



STATEMENT DW115

A SPECIAL REPORT: SWEEPING CHANGES IN THE WAY INTERNATIONAL

The Way International introduced sweeping changes at the annual Rock of Ages gathering last year. The crowd of 11,000 applauded the changes, hoping that this would help remedy the severe decline and turbulence of the past 10 years. Splintering of the group since 1985 has greatly reduced its active membership, from a peak of about 35,000 to less than 10,000.¹

The most important change involves the new “The Way of Abundance and Power” classes by Way president, L. Craig Martindale. They include the Foundational Class (“Receive with Meekness”), the Intermediate Class (“Retain with Conviction”), and the Advanced Class (“Release with Boldness”). The Advanced Class was first presented in the fall of 1995. The other classes were filmed from February through April of 1995 and are currently being used.

These classes replace the “Power for Abundant Living” (PFAL) classes by Way founder, Victor Paul Wierwille, who died of cancer in 1985 after losing an eye to the disease and suffering strokes. Martindale’s classes include material from PFAL as well as new topics.

The Way not only teaches that Jesus Christ is not God, but also has instruction on tithing, the law of believing (whatever one believes will happen to one, whether bad or good), and the accuracy of the Bible (as translated by Way leaders). The Way also teaches its followers to receive an impersonal power (called “holy spirit,” “power from on high,” or “Christ in you”) by inhaling, and that speaking in tongues is the only proof that one is born again.

Martindale told his followers at the 1995 Rock of Ages conference that new classes were needed because The Way’s opponents had attended PFAL classes and learned how to use this material against The Way. (The PFAL classes had been open to anyone who paid the \$50 fee.) His complaint, however, implies that he realized there were significant errors in PFAL.

New classes were also needed because the existing video version, filmed by Wierwille in 1967, was obviously dated in its style, production, and dress. It endured so long largely because members of The Way (Wayers) viewed Wierwille as their “Father in the Word,” who heard God’s audible voice and taught God’s Word “as it had not been known since the first century.”

While PFAL was used to introduce prospects to The Way, Martindale’s new classes are open only to people who have attended a twig (home fellowship) for a year and have been taught how to receive holy spirit and speak in tongues by the twig coordinator. This practice is intended to “weed out” any opponents.

The new policy may reduce The Way’s recruitment. Last year, *The Way Magazine* lauded the organization’s success at quickly beginning new PFAL classes through street witnessing; but now fewer classes are likely to be held since many recruits drop out of the twigs before attending a full year.

Homosexuals Purged, Wow Ambassadors Terminated

Martindale also hopes the new classes will hinder homosexuals from joining The Way, because he condemns homosexuality. In fact, Martindale considers homosexuality to be “devil-spirit possession.”

Each year The Way had sent out hundreds of WOW (Word Over the World) Ambassadors as volunteer missionaries to cities around the world, which was its primary outreach for 25 years. During WOW training at the 1994 Rock of Ages conference, however, Way leaders decided not to send WOWs, because nearly 10 percent of their Ambassadors were homosexual. Since many WOWs are in the second year of the Way Corps (leadership training) program, it is likely that many homosexuals were also in the Corps.

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As a result, Martindale told everyone to “eliminate this and other spirit-driven malignancies” from Way circles. He added, “We have flushed homosexuals and ‘homo’ fantasizers and sympathizers out of our Way Corps and Staff.”² The Corps coordinator, a Rev. Homey, reported that “163 sodomites...had been purged, marked and avoided” by January 1995.³

At the time Martindale saw the suspension of WOW as the response to an attack by evil devil spirits, but by the summer of 1995 he recast the suspension as a Way victory. He told Corps grads that the Ambassadors had accomplished their mission of getting God’s “Word over the world.” He called it “WOW redefined,” but he never explained how reaching only a fraction of a percent of residents of the United States (much less of the world) constitutes *completing* the mission.

It is not known if Martindale’s strong stand against homosexuality is in some way related to widespread reports of rampant adultery and promiscuous sex in The Way, including the highest levels of leadership. One ex-member said the Corps’ residence training was sometimes like a “bordello,” with promiscuity, adultery, orgies, wife swapping, and even gang -rape.⁴

Meanwhile, Way leaders apparently have tried biblically to defend adultery. In opposition, John Schoenheit produced a paper that confronted this error and biblically explained that adultery is a sin. At the time, Schoenheit was on The Way’s research team. His appendices offered reasons Way leaders gave to justify adultery, along with his own rebuttals. Their arguments included: women who traveled with Jesus and Paul supplied them with sex because it satisfied their legitimate needs; men have needs for sex with a variety of women and God provides for this; all things are lawful when done in faith (Rom. 14:21 -23); stringent laws are done away with when one is born again (Col. 2:20-21); God punished David for killing Uriah, not for having sex with Bathsheba; and the Bible’s word for “adultery” has a spiritual, not a physical meaning.

