

## **The Way International™ and Christian Fundamentalism**

The following is by Charlene L. Edge from her blogs posts at <https://charleneedge.com>. Charlene is the author of the award-winning memoir, *Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International*. (New Wings Press. 2017).

### **Early 1900s: Lyman Stewart floods the USA with Christian fundamentalism**

Many good books are available on the topic of Christian fundamentalism, but a quick overview is in an article I came across that gives the background about *The Fundamentals*, a series of pamphlets distributed by a man named Lyman Stewart from Los Angeles in the early 1900s. Stewart took Christian fundamentalism to a new level in the U.S.

*The Fundamentals* in large measure changed the course of Christianity in this country. As a result, it also changed the course of my own life and many others like me. From the report:

Between 1908 and 1923, Lyman poured millions of dollars – mostly from his Union Oil holdings, but also from the Stewart Citrus Association orange groves in Ontario – into making Los Angeles a world center of the fundamentalist movement.

To read the entire report, click this link: [The Fundamentals](#).

### **When Fundamentalism Hooked Me**

#### **A Catholic youth**

To understand how and when fundamentalism hooked me, let me tell you a bit about my upbringing. I grew up Christian, the Catholic kind. When I was a kid, my parents paid for me to attend St. Francis de Sales Catholic School. I carried the brown tuition envelope to Sister Mary Something-or-other on the first of each month for eight years, enduring occasional humiliations for talking too much and putting up with bruised kneecaps after Friday Mass in the school basement—hated that brown and white-checked linoleum! But Jesus gave his life for me, so my little purple knees were the least I could offer in return.

By the time I graduated from St. Francis I had memorized a multitude of angelic hymns, prayed thousands of circles around the rosary, and internalized questions/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.

At our eighth-grade graduation service, beaming and proud in my new pink dress, I received from the priest the coveted Religion award. I got the highest grades in the subject, thanks to Mom drilling me at the kitchen table with possible test questions. I was right with God. I was set up for a shock.

## **Authority**

I had taken for granted in the Catholic religion that the ultimate authority on how to live for God and what to believe as true was partly the Scriptures but more so the Pope and two thousand years of tradition that formed our esoteric rituals, like swinging the incense burner at mass, and righteous attitudes, like believing Protestants were damned. Scripture was indeed sacred and referred to as The Word of God, but in practice (at least in my experience), it was an augmentation, an add-on, to the Church fathers' authority.

## **Fundamentalism rolls in**

How on earth or in heaven could a Pope or anyone else decide on an "accurate interpretation" of the Scriptures and claim it as The Word of God, expecting everyone to agree? Interpretation happens, even with a sacred book, as anyone who reads anything can testify.

But fundamentalists take the Bible as a perfect authority, usually the King James Version, but not always. Granted, they pick and choose which parts are literal and which parts are metaphorical, depending on what the fundamentalist leader wants to demand from his or her followers.

By the time I was a junior in high school, a peppy cheerleader coaxed me into coming to her house for a Bible fellowship. What happened in her living room was a cross between Catholic religion class and a birthday party. The meeting's sponsor was Young Life, a Protestant evangelical organization that targets youth and still operates today. Our leader, a Presbyterian minister, urged us to read God's Word, which was the Bible, and invite Jesus into our hearts if we hadn't already done that. Get born-again!

## **The Bible, not the Pope, was my new spiritual leader**

Young Life (Y.L.) was Martin Luther all over again, but they didn't mention that monk from the 15th century, nor how he protested Catholic corruption, caused a split in the Catholic Church, cited the Bible, not the Pope, as THE AUTHORITY, and kicked-off the phenomenon we call the Protestant Reformation.

In college I met followers of The Way International™ who told me about their Protestant group, an interdenominational biblical research, teaching, and fellowship ministry. They took the Y.L. message and behavior to the next level with dogmatic Bible classes taught by the founder, Victor Paul Wierwille. They said he taught people how to determine "the accuracy of God's Word" and have a more abundant life.

