



## **Undertow: My Escape from the Fundamentalism and Cult Control of The Way International**

**by Charlene L. Edge**

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### **Reviewed by Bart Stewart**

*Undertow* may be looked back on someday as an important book for how deeply it immerses you inside the fundamentalist Christian world. If like me you have never been there, you may not know how this "other half" lives. And considering that fundamentalists comprise a significant portion of the US population, it might be a good idea to know what they think! A big part of it is that they want you to be one of them. Author Charlene Edge says of the early stage of her recruitment, "Evangelicals are practiced at overcoming wimpy objections" (p. 13).

Ms. Edge was not part of a typical evangelical church. She was a member of The Way International. The Way had components of three major movements in Christianity: evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism. The organization has shrunk significantly from its 1970s and 80s heyday, when she was in, but it still exists. These days it is widely considered a heretical cult in Christian circles.<sup>1</sup>

I should say at the outset that there are distinctions between these three movements, as well as overlap.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, the broad, more amorphous evangelical movement encompasses a wider spectrum of biblical interpretations than the more literal and absolutist lens of fundamentalist Christian sects. Pentecostal practitioners, a major (and growing) segment of fundamentalism, emphasize passionate emotional experiences they see as coming from the Holy Spirit, including visions and speaking in tongues.

This lengthy, in-depth memoir imparts the *feeling* of a very different world. It is a little hard to describe. (Read the book.) They have a very disciplined approach to life, certainly. A somewhat conformist demeanor prevails. Certain lines of scripture may take on an importance with them far beyond what the words would convey to an outsider. Basically all aspects of life are filtered through ancient religious writ.

Charlene Edge was a teenager in the 1970s, a practicing Catholic, and heartbroken by the death of her mother. A friend invited her to a Christian fellowship called Young Life. It started with get-togethers at the friend's home, and soon progressed to travelling to another town for much larger events. At one of these, during a singing of How Great Thou

Art, Charlene converted to Protestantism. After a year in Young Life, she describes herself as being a “fanatic.”

I wondered if her earlier religious life primed her in some way for this more intense experience. Would a secular child have become as fanatical? In all likelihood it just depends on the individual and the circumstances at the time. Charlene said that “the idea of Jesus as a pal” held great appeal to her. She was in college soon enough, and at a Christian meet-up there she encountered a young attractive guy who was a member of The Way International.

The founder, Victor Paul Wierwille, started the outfit up at his farm in New Knoxville, Ohio, in the 1940s. It all started with a miracle.

Wierwille claimed the voice of God spoke to him, out loud, and said that He would allow him to know the many secrets of the original text of the Bible if he would share them with others. Wierwille asked for a sign from God to seal the deal, and when he glanced out the window he saw that a perfectly clear day now had deep snow all over the place.

This sacred snow emergency did not make the newspapers, and Wierwille was all alone at the time it happened. But the events of that day were taken as absolute Truth for decades to come by tens of thousands of believers who became members of The Way.

Charlene had a revelation that she belonged in The Way and dropped out of college, to the consternation of her father.

Linguistic study was central to the teachings of Wierwille. (The final E in his name is silent, and the second I is pronounced like an O, so the name is pronounced like werewolf without the F.) The Way taught that by intense study of the words of the Bible in their various original languages, helped by a little divine intervention, it would be possible to restore the Bible to its “original form.” The Way would restore the Bible to how it was in the first century, cleansed of all errors of interpretation.

The original text of the Bible no longer exists, of course, if it ever had a single, preeminent state. The typical Protestant canon includes 66 books,<sup>3</sup> written in different languages in different places and centuries. Coalescing a single original version out of the textual variances in old Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, and Aramaic is not possible. Nor is knowing what was an ancient monk’s copying error, or outright forgery. Wierwille taught almost exclusively from the King James Version from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but also felt that the text had been distorted. Therefore, The Way devoted decades of research with the original languages to find the real, intended meanings.<sup>4</sup>

The Way’s extensive, long-term efforts in Biblical research never seemed to bring about any major breakthroughs in the understanding of Christianity, according to Charlene, who became an expert in Aramaic. She would work at the ministry’s headquarters in New Knoxville as part of a special team that spent their days poring over ancient texts. Their work was expected to confirm the pre-existing ideas of Victor Paul Wierwille—and they always did. It was part and parcel of their belief in the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy.<sup>5</sup>

Charlene said fundamentalist belief in Biblical inerrancy is “as strong as a child’s belief in Santa Claus, times 1,000.” She defined fundamentalism in five words: The certainty that you are right. However, I sensed there were questions that Charlene pondered, but didn’t dare to ask during her time in The Way—namely: Why did God keep his message so thoroughly hidden away if He wanted it to go out to all the world?

