



STATEMENT DW-100

THE WAY TREE IS SPLINTERING

by John P. Juedes

For followers of The Way International and its late founder Victor Paul Wierwille, the past two years have been life shaking. This is a key time for Christians to understand the issues which Wayers and ex-Wayers face and to learn ways to share biblical truth with them. Furthermore, this volatile time gives observers of new religions an unusual modern-day glimpse into how such movements spawn daughter groups.

Many statistics show that The Way International is splintering:

- Enrollment at *The Way College* of Emporia, Kansas, fell from 350 students to 90. This reflects an enrollment decline in The Way Corps leader training program.
- Attendance at the Rock of Ages festival was down by 3,000 in 1987 (about 12,000 below its peak of 22,000 several years ago). This annual gathering includes teaching, entertainment, tours of facilities, recognition of the past year's W.O.W. ("Way Over the World") Ambassadors (one-year volunteer missionaries), and the commissioning of new Ambassadors.
- The 1987 "Corps week" drew only 2,000 of the 3,500 graduates. All grads of The Way Corps are required to attend this meeting which precedes the Rock of Ages each year, so attendance is normally near one hundred percent.
- Income fell to \$10 million (1986-1987), far below the \$27.1 million for 1983-84 and the one-time peak fiscal year of \$32 million. Reports say The Way's facility in Tinnie, New Mexico, is for sale.
- Ex-followers have held meetings of Wayers in many cities to expose corruption and false doctrine in The Way, resulting in several alternative groups.

ACCUSATIONS CAUSE DEFECTIONS

People who have been involved in The Way for several years have formed networks of friendships which are now being used to spread debate and accusations.

The main objects of the accusations are past and present Way trustees, especially founder Victor Paul Wierwille, present president L. Craig Martindale, Wierwille's son Donald, and Howard Allen. The five trustees (which numbered only three before the controversy began in 1986) control all aspects of the group, including teaching, policy, and finance.

Way leadership has tried to ignore the controversy and stop public and private debate. Trustees have fired leaders who have protested and have accused some of being possessed by devil spirits. They have warned followers not to listen to or read materials by defectors. The President's regular newsletters and *The Way Magazine* have said nothing of the controversy. However, regular readers have noticed the smaller size of the issues and the conspicuous absence of former leaders' names. The Way has also reorganized and reduced the size of some "twigs" (home fellowships) to adjust for losses.

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Four major charges dominate the debate: *authoritarianism*, *plagiarism*, practice and approval of *adultery*, and *false teaching*. In each case, Wierwille is indicted with current leadership.

Prominent dissenters made most of the charges while still in top Way leadership positions, which increased their damaging effects.

Mass confusion and fear struck Way leadership when European Region Coordinator Chris Geer read "The Passing of the Patriarch" at leader meetings in 1986. Geer claims this is the last will and testament of founder Wierwille ("Patriarch" refers to Wierwille). Declaring that the Trustees failed Wierwille and departed from the Word, the document appoints Geer to restore the ministry. Relatively few Way insiders have heard "The Passing," and apparently no third party was present when Wierwille spoke with Geer shortly before his death. Yet, most leaders seem resigned to the influence which it and Geer have acquired since its first reading.

Within months, John Lynn and other Way leaders added more accusations in a 37-page letter (46% of which is quotations of Wierwille) to the Trustees in February 1987. The letter accuses Trustees of gross dereliction of duty, evil intents and practices, lies, unbelief, instability, devilish judgments, refusal to accept correction, and other related misdeeds.

Charge One: Authoritarianism

Ex-Wayers assert that leaders coerce followers to promote and obey the organization at the expense of the people. As examples, they note the Way teaching that believers who disobey Way leadership will be opposed and judged by God. They also denounce the Way law of tithing and abundant sharing, which requires followers to give more than 10% even if personal needs go unmet. They further criticize the Trustees' manner of making decisions, detailing expenditures, and selecting leaders for local areas.

