

When Did the Two by Two Church Really Begin?

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A Brief Historical Account

Revised Oct. 13, 2024

The Two by Two Church Really Began...

With:.. **Founder, William Irvine**

Where: **Ireland**

When: **Around the turn of the 20th century (1897-1901)**

The following chronological account of the group's history. The TTT website contains sources, bibliography information for books, newspaper articles, publications, photos, meetings, funerals, letters, genealogy, conventions, lists, statements, early missions, transcripts, quotes regarding the friends and workers fellowship and William Irvine.

1893, Jan 7: William Irvine, a Scotsman (age 30) professed in a revival service held in Motherwell, Scotland by Reverend John McNeill, who was a well-known evangelist associated with the D. L. Moody campaign. [Additional Information](#)

1893, November 1: Resigned from Baird & Co. when he was 30 years old where he held the position of General Manager of Baird's Bothwell Collieries in Lanarkshire. From age 20 to 30 Irvine made about £300 pounds per year and had reached the top by very hard work, and had the best of prospects ahead.

1893-95: Studied in the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow for two years.

1895, June 14: William Irvine became a worker with the [Faith Mission](#). The Faith Mission was founded in 1886 to evangelize rural Scotland. It is an independent evangelistic movement, not a denomination. Their workers depend upon God for guidance, wisdom and material needs; are itinerant, preach in pairs, hold conventions, special and union meetings, stay in converts' homes and make no appeals for money. They use the terms: professing, workers, missions, companion, fields, the work, harvest field.

1897: Faith Mission sent William Irvine to pioneer their work in S. Ireland. Reportedly, while reading Matt. 10:8-10, William was struck with a thought. *"WHAT IF Jesus intended for His instructions to the 12 Apostles in Matt. 10 to be followed by all preachers for all times?"*

1897, Aug.: William Irvine met John Long, a Methodist colporteur (itinerant seller of religious printed material) and together, they held the FIRST Revival mission independent of Faith Mission, in Nenagh, County Tipperary, S. Ireland. Several converts later became workers. For the next few years, Irvine continued to do evangelical work for the Faith Mission.

1897, Oct. 10-31: Irvine held his second independent mission in County Meath near Rathmolyon, 25 miles NW of Dublin; 14 workers resulted.

1899: George Walker FIRST became associated with William Irvine, along with Tom Turner, Alex Givan and John Long.

1899, Oct.: William Irvine and 7-8 of his young male converts travelled to Scotland for the **FIRST** experimental GROUP mission, putting into practice Jesus' Matt. 10 instructions to the Apostles. (View photo of [Bicycle Boys](#).) These men believed Irvine introduced religious methods which were ordained by God and believed that *"The Jesus' Way"* was a restoration of God's Scriptural pattern for ministers, and that theirs was the only true New Testament ministry.

1899, Jan.: John Long goes out preaching independently on *"Faith Lines."*

1900: Last year Irvine's name was shown on the Faith Mission Superintendent List. The FIRST women entered the work: Sarah Rogers, and sisters, Jennie and Emma Gill. William Irvine was joined by Willie Gill, John Hardie, Irvine Weir, Will Cleland, Matt Wilson, John Sullivan, A. Alexander, Ben Boles, Albert Quinn, Sam Boyd, for a total of 18 workers.

1900-1901: The FIRST convention was held on Willie Gill's farm in Rathmolyon, Ireland, near Dublin. It was similar to the annual conventions held at Keswick, England; and those of Faith Mission. 70 attended for 3 weeks. William Irvine was viewed as a prophet; one God raised up to restore God's way. The group began to be called *"Tramp Preachers."*

1901: Irvine copied the majority of the Faith Mission methods and traditions; used their terminology and dress code; duplicated their portable meeting halls and living quarters (batches), black stockings, hats and court-shoes for women; and conventions. He believed he had restored *"God's true way."*

1901: Edward Cooney joined William Irvine. Followers increased rapidly. The group FIRST began to be called Cooneyites. *[10 new workers went out making 28 total.]*

1902: FIRST Convention was held at Enniscorthy, Co Wexford, S. Ireland. *[23 new Workers went out making 51 total.]*

1903: FIRST Convention was held at Portadown, Co. Armagh, N. Ireland. Started baptizing and rebaptizing for the **FIRST** time; and withdrawing from churches and forming their own home churches. The followers now consisted of both workers and saints. *[34 new workers went out making 85 total; including Mr. & Mrs. William (Bill) Carroll, and May]*

1903?: The FIRST Sunday Morning Meeting was held in Dublin, Ireland, over Weirs Store on Baggot Street where the Weir family lived. [View Photo](#)

1903, Sept.: The FIRST workers ventured outside the British Isles, pioneering the work around the world. The **FIRST** workers in the USA were William Irvine, George Walker and Irvine Weir.

1904, Sept/Oct: The FIRST Convention at **Crochnacrieve** was held on John West's farm near Enniskillen, N. Ireland, lