

## Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols

The following is a paper I presented in 2017 at a conference on cultic studies. As you read, you'll find places where I cited slides in an accompanying PowerPoint that I was showing the audience, but I am not posting it here. Instead, please use your imagination.

Footnotes are at the end of the paper.

Original presentation given at [International Cultic Studies Association](#) 2017 Conference in Bordeaux, France.

**Presenter: Charlene L. Edge**, author of [\*Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International\*](#). New Wings Press. 2017.

My presentation today is about how cult leaders use symbols to control followers and how we can break the power of those symbols. As an example, I'll use [The Way International](#),<sup>TM</sup> the fundamentalist cult I escaped in 1987. High-control groups like The Way use insignias, catch-phrases, and other imagery to recruit, manipulate, and retain believers. These emotionally charged symbols contribute to how hard it is for followers to leave the cults that captured them. Understanding what a cult's symbols mean, and the ways they affect followers, can contribute to cult recovery.

### First, let me tell you a little about me.

In 1970 I was a teenaged college student yearning for knowledge of the Bible and a like-minded Christian fellowship. I turned away from family and friends after college student recruiters led me to The Way. At the time, it was a small sect led by the charismatic [Victor Paul Wierwille](#), but within a decade it was one of the largest cults based in North America. The Way held me in its grip for seventeen years.

Believing that God led me to Wierwille, I underwent his intensive two-year program, [The Way Corps](#)<sup>TM</sup>, designed to produce loyal leaders. I was totally committed and ignored warning signs of Wierwille's increasing paranoia and abuse. For instance, he considered dissenters as agents of the Devil, manipulated us into keeping his secrets, lashed out against denominations, damned homosexuality, and surrounded himself with bodyguards. None of that deterred me. I married a fellow Corps graduate and we served across the United States as Way leaders, funneling money into Wierwille's bursting coffers and shunning anyone who criticized him. As obedient Way Corps, we also raised our child to believe the doctrines of Wierwille.

Eventually I was promoted to the inner circle of biblical researchers, where I discovered devastating secrets: Wierwille deliberately twisted Scripture to serve his personal agenda, shamelessly plagiarized the work of others, and misrepresented the purpose of his organization. Worst of all, after Wierwille died in 1985, shocking reports surfaced of his secret sex ring.<sup>1</sup> Amid

## Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols

by Charlene Lamy Edge

<https://charleneedge.com>

chaos at The Way's Ohio-based headquarters, I knew I had to escape—for my own survival and my child's.

People ask why I stayed in The Way so long. The answer is complicated, but it includes Wierwille's implementation of mind control through symbols.<sup>2</sup> This paper answers the question, "How did Wierwille use symbols to control followers and keep them loyal to his goals?"

### **So, what exactly is a symbol?**

From the Merriam-Webster Dictionary we learn that a symbol is "something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance." A symbol can be "a visible sign of something invisible, for instance, *the lion is a symbol of courage*."<sup>3</sup>

Most symbols at The Way, like photographs of Wierwille in *The Way Magazine* and catch phrases like, "Dr. Wierwille is our father in the Word," triggered loyalty to our leader as God's spokesman and the authority on the Bible. We will see how The Way used symbols as instant reminders of our collective purpose and sparked loyalty to our cult leader.

### **Using religious symbols**

To begin, let's compare how cults and traditional religions use symbols. For example, most of us are familiar with the three major monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. They use various symbols to enhance the spiritual life of believers, to provoke devotion to God, and to remind followers of their spiritual duties. For Christianity, symbols like the cross remind devotees of Jesus's sacrificial death. Paintings of Jesus healing the sick engender empathy for those in need.

Leaders of high-control cults, however, deliberately deploy symbols for different purposes. Instead of encouraging believers to contemplate invisible spiritual realities represented by symbols, cults use their leaders' photographs, slogans, and official insignias to galvanize commitment to the group and obedience to their leaders' beliefs, dogmas, and directives. This results in members discarding their own opinions, abdicating their autonomy, and suffering from low self-esteem.