V.P. Wierwille initiated "The Way Tree" hierarchy in the late 1960s, claiming it was the biblical pattern for the church. In this structure, "leaves" represent believers, "twigs" stand for home fellowships, "branches" are areas, "limbs" stand for states, some countries are called "trunks," and "roots" are Way bases of operation, especially the New Knoxville, Ohio, headquarters.

It was not long, however, before top leaders realized that Wierwille used the Way Tree structure to attain finances from, and absolute control over, groups that had previously been independent expressions of the Jesus movement. As a result, at least seven top leaders left, including Peter Wade, whom Wierwille once commended as his "assistant" and "friend," and who wrote articles and a booklet for The Way. Ironically, many who replaced them, such as Lynn, have only now come to realize the domination of The Way Tree, and have left also.

Charge Two: Plagiarism

Charges that "the Master teacher" V.P. Wierwille plagiarized large sections of other authors' books also occupy many conversations. This writer published the first examples in 1980, showing that in his *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today* Wierwille plagiarized sections of E.W. Bullinger's *The Giver and His Gifts*.¹ By 1987 Jay Valusek and I had also published excerpts showing Wierwille had plagiarized portions of *The Gift of the Holy Spirit* by J.E. Stiles, *The Father and His Family* by E.W. Kenyon, and *Selected Writings, The Church Epistles, The Mystery, How to Enjoy the Bible*, and *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* by Bullinger.²

Recently, more examples have been uncovered, including (but not limited to) Wierwille's use of:

- Bullinger in his University of Life course on *Thessalonians*.
- B.G. Leonard's *The Gifts of the Spirit* in his *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today* and the *Intermediate* and *Advanced Power for Abundant Living* courses.
- Oral Roberts's *The Red Thread* in his *Lifestyle of God's Word*.

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In addition, anyone who is well-acquainted with Wierwille's writings and reads Kenyon's and Bullinger's books is struck by the close parallels, even though one cannot always trace exact word-for-word plagiarism.

Many people follow Wierwille in part because they were impressed by his claim that he took over 3,000 books on theology to the city dump³ and resolved to study the Bible alone without men's teachings.⁴ Although Wierwille sometimes said he learned from others, he often explicitly claimed originality. He cultivated an image of being an original Bible researcher and his followers have seen him as such. It has now become apparent to many of them that Wierwille was instead an eclectic plagiarist.

Almost every one of Wierwille's teachings can be traced to other sources (see sidebar for descriptions of some of Wierwille's teachings). Wierwille's writings on the topics of interpreting the Bible, soul sleep, the distinction of impersonal holy spirit from the Holy Spirit, ultradispensationalism, gospel harmony, and "the mystery" are all drawn from Bullinger.

Wierwille's stance that the whole Bible was authored in Aramaic, that parts of Scripture have been lost, that many Bible passages in popular translations were deviously inserted by pagans, and his Nestorian-like view of Jesus Christ (which drives a wedge between the "human Jesus" and the "divine Christ") all trace to mystic George Lamsa. Although Lamsa's blemished "translation" of the Bible appears in Christian bookstores, he held New Thought (Christian Science-like), not evangelical, beliefs.⁵

Wierwille drew his laws of believing, of tithing, prosperity, mental imaging (imagining good things to bring them to pass), and the "more abundant life" from Albert Cliffe. Although *Guidedposts* helped popularize Cliffe's writings and he claimed to be Anglican, Cliffe held New Thought beliefs, seeing God as impersonal principle. He also was a spiritist and claimed, "Many of the subjects I have given in my Bible class have been dictated to me by the loved ones long since passed on."⁶

It would appear that Wierwille's gnostic leanings, healing emphasis, camp/advance (retreat) formats, divine laws, stress on physical exercise, desire to be "the best," and even the term "The Way" itself were derived from New Thought speakers Glenn Clark, Starr Daily, and Rufus Moseley.

Wierwille's ideas on sense knowledge, confession, and healing (among others) he found in E.W. Kenyon.