The Way claimed any number of overtly supernatural manifestations. They could heal with the laying on of hands. No amputated limbs were regrown, but other conditions were healed. They could speak in tongues, and they could teach you how to do it. And of course Doctor Wierwille was on direct speaking terms with the Creator of the Universe. In the religious order he founded, Wierwille was considered on par with the Apostle Paul. The farm in New Knoxville was considered hallowed ground.

Wierwille smoked cigarettes, which startled Charlene at first. I was curious as to which brand he smoked. L. Ron Hubbard smoked Kools. Supposedly in every Scientology Center of a certain size they maintain a special room with a big easy chair and a little table with a pack of Kools on it. Because Hubbard is “coming back” someday. Later in *Undertow* we learn that Wierwille smoked Kools! Is there something in the curing process of that fine American tobacco?

Wierwille also drank. Hard liquor. Every night. A true believer, Charlene found a way to justify her leader’s behavior and felt that his many changing moods meant that he was “strong in the Lord.” Wierwille ultimately would die of liver cancer.

Wierwille was the arbiter of marriages within the group, as well. A man proposed to Charlene, and she accepted. Wierwille told them to wait. He didn’t ask. He told these two adults to wait to get married.

Eventually they wed and began an intrepid climb up the ranks of the ministry. First Corps. Second Corps. Third Corps. Fourth Corps. Twig. Limb. Power For Abundant Living, which was actually the first step of The Way. W.O.W. (Word Over The World.) So many levels and departments. So much jargon, or Wayspeak, as Charlene came to call it.

Then there was the Bless Patrol. This was the armed security section of the ministry.

By 1976 Doctor Wierwille was getting rich—and paranoid. He fretted about a communist takeover of the United States and instituted survivalist prepper procedures throughout The Way. He also became virulently antisemitic and a Holocaust denier.

Charlene’s marriage was rocky, but it produced a daughter, who transformed her life. Later it turned out her husband was cheating on her, and they were going to divorce. But Wierwille insisted they get back together. Ultimately, it didn’t last.

Following Wierwille’s sudden death in 1985, a series of revelations came out about him, which became a cascade of scandals. Not everyone believed it all, but Charlene did, having been earlier disabused of notions of his infallibility by a serious textual error he had made. Of course, that was nothing compared to what was being said about him now. She also saw for the first time how basic human rights were being curtailed in The Way. No freedom of speech. No critical thinking. She made secret plans to leave with her daughter.

This is a book that anyone interested in evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, or aberrant fundamentalist Christianity should read. Maybe everybody should. As I read it I wondered how many other, similar movements there are like this one? What about Bill Gothard? Herbert Armstrong? Tony Alamo? How about the small, or not-so-small army of money-grabbing televangelists and radio preachers all over your broadcast dial? Not spiritual giants, just narcissistic con artists out to wrap healthy minds in a banal, stultifying cocoon of control. Charlene Edge calls it “the concrete coffin of fundamentalism” (p. 255).

The ending of *Undertow* implies that she has not returned to religious life. She has remarried and resumed her education. She describes her daughter from her first marriage as “the great gift from my years of cult involvement” (p. 428).

In her case, the number of those years was seventeen.

## Notes

[1] According to Christoph Kreitz, an instructor at Cornell University, the beliefs of The Way International have been characterized “as a mixture of Evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism, and a few ancient heresies which The Way shares with Jehovah’s Witnesses and other cults.” <https://www.cs.cornell.edu/info/people/kreitz/Christian/Cults/4.way.pdf>

[2] Regarding the overlap between evangelicalism and fundamentalism, and on the difficulty of defining these labels, you might check out these sources as a starting point. The National Association of Evangelicals hosts a website at <https://www.nae.org/sharedfaith/>. Bruce Hindmarsh addresses the complexity in his article on “What is Evangelicalism?” in *Christianity Today* at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/march-web-only/what-is-evangelicalism.html>

[3] To complicate things further, historically, prior to the Reformation, the historical church had recognized 73 books in the scriptural canon since 382 A.D. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_canon) Then, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Protestant reformer Martin Luther ejected six books from the traditional canon. For more on the differences of opinion (and making the case for less literalism/fundamentalism), see <https://earlychristiantexts.com/how-many-books-in-the-bible/>

[4] For more on the history of The Way, see “Whatever Happened to The Way International” at the link here. Regarding biblical matters, see the section on Beliefs and Practices, Authority and the Bible. <https://www.marketfaith.org/whatever-happened-to-the-way-international/>

[5] For more on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, see Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_inerrancy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_inerrancy)

**Bart Stewart** lives in metro Boston and has been a student of the cult scene since the Jonestown story hit the news in his youth. Bart has no personal background with cults. He is simply a concerned citizen, supporting ICSA, and before them the original Cult Awareness Network. Bart writes literary fiction and will release a full-length novel dealing with a cult experience in the spring of 2024. Tell a friend—and look out for—*The Contraption*.