While symbols may be introduced to appeal on the cognitive level to members, they quickly influence deeper, emotional commitments, much like pledging allegiance to a flag or singing a national anthem. Thus, symbols can be used to control members, and since their pull remains on the non-conscious level, they can make it difficult for a member to extricate from the group.

### **How did Wierwille use himself as a symbol of God's authority?**

## Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols

by Charlene Lamy Edge

<https://charleneedge.com>

This photo [published of Victor Paul Wierwille standing at the podium in the auditorium at The Way] is a perfect example of how Wierwille insinuated himself in our minds as God's spokesman to be obeyed.

On the banner right behind him, we see "I Am The Way," a well-known phrase from the Gospel of John attributed to Jesus, but here it can easily be construed as referring to Wierwille! Looking friendly, Wierwille poses with an open Bible and offers a welcoming gesture. He appears to be a respectable man of God. I now see him as a self-proclaimed prophet who knew how to promote himself.

This image prompts the question, "Why did any of us get hooked on The Way instead of another Bible group?" I offer three main reasons.

**First**, Wierwille claimed he taught "the accuracy of God's Word." That was a powerful inducement to join and remain loyal. Initially, what he called his biblical research sounded legitimate to most of us who had no training in Old or New Testament history, Early Church history, or biblical criticism.

**Secondly**, his academic credentials made him appear to be a biblical scholar. In 1940 he earned his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Mission House Seminary, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. In 1941 he earned a Master of Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary (which has nothing to do with the prestigious Princeton University). He was then ordained in the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which later became the United Church of Christ. He started his first pastorate in Ohio at age 24. In 1948 he received his Doctor of Theology degree at Pikes Peak Bible Seminary and Burton College, Manitou Springs, Colorado (much later I learned it was not accredited).<sup>4</sup>

And **lastly**, but possibly the most important reason for many of us, was the fantastical story he told, published in *The Way: Living in Love* by Elena Whiteside, a devoted Way follower. Wierwille said God talked to him audibly:

"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. ... Well, I nearly flew off my chair. I couldn't believe that God would talk to me. ... It's just too fantastic. People won't believe it. But He spoke to me just as plainly as I'm talking now to you."<sup>5</sup>

In Whiteside's book, Wierwille goes on to say that he asked God for a sign to prove He had spoken to him. When he looked out his office window on what had been a clear day, he saw snow falling so thickly that he could not see the gas pumps at the filling station across the street. It was true, he insisted, that the alleged revelation was from God—the snow story proved it. Some of us were vulnerable enough to believe it.

Years later, when I came to terms with this story, I was more than chagrined to learn it was bogus. Among other reasons for rejecting my previous belief in it, early Church history tells us

that today's New Testament (part of "The Word" that Wierwille referred to) did not even exist in the first century. It evolved much later, during the first two hundred and fifty to three hundred years of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Thousands of us became hooked on Wierwille, the man we accepted as the ultimate authority on the Bible, which was the centerpiece of his teachings.

### **So, the Bible became the Supreme Religious Symbol**

After my escape from The Way in 1987, my recovery included reading about cults and fundamentalism. Over time, I learned that Wierwille's fundamentalist doctrines—many of which were plagiarized—was a mix of Literalism, Pentecostalism, Dispensationalism, and Millennialism, with a dash of self-help witticism.<sup>7</sup> At the center of these "isms" was the Holy Bible.

One of Wierwille's favorite slogans was "It's the Word, the Word, and nothing but the Word." When outsiders accused him of bibliolatry—worship of a book—Wierwille scoffed, but I eventually realized those critics had been correct. Scholar James Barr points out in his book *Fundamentalism*, "It is this function of the Bible as supreme religious symbol that justifies us in seeing fundamentalism as a quite separate religious form."<sup>8</sup> In our group, Wierwille proclaimed the Bible as being the *only* source of truth. And he made his teachings of it so convincing that we failed to realize what is obvious to outsiders: Wierwille was promoting *his own interpretations*, which often he deemed to be the original reading of the Scripture. Nevertheless, we praised his Bible classes and adopted his goals.

### **Wierwille created an official symbol to express those goals**

When I was involved in The Way, from 1970 until 1987, this was the group's official insignia [a round green and white seal]. We called it The Way seal, which appeared in gigantic form as the backdrop on stage at our annual festival, The Rock of Ages, in 1973. It also came in three-inch diameter size as a sticker sold in The Way Bookstore. Many of us affixed this seal to our Bible covers, keeping our new, godly aims in plain sight.

In the center of this seal is a familiar image of a globe. Above the globe, are Syriac words to convey Wierwille's goal, "The Word Over the World." Why Syriac? Wierwille was convinced that the Bible had been originally written in Aramaic, from which Syriac is derived. (Our teacher gave no evidence for this claim, which contradicts modern scholarship showing the New Testament was written in Greek.) These words mean "The Word of God throughout all the inhabited earth," which was Wierwille's dream. Thousands of us dedicated ourselves to making it come true.

The open Bible, indicating the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, sits at the top of the globe. It implants the idea that Christians should rule the world and obey the New Testament doctrines in Paul's letters, which Wierwille said were addressed directly to us today, in contrast to Jesus's

## Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols

by Charlene Lamy Edge

<https://charleneedge.com>

teachings in the Gospels which were directed to Israel. Why? Wierwille was a dispensationalist, which means he subscribed to ways of dividing up the Bible into time periods to account for the conflicting ways God is shown dealing with mankind.

The phrase *Power for Abundant Living* printed across the globe is the name of Wierwille's Bible class, our primary recruiting tool. He marketed this class as offering "the accuracy of the Bible." In his book by the same title, Wierwille tied spirituality exclusively to Bible knowledge:

"Spiritual weakness and spiritual inability can be due only to an improper diet, that is, the neglect of the Word of God."<sup>9</sup>

He also claimed his classes contained keys for manifesting the power of God and appropriating God's promises to bring abundance to every category of our lives.

Around the bottom of the seal is printed, The Way Biblical Research Center. That refers to a most unique aspect of Wierwille's cult: biblical research. I worked on projects in The Way's biblical research department and finally realized it was only window-dressing to make Wierwille appear as a reliable educator. Mostly, we served to backup what Wierwille had already taught, parts of which were plagiarized and riddled with sloppy thinking. In no small way, inerrancy, the non-negotiable foundation of Wierwille's approach to the Bible, produced many twisted and fabricated teachings.

In summary, The Way Seal was a one-stop-shop insignia representing the group. Followers recognized it easily and knew what it stood for. Its imagery made me feel important. I was proud to follow who I perceived as God's man and belong to his organized movement for this day and time. Many of us displayed the seal with pride on our Bibles, bookbags, and even household refrigerators. It galvanized our loyalty to The Way and reminded us of what we were supposed to be doing—recruiting others to take the *Power for Abundant Living* class.

Sometime after I left the cult, the second president, Craig Martindale, discontinued promoting this seal. Why? Because by then, thanks to about 40,000 followers, he considered Way teachings to have spread around the world. To reflect this, The Way created a new slogan: "The Prevailing Word."

### **Wierwille as a father symbol**

So, we've seen how Wierwille crafted the official Way seal and used photographs to elevate himself in his follower's eyes as God's chosen leader. As an even stronger symbol, for many loyal followers, especially The Way Corps, he even became "our father in the Word." This intimate phrase came from Wierwille's likening his ministry to the apostle Paul's. In First Corinthians 4:15, Paul told his believers: "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel."

This is a major Way belief that qualifies Wierwille as a cult leader. In this photograph, we see members of The Way Corps in 1972 gathered around Wierwille in The Way Headquarters' auditorium. I am seated near the middle (age 20). The young man, who ten years later would become the second president of The Way, Craig Martindale, is on the far right looking on as Wierwille leans his arm on his knee, depicting himself as our teacher.