The Way founder's instruction on how to receive the Holy Spirit by inhaling and the belief that speaking in tongues cannot be counterfeited were derived from J.E. Stiles, a leader in the early charismatic movement. Wierwille credits Stiles with showing him how to receive and manifest the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues when they met at a Tulsa rally in 1951.⁷

He took his teachings on evil spirits, definition of humans as body-soul-spirit (with his peculiar exegesis), laying on of hands, and his descriptions and methods of "operating the manifestations" (gifts of the Spirit) from B.G. Leonard. Wierwille admits going to Alberta, Canada, twice in the early 1950s to hear Leonard teach on the manifestations and get a copy of his syllabus for his use.⁸ Leonard still teaches in Brownsville, Texas.

Wierwille exercised very little discernment in learning from others, readily accepting teachings from itinerant mystics, Christian Scientists, and spiritists.

It is apparent that almost all Wierwille taught he acquired from other men, not from original study of God's word. When Wierwille wrote, he commonly used these men's writings and copied them, idea by idea and often word by word. He never credited his sources, in effect lying to his readers by leading them to believe that he originated his teachings under God's direct tutelage.

Charge Three: Adultery

Defectors also accused Way leadership of practicing and approving adultery as a godly practice. John Lynn claims that Wierwille and at least four other trustees had sex with literally hundreds of women, many of whom Lynn and other ex-leaders have counseled personally.⁹ They also claim the Trustees fired long-time researcher John Schonheit for writing a brief paper summarizing the Bible's teaching against adultery. Additionally, ex-members have on file

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letters and transcripts in which Way president L. Craig Martindale defends sex outside marriage in many situations.

Many Wayers have accepted these allegations in part because they explain and confirm previous experiences. Almost every long-time member has had at least one question such as: "Why did Dr. Wierwille never speak against adultery in his 'Christian Family and Sex' class?" "Why does my Limb leader often spend the night with certain twig leaders of the opposite sex?" "Why did our women's meeting leave the impression that a woman should satisfy *any* physical desire of visiting Way leaders?" "Why do Way leaders give contradictory answers when I ask about the biblical stance on sex outside of marriage?" "Why did the twig leader make sexual advances toward me the first time I attended?"¹⁰

Charge Four: False Teaching

Ex-Wayers are increasingly charging The Way with false teaching and scholarship. John Schonheit's paper on adultery was a thinly veiled accusation that Wierwille and other leaders falsely taught that adultery is a biblically acceptable practice. Ex-Wayers also charge that The Way teaches falsely on the topics of believing, abundant sharing, tithing, interpretation of tongues, and "athletes of the spirit" (the belief that every warfare metaphor in the Epistles should be understood as an athletic metaphor instead). Many have realized that they have also been falsely taught on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and have turned to evangelical beliefs instead.

As Wayers recognize false teachings, they further see the inaccurate scholarship Wierwille used to defend his teachings.¹¹ Therefore, they also criticize Wierwille's skill as a Bible researcher and teacher and call into question everything they learned from him.

This article only sketches the most prominent and publishable charges. The stories which former (and current) Way insiders hear include many more specific charges about shocking events. Lynn summarized this when he assured listeners that many stories "would curl your hair."¹²

SPLINTER GROUPS BEGIN

Several thousand followers have severed ties with The Way International as a result of the allegations and evidence they have seen, including the entire state (Limb) of South Carolina in April 1988 and about 80 percent of the Washington, D.C., Limb. They now favor home fellowships which are "self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating." This is a reaction against The Way, which governed home groups, received and dispensed their income, and directed all the propagating efforts (which focused on promoting Wierwille's videotaped *Power for Abundant Living* class). Nonetheless, many ex-Wayers desire publications, traveling teachers, regional meetings, and a network of fellowships similar to those they had in The Way. Accordingly, several groups have arisen to try to meet these needs.