Way trustees fired Schoenheit for writing the paper and sternly warned Wayers not to read it, ask about its contents, or have contact with those who read it.

Way Disciples Replace WOW Ambassadors

The termination of the WOW Ambassador program led to the start of the “Disciples of The Way Outreach” program. Unlike the WOWs, the Disciples program is open only to Advanced Class graduates, and therefore probably consists mainly of members of the Way Corps. Martindale hopes that the Disciples will have more strict and disciplined lives than WOWs did, which itself is an implicit indictment against the lifestyles of many WOWs.

Disciples serve only four months, and The Way plans to send out two waves a year. The Way sent out 138 Disciples to 15 cities during the Rock of Ages 1995 conference, far below a peak of 3,100 WOW Ambassadors it claimed to have sent in 1982.

Martindale seems determined to remake The Way and close ranks, which may result in an increasingly cultic mindset. Meanwhile, he promotes his book, *The Rise and Expansion of the Church*, through weekend seminars. Although the Way brags that 5,027 people have attended these seminars, that figure actually indicates an average of only about 100 per state. This is his first book, and the first book produced by this “Biblical Research and Teaching” ministry in over 10 years.

Nevertheless, The Way’s situation has improved. Homey reported that it liquidated \$29 million of debt by mid 1995. This led to Martindale’s promise that all new Way Corps grads would obtain paid positions, which hadn’t been done for over 20 years. Sale of assets, reduction of overhead, smaller Corps classes, large numbers of defections (which left more staff openings), staff purges, and the sale of the The Way College of Emporia, Kansas, campus helped make this possible.

The Ongoing Effects of Splinter Groups

The Way’s decisions to terminate the WOWs and PFAL classes are partly due to the damaging influence of Way splinter groups. They use Wierwille’s teachings, jargon, and writings, and have drawn off many of The Way’s followers by accusing “International” of authoritarianism, misuse of power, adultery, misuse of funds, spiritual corruption, departure from the Word of God, and denominationalism.

Martindale openly and vulgarly expressed his contempt for the splinter groups during his Rock of Ages ‘95 sermons. The Way president is accustomed to using crude speech and profanity, even in public settings.

The most prominent of these groups are John Lynn’s Christian Educational Services (CES) and Chris Geer’s The Way of Great Britain. CES includes Wayers who were respected or well known, such as Lynn who had three books published by The Way, more than any author except Wierwille. CES now wants to be seen as an independent ministry, not just as a Way splinter group, even though its glaring similarity to The Way is obvious to outsiders.

Geer is damaging to The Way because of his previous close ties to Wierwille. Just after Wierwille's death, Geer published *The Passing of a Patriarch*, which is a rambling account of Geer's final conversations with Wierwille shortly before his death. When he first presented it verbally to gatherings of Way leadership (at which, John Lynn reports, he carried a large-caliber pistol for self-protection), it caused tremendous turbulence, and its content was kept out of general circulation. European Christian Press (which Geer controls) then published it a few years after Wierwille's death.

The Passing of a Patriarch greatly damaged The Way because it summarizes the accusations Wierwille made against the three trustees who alone are technically "members" of The Way and who control all assets and policy. The book asserts that the president and trustees were untrustworthy and spiritually corrupt, did not listen to God or Wierwille, killed Way ministries by neglect, avoided responsibility, were hypocrites, led selfish lifestyles, and so forth.

This book condemned not only the trustees but all Way leadership, including the clergy, headquarters staff, regional leaders, and Corps around the world. In addition, the account includes several insights into The Way. For example, Geer describes Wierwille as one who was very hard to live with, "often lashing out at those closest to him" and hurting them.⁵ It includes a reproduction of handwritten notes in which the three trustees admit that the accusations against them are true. For instance, trustee Donald Wierwille (Victor Paul's son) confessed, "I apologize for not having followed my 'man of God.'"⁶

Geer and trustee Howard Allen apparently believed that the behavior of the trustees, not strokes and cancer, caused Wierwille's death. Allen wrote, "I read it and all is true....So I will change to do my best for the man I helped kill."⁷ They apparently could not reconcile the death of "the man of God" with their teaching of "the law of believing." Since they considered Wierwille the epitome of believing, he should easily have been able to will himself to health simply by believing he was well and free of cancer.

