught a specific technique for speaking in tongues during The Way of Abundance and Power classes. All TWI students are expected to demonstrate the ability to SIT before graduating.

Biblical Response: TWI’s two-stage concept of redemption is without biblical support. One is fully born again by trusting in Jesus Christ as one’s Savior and Lord, and receiving salvation by grace through faith

alone (see Eph. 2:8-9). At that moment, our sins are forgiven, we are saved from our sins, and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us to empower us for living the Christian life. There is no indication that speaking in tongues or any other outward sign is necessary to confirm the Spirit’s presence. The Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes His various gifts as He wills to all members to minister to the whole body of Christ (the church) (see Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11).

The Dead Are Now Asleep

TWI maintains, as do Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, that there is no conscious existence after death. When believers die they do not go immediately to be with God or Jesus. Rather, they await the future resurrection when their bodies, souls, and spirits will be reunited to live again.

Biblical Response: At death, believers in Christ maintain a conscious relationship with Him while awaiting the resurrection (see Matt. 22:32; Luke 16:22-23; 23:43; John 11:26; 2 Cor. 5:8; 12:2-4; Phil. 1:23-24; 1 Thess. 4:14; 5:10).

Organization: The Way Tree

TWI is organized along the lines of the metaphor of a tree. A small cell-group fellowship of followers is a “Twig” and is led by an experienced elder. The local Twig association is a “Branch,” and a state association of Branches is a “Limb.” All the Limbs in a specific country comprise a national “Trunk,” and the world headquarters is the “Roots.”

All policies and doctrinal positions are transmitted from the Roots through the various levels of authority to local Twigs. All leaders are appointed by various levels of authority and approved by the Roots leadership.

Biblical Response: TWI’s centralized and authoritarian system of organization contrasts to the locally led and based churches of the New Testament. No one leader or leaders since apostolic times can claim exclusive authority over local congregations of believers. The biblical model for church structure is the body of Christ. Jesus referred to Himself metaphorically as the vine and His followers as the branches who produce good fruit (John 15: 1-8).

Conclusion

The Way International is a shell of what it was during the lifetime of Victor Paul Wierwille. It has shrunk in size and, as often is the case in cults when the original leader dies, splintered into several move-

ments. All claim to hold the true legacy of Wierwille's teachings. That being said, it is possible that we may encounter people in TWI or one of its progeny. In those cases we should be ready to witness to them using the following principles.

1. Have a clear understanding of your own faith and the Bible.
2. Study the beliefs and practices of The Way International and Victor Paul Wierwille in order to communicate intelligently with those involved in it.
3. Determine the level of involvement of the person in TWI. Have they been through The Way of Abundance and Power class? Are they involved in a Twig fellowship? Are they in some position of TWI leadership?
4. Define all terms carefully. TWI members often use Christian terms but have different meanings. For example, when they talk about Jesus as "the Son of God," they do not mean "God the Son."
5. Seek to build personal relationships and sincere friendships with those in TWI. Remember, patience is a key ingredient.
6. Avoid arguments, and let love be your true motive for witness.
7. Share your personal testimony of God's grace and assurance in your life. Tell what Jesus means to you personally.
8. Affirm the reliability of the biblical texts. Use a modern and reliable translation of the Bible in your discussion and check all passages for correct context.
9. Focus your discussion on the essential biblical issues including the nature of the Godhead (the Trinity), the deity and saving work of Jesus Christ, and the basics of the gospel message.
10. Pray and trust the Holy Spirit to lead in your witness encounter.

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