The largest group seems to be Christian Educational Services, Inc. (CES), which incorporated this fall in Indianapolis. This group was formerly known as American Fellowship Services. CES includes many past Way celebrities and clergy such as John and Pat Lynn, Ralph Dubofsky, Robert Belt, Sue Pierce, Tom Reahard, and John Schonheit. They all have been visible in speaking, writing, and leadership positions such as Region and Limb Coordinators and headquarters staff (Region Coordinator is the highest Way position other than Trustee). They have been active and effective at exposing problems in The Way through personal influence and meetings of Wayers around the nation.

CES holds two national meetings per year in Chicago (drawing about 150 people per meeting), publishes *Dialogue* magazine bi-monthly, circulates periodic newsletters, and distributes tapes. The CES meeting in May 1988 sponsored two and one-half days of biblical teachings and allowed sales of books by those attending, including Lynn, Lionel Recio, and myself. The most debate arose when the topic of financing CES was raised, which prompted fears that their donations would be misused by yet another organization. Participants were sensitive (having been wounded by The Way), were open to friendships and ideas, and were reevaluating their beliefs.

Pacific West Fellowship,¹³ headed by Steve Sann (who also was once a Limb and Region Coordinator), seems to be the second most aggressive splinter group. Sann distributes a free tape, "A Ministry in Crisis: An Editorial on The

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Way International," in which he asserts that The Way became hierarchical in the 1970s, causing a deterioration of "the Ministry" in many areas. Sann also circulates periodic newsletters and regularly publishes teaching tapes. He also hopes to produce more printed materials, provide a network of fellowships, and serve as a traveling teacher.

The Nature of the New Groups

While ex-Wayers want the groups to be much different than The Way, there are many similarities in teaching and goals.

First, the assumptions and structure of the new groups are like The Way International. They assume that honest, objective biblical research and a fellowship of true believers cannot be found among Christians outside Wierwille's heritage of teaching, so they limit research and fellowship to their own narrow circles. While accusing the Christian church at large of being divisive, the new groups (like The Way International) practice division much more stringently than most Christian denominations or churches. Wierwille always told them that they could only go as far as they had been taught, and the new groups demonstrate this principle by organizing themselves in the same ways, and on the same assumptions, which Wierwille used in building The Way Tree. One CES leader, with a touch of irony, attempted to distance CES from The Way by explaining that CES would do "Christian study," not "biblical research" (A Way term). Nonetheless, hundreds of Way refugees are resisting the new groups' pleas to "join up."

Second, the doctrine of the splinter groups is nearly a carbon copy of Way doctrine. A good example of this is John Lynn's 12-session class "Keys to Victorious Living." The Class is nearly an exact duplicate of Wierwille's "Power for Abundant Living" class, teaching over two dozen of the same specific doctrines and using the same proof texts Wierwille used (though Lynn corrects some of Wierwille's most glaring misinterpretations). Lynn retains all the critical Way doctrines of concern to Christians, such as anti-Trinitarianism, ultradispensationalism, soul sleep, and the belief that speaking in tongues is infallible and essential proof that one is saved. Lynne's "new" teachings include the assertions that interpretation of tongues must always be praise to God (never a message to believers), and that "believing" does not work for saint and sinner alike, but is receiving God's promises.

Sann, on the other hand, considers people like Lynn to have gone too far in rejecting valid teachings. In response, he defends such Way teachings as that on interpretation of tongues.¹⁴

Ralph Dubofsky told the May 1988 CES meeting that the reason they like so much of E.W. Bullinger is that they had already heard Wierwille teach Bullinger's material as his own. He rightly exhorted them to reactivate critical thought rather than just change from being a Wierwille disciple to a Bullinger disciple.

Many ex-Wayers continue to read Bullinger, as they did while in The Way. Few know that many able scholars have effectively refuted some of Bullinger's ideas. One response still in print is *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* by H.A. Ironside, which addresses aspects of ultradispensationalism.¹⁵ It is often perplexing to Wayers, though, that teachers Wierwille respected such as Bullinger, Kenyon, and Stiles staunchly held primary orthodox beliefs which Wierwille rejected, including Trinitarianism.