## **Biblical inerrancy: the scarlet letter of Christian fundamentalism**

What made Wierwille a fundamentalist? Primarily his rock-solid belief in biblical inerrancy. What's that? It goes like this: God is the author of the Bible. The writers just wrote what God wanted. Since God is perfect, whatever He dictated had to be perfect, too. Therefore, since the

Bible is God's Word, and He is perfect, then the Bible is perfect. Has to be. Sounds logical, right? But where do fundamentalists get this belief?

The idea of a perfect Bible as the product of a perfect God comes from philosophy, namely principles of logic. No matter, fundamentalists like Wierwille shove glaring round pegs of contradictions in the Bible into the square hole of perfection to make the Bible appear without error, and rarely does anyone in the congregation call them on it. The spiel is too rapid and too convincing.

This all made sense to me when I was a teenager, given I wanted to learn the *real* Word of God, not somebody's opinion or interpretation. I thought the Catholic Church had let me down, since it had not insisted the Scriptures should be the centerpiece of my faith. I loved God and wanted to serve Him, like the nuns said I should, and fundamentalism disguised by Wierwille as "the accuracy of God's Word" had a vise-like grip that felt safe, a godly perch in a world swirling with confusion. I was not a casual believer. I did not attend a home fellowship once a week and continue my regular life with a job, family, phone bills, and rental/mortgage payments, like many church-goers do. I was 18 years old, looking for truth, and I ran away to join the circus of The Way International.

Over time the repetitive Way lifestyle became a not-so-merry merry-go-round of never answering people's direct questions about how I knew for sure the Bible was inerrant.

I never admitted that I never saw Wierwille make the whole Bible "fit together perfectly."

I did not doubt that Wierwille taught the "accuracy of the Word of God" until about sixteen years into it when I finally broke through a mountain of denial and sawed off the cast-iron vise that held me. I left The Way in 1987.

Surprising to some people, The Way International is still in business. It was and still is a "religious" non-profit organization. Those sorts of entities are hard to dismantle even when they stand for something unrealistic or abusive or destructive or at the very least, misleading.

## **What Makes The Way International™ a Fundamentalist Cult?**

1. **Belief in inerrancy of the Bible:** Christian belief, common among fundamentalists, that the Bible is entirely without error, not only in theology and ethics but also in history, geography, and science. A less strict view of the Bible, held by many evangelicals, is that the Bible is simply inspired by God." (Stephen Prothero. *Religious Literacy*)
2. **Belief in Literalism:** The Bible should be taken literally except where figures of speech are used, although Wierwille did not always follow that rule.
3. **Hostility to modern theology:** Rejects the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible. (e.g., higher criticism and historical criticism).

4. **Exercise of militant piety:** An assurance that those who do not share their views on the Bible are at least wrong; at worst, possessed by devil spirits.
5. **Belief in Creationism:** The doctrine that the universe was created only a few thousand years ago, rather than the billions shown by modern science, and that God created man and woman and all the species outright, rather than by a process of evolution.
6. **Trust in a charismatic authoritarian leader:** Victor Paul Wierwille. Even after his death, his teachings (many are plagiarized from E.W. Bullinger, B. G. Leonard, and J.E. Stiles) are believed and promoted.
7. **Belief in leader's claim of special knowledge, "The Guru Claim":** Wierwille said, "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." Elena Whiteside. *The Way: Living in Love*. (New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press. 1972) Page 178.
8. **Control** of information and followers' behavior, time, emotions, thoughts, and money.

**Resources:**

*Religious Literacy* by Stephen Prothero

*Fundamentalism* by James Barr

*The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* by Karen Armstrong

*The Roots of Fundamentalism* by Ernest R. Sandeen

*Combatting Cult Mind Control* by Stephen Hassen

*Bounded Choice* by Janja Lalich

*Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, ed. By Michael D. Langone