Geer believes Wierwille actually caused his body to die: "There were two points when I felt that he might change his mind and decide to go on living....I am fully convinced that he believed to stop the functions of his body."⁸ He seems to believe that Wierwille chose to commit suicide, using his spiritual weapon of "believing," rather than to continue fighting the spiritual decline of the trustees.

Geer's book also claims that Geer alone is spiritually able to reform The Way Ministry. Geer repeatedly promotes himself as the only man left in The Way Ministry who is fully informed, spiritually adept, and capable of leading the Ministry and stemming its speedy decline. As a result, many Wayers view Geer as being the true spiritual heir to Wierwille. Incidentally, only Geer's group has published a book by Wierwille since his death.

New Knoxville's Guarded Ways

Just as 100 different Mormon groups all revere the Temple Lot in Independence, Missouri, because of founder Joseph Smith's attachment to it, the many Way splinter groups also revere Wierwille's New Knoxville, Ohio family farm and books. Since the Martindale faction controls these, it views visits by ex-Wayers as enemy infiltration. This conflict has increased as ex-Wayers have persuaded many of their friends to leave Martindale's group.

Because of the work of splinter groups, in recent years The Way has been marked by heightened paranoia, attention to security, and bitterness. The Way's security force has become increasingly aggressive, quickly and thoroughly investigating anyone who appears at functions like the Rock of Ages conferences⁹ or is on their campus without a Way nametag. They run off anyone who is not currently active in a Way-controlled twig and who doesn't have a Way escort. Way security personnel try to intimidate outsiders by dressing as police officers — complete with utility belt, holster, CB-style microphone clipped to a shoulder, metal badge with the word "patrolman" prominently stamped on it, and white vehicles with a seal painted on the door and emergency lights on top.

Although Wayers project a curt and indifferent attitude toward the many who have left the group, they have undoubtedly been hurt deeply in recent years. After all, it is their *friends* who have left and made accusations of severe error against The Way leadership. With the more aggressive and cultic mindset of current Way leadership, followers can expect more years of turbulence and change.

— John P Juedes

John P. Juedes is the pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Highland, California, and has written extensively on The Way International.

NOTES

1 See "The Way Tree Is Splintering," *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1988. Technically, the group has only three members — the trustees who control all aspects of The Way International, Inc. Although the group emphasizes that it does not have members, it keeps very detailed records of its class graduates and donors, which are used as criteria to determine people's status with the group and their access to some of its functions.

2 *The Way Magazine*, Nov.-Dec. 1994, 26. Rev. Bill Green, who handles some public relations for The Way's New Knoxville, Ohio headquarters, declined to be interviewed about the classes and related developments.

3 *Highlights of The Way Corps Graduation* (June 1995), cassette tape. Since then, The Way has sought to purge (that is, totally shun) all who do not tithe or who question Martindale on any issue.

4 Lionel Recio and Steve Lefevers, *The Way of Life or the Way of Death* (self-published, 1987), 106. John Lynn described in detail how Way leaders practiced and tried to justify adultery in the audiotape, "Overview of Events -1."

5 Christopher C. Geer, *The Passing of a Patriarch* (Attrincham, Cheshire, U.K.: European Christian Press, n.d.), 34.

6 *Ibid.*, 75, 78.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 67, 68. See also pp.38 and 52. Wierwille's death certificate lists ocular melanoma, or malignant tumor of the eye, as the underlying cause of death. The immediate cause was metastatic melanoma of the liver, which means that the cancer spread from the eye to the liver.

9 In an April 30, 1996 press release The Way announced it would not hold a Rock of Ages festival in 1996. "The Rock" had been held annually for 25 years, and had been used to teach, recruit participants for Way ministries, and send out Way Ambassadors. The group says that it will hold classes and smaller conferences instead, including a weeklong gathering of 2,000 at The Way's auditorium in New Knoxville, July 20-27. The Way stressed that these gatherings were for "committed," "faithful" followers, unlike the Rock, which was open to anyone. Like the new classes and the Disciples, this is a sign that The Way is striving to further restrict access to its activities, purge anyone who questions current Way leadership, increase control, and consolidate.