What Are Long-Time Wayers Thinking About?

The past two years have been a very unsettling time for Wayers. Accusations have disturbed many people and strained or broken numerous friendships. Reportedly, a few people have even considered suicide or entered mental institutions.

Some still in The Way are ignorant of the controversy, while others refuse to listen to the charges, deny them, or rationalize how Wierwille could have done such things without guilt.

There is a great diversity of emotions and viewpoints among those who have left The Way International. Some retain great respect for Wierwille, while a few joke about him. Many remember current leaders as friends, but at the same time despise them for wrongs they believe they have done or allowed. Most still feel hurt from being betrayed by The Way, are suspicious of any new organizations, and hesitate to connect themselves with any Christian church. But they are open to friendships and the Bible, and are reevaluating many teachings and practices. Some find it hard

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to reevaluate the Trinity, perhaps because they heard Way leaders ridicule Trinitarianism so often, and because they themselves also berated the teaching. Most ex-Wayers are confused, not knowing where to turn, whom to trust, or what to believe. They also feel the need for teaching and fellowship with other believers.

SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS INTO THE CONTROVERSY

One Scripture passage (2 Cor. 11:2-4, 13-15) gives insight into the nature of this controversy, Wierwille's work, and his followers:

For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy, for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully....For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light; therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their deeds.

The Way began to grow significantly only when Wierwille traveled to California and recruited followers from the Jesus movement.¹⁶ Like Eve and the Corinthians, these young believers (and many since the 1960s) were "virgins" with simple devotion to Christ, but were not grounded in Scripture and thus were easily led astray. They did not understand that Wierwille preached "another Jesus" (who was only a man) and "another spirit" (not the Holy Spirit personally indwelling them).

The apostle Paul warned of deceivers when he told the Ephesians, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30). Wierwille was not the only former minister to draw away young disciples — David Berg was one of several others. Like Wierwille, Berg drew young people from the Jesus movement to form his own group, the Children of God (now called the Family of Love), which uses sexual promiscuity to win new followers. Like Wierwille, Berg's teachings became the ultimate authority, and when he committed adultery, he reinterpreted the Bible in order to defend his sinful practice.

This present controversy is serving to alert "pure" believers that Wierwille and his successors are false apostles after all. Followers are now tasting the matured fruit of The Way Tree — fruit of promiscuity, adultery, plagiarism (a form of lying), authoritarianism, false teaching, unfaithfulness, and lack of self-control. The false apostles' disguises are being pulled from their faces, and the "virgins" who were led astray are returning to the one true Jesus, Spirit, and gospel, and the church of Jesus Christ.

This is hard to accept for those who knew V.P. Wierwille as father, friend, and teacher, but both the Scriptures and the empirical evidence demand it.

WHAT CAN CHRISTIANS DO?

The current turmoil surrounding The Way presents an excellent opportunity for Christians to befriend ex-Wayers and help them discover biblical truths they have forgotten or never known. Christian can also help (ex-) Wayers through four basic steps of reorientation: 1) expose, 2) emotional reaction, 3) relearning, and 4) reconstruction.

First, it is helpful to present facts of doctrinal, organizational, and personal error in Way leaders. This includes Wierwille's plagiarism, approval of adultery, authoritarianism, errors of scholarship and Bible interpretation, and so forth. If the person refuses to read or hear material which exposes such errors, then take the time to obtain the primary sources which demonstrate them and ask his or her opinion of them. Point out that Wierwille's adultery and lying (plagiarism) mark him a false teacher, not just a teacher with failings (Matt. 7:15).

Second, give ex-Wayers "space" to vent their emotions and hurts, and pray for them and their healing. Show love

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and patience throughout this trying time of change. It is common for ex-Wayers to take several years to fully separate from The Way and reorient their lives.