For two years, we lived in mobile homes for this round-the-clock intensive leadership training. Wierwille controlled our environment, our schedule, our incoming information, and therefore wielded undue influence over our thoughts. Day and night, at formal and informal meetings, we were to soak up everything Wierwille said about the Bible and how to apply it to our lives.

**Some of Wierwille's teachings were harmful.** Besides garnering adoration from The Way Corps, Wierwille solicited loyalty by convincing tens of thousands of people that he taught God's Word. Here are just a few of his unorthodox and/or harmful teachings:

1. The Bible fits together "like a hand in a glove." Consequences of this were twisted meanings of Scriptures to maintain the illusion of inerrancy and wipe out contradictions. One byproduct was the teaching that four men were crucified with Jesus, not two.
2. All believing equals receiving. Consequences of this were many. When we did not believe strongly enough to receive the "promises of God," which included health, abundance, and power over negative circumstances, it was our fault. We were told we needed to stop doubting and being negative and get more knowledge. That meant we should take more Way classes, study harder, and attend more fellowships to get stronger.
3. The husband is the head of the wife. Consequences of this were many, too. Although Wierwille allowed women to be leaders, and even ordained some of them, married women were subservient to their husbands and were not encouraged to develop their own talents and flourish as independent adults. Wives were to be helpmates to their men and bear children to further The Way ministry.
4. Homosexuals are possessed by devil spirits. Consequences of this are obvious. This belief produced bigotry towards "the other" and demonized all members of the LGBT community. In the 1990s, The Way "purged" any suspected homosexual from the group.

**What is important to remember is that cult symbols are tools of manipulation and abuse.**

Using the vowels of the alphabet is one way to remember how cult symbols result in abuse. In my experience:

- **A**ltruism was exploited. Personal aspirations and desires to make the world a better place were abandoned for Wierwille's goals; self-sacrifice for The Way became the norm.
- **E**motions and creativity were abused. Emotions were constricted and creativity was enlisted for propaganda. Emotional and sexual abuse often proliferated because we were told our feelings did not matter and could not be trusted; only The Word mattered.
- **I**ntelligence was thwarted. Thought-stopping clichés like "The Word of God is the will of God," and "Believing equals receiving" squelched critical thinking, especially after years

of accepting Wierwille's propaganda as true. Curiosity was primarily confined to matters within the group.

- The **Outside** world was demonized because of the teaching that the Devil is the god of this world. Relationships that hindered commitment to the cult were broken. Unbelievers were agents of the Devil, including non-cult family members and friends who disliked Wierwille.
- Our Understanding of the Bible was controlled by inerrancy, plagiarism, and bibliolatry. We denied contradictions in the Gospels, for instance, to support inerrancy. We accepted the use of Scripture out of context to support our leader's dogmas. We regarded modern biblical criticism as a threat. When anyone recognized Wierwille did not credit his source material and engaged in plagiarism, they were told he just "learned from others."

To sum up, Wierwille hijacked his followers' idealistic hopes for making the world a better place and funneled their energy into his cause. He especially manipulated The Way Corps (numbering over 1,000), training us to promote his interpretation of the Bible, as well as his various political, cultural, and economic opinions. Thousands of us lost our autonomy. Often our emotional, mental, and physical health was damaged.

As we parroted official Way rhetoric, our unique identities were masked. Anyone who interfered with our commitment to The Way was deemed a spiritual enemy. Our understanding of The Bible, the supposed reason for The Way's existence, was shaped in the image and likeness of Wierwille's fundamentalism.

Despite its dark history, The Way continues to operate from its Ohio headquarters, although it now has far fewer followers (an estimated 7,000). In January 2017 Rev. Jean-Yves De Lisle was installed as the fourth president.<sup>10</sup> Due to ongoing upheavals, especially after Wierwille died and when Martindale, the second president, was ousted in 2000 after lawsuits for sexual misconduct, many Way leaders left the organization and formed their own groups.