Third, help them to relearn. They have rejected some Christian teachings (such as the Trinity¹⁷) primarily because they have accepted Way caricatures and have not fully understood them. Explain teachings carefully, and give them time alone to read the Bible in a newer version (such as the New International Version or New American Standard) which has clearer wording and lacks Wierwille's marginal notes and deletions marked in their old King James Versions. If possible, use Way terminology and address Way thought patterns, or put them in touch with ex-Wayers who can.

Fourth, help them through the reconstruction of their Christian lives by introducing them to sincere, Bible-believing Christians, small group fellowships, and churches. This is a big hurdle, because V.P. Wierwille was always more effective at turning people away from the church of Jesus Christ than he was at turning people toward the Bible or The Way International.

By word, character, and example, show them that there is more-than-abundant life outside The Way International.

Dr. Juedes is a Lutheran pastor who has written extensively on the Way.

NOTES

¹ John P. Juedes and Douglas V. Morton, *The Integrity and Accuracy of The Way's Word* (St. Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach, 1980), 43-48.

² John P. Juedes and Jay Valusek, *Will the Real Author Please Stand Up?* (St. Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach, 1987), 50 pp.

³ Victor Paul Wierwille, *Power for Abundant Living* (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1971), 119-20.

⁴ Victor Paul Wierwille, *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today*, 6th ed. (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1972), x. See also Elena Whiteside, *The Way — Living with Love*, 2d ed. (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1972), 209, 174, for Wierwille's claim that his book is the most *original* coverage of the subject, and p. 178 for his claim that God audibly promised to teach him directly and personally.

⁵ Lamsa considered himself an apostle and believed in clairvoyance and universalism. He taught that Jesus Christ was not resurrected bodily and will not return visibly, and that the Holy Spirit is an influence, not a personal being. See John P. Juedes, "Looking at Lamsa," *Personal Freedom Outreach Newsletter* (Jan.-Mar. 1987).

⁶ Albert Cliffe, *Let Go and Let God* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 157. Cliffe's book *Lessons in Successful Living* addresses similar topics. Although Wierwille has written against spiritism, he welcomed this spiritist with open arms.

⁷ Whiteside, 205-9. Leonard's book and course syllabus called *The Gifts of the Spirit* are still in print.

⁸ Whiteside, 197-200.

⁹ John Lynn, *Overview of Events*, two-cassette series, 1987. Available from: Capitol Saints/John A. Lynn, 5918 Chesterbrook Road, McLean, VA 22101. The Way published three books by Lynn, more than any author other than Wierwille.

¹⁰ These are actual experiences which Wayers, ex-Wayers, and others have shared with me.

¹¹ Morton and Juedes, *Integrity and Accuracy*, reveals many of Wierwille's errors in scholarship and Bible interpretation.

¹² Lynn, *Overview of Events*. For example, Lionel Recio and Steve Lefevers claim that one woman was "'gang-raped' by several Way clergy" and that the Corps residence training was sometimes like a "bordello" with promiscuity, adultery, orgies, and wife-swapping. *The Way of Life or The Way of Death* (self-published, 1987), 106.

¹³ Address: Pacific West Fellowship, P.O. Box 18503, Anaheim, CA 92817.

¹⁴ Letter by Steve Sann, Pacific West Fellowship, 2 March 1988.

¹⁵ H. A. Ironside, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1938) addresses the relation of the gospel to the church, the Bride and body of Christ, baptism, and related topics. (Ex-)Wayers would also benefit from Robert A. Morey's *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), Stuart Olyott's *The Three Are One* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), and Cal Beisner's *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985).

¹⁶ Wierwille noted that acquiring young people from the Jesus movement caused the Way's growth (Whiteside, 230-35).

¹⁷ Rick Lessing, *An Analysis and Critique of the Theology of The Way International: An Evangelical Christian Response to Victor Paul Wierwille's Concept of the Trinity* (unpublished paper, 1986), makes a case that Wierwille misunderstood Trinitarianism as (alternately) Sabellianism and polytheism, and that when Trinitarianism is properly explained, it is clearly biblically valid and coherent.