### **So, how can we break the power of cult symbols? Answer an S.O.S.**

- Show cult recruiters how their cult's symbols are manipulative propaganda aimed at controlling their beliefs and behavior.
- Offer assistance to former cult members. When appropriate, suggest professional counseling, books about cultic manipulation, articles on websites like ICSA's. Offer ways that survivors can validate their own personhood, like developing latent talents. Above all, we can offer them comfort by listening well as we give our undivided attention.
- Share cult stories about how other people escaped cults and recovered. Stories can be a powerful antidote to cult power and provide healing for the wounded.

### **My Story**

This is my story, a memoir titled, [\*Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International\*](#). It's now available in paperback and e-book.

## Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols

by Charlene Lamy Edge

<https://charleneedge.com>

Cult experts like Dr. Michael Langone and Dr. Janja Lalich, as well as religious studies professors, former Way Corps members, and other academics and authors, are helping me promote *Undertow*, what readers are calling a valuable, in-depth, and healing story.

### Notes

1. Accounts of sexual abuse were later published in Karl Kahler's [The Cult That Snapped: A Journey into The Way International](#). Los Gatos, CA: Karl Kahler, 1999. Another personal account showing Wierwille as sexual predator is Kristen Skedgell's [Losing The Way: A Memoir of Spiritual Longing, Manipulation, Abuse, and Escape](#). Richmond, California: Bay Tree Publishing, 2008.
2. For descriptions of mind control techniques, see Steven Hassan's [Combatting Cult Mind Control: The #1 Best-selling Guide to Protection, Rescue, and Recovery from Destructive Cults](#), Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1988. Most recent update: 2016.
3. For definitions of *symbol* from Merriam-Webster Dictionary, visit: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbol>
4. Wierwille's academic credentials are listed in many materials, including two booklets: *The Teacher: Victor Paul Wierwille* printed by The Way and distributed at the Rock of Ages festival, August 12, 1985, and "From 'Vesper Chimes' to 'The Way International': The Founder, History and Activities of The Way Ministry" by John P. Juedes and Douglas V. Morton. Distributed by C.A.R.I.S., P.O. Box 1659, Milwaukee, WI, 53201.
5. Elena S. Whiteside, [The Way: Living in Love](#), (New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1972), 178.
6. New Testament scholar Bart D. Ehrman writes: "... In the year 367 C.E., Athanasius [Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt] wrote his annual pastoral letter to the Egyptian churches under his jurisdiction, and in it he included advice concerning which books should be read as scripture in the churches. He lists our twenty-seven books, excluding all others [there were many others]. This is the first surviving instance of anyone affirming our set of books as The New Testament. And even Athanasius did not settle the matter. Debates continued for decades, even centuries. The books we call the New Testament were not gathered into one canon and considered scripture, finally and ultimately, until hundreds of years after the books themselves had first been produced." [Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why](#), (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 36.
7. Examples of Wierwille's plagiarism are well documented by John P. Juedes and Jay Valusek in the booklet "Will the Real Author Please Stand UP? A Review of the Origins of Victor Paul Wierwille's Writings," available from Watchman Fellowship: A Personal Freedom Outreach, P.O. Box 26062, Saint Louis, Missouri 63136 and at Juedes's website: <http://empirenet.com/~messiah7/cultsthe.htm>
8. James Barr, [Fundamentalism](#), (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 37.
9. Victor Paul Wierwille, [Power for Abundant Living: The Accuracy of the Bible](#), (New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1971), 95.
10. Consecutive Way presidents: Victor Paul Wierwille, L. Craig Martindale, Rosalie Rivenbark, Jean-Yves De Lisle. For more information, visit: <http://www.theway.org>.



Breaking the Power of Cult Symbols  
by Charlene Lamy Edge  
<https://charleneedge.com>

---END---

Thanks for reading!

Your writer on the wing,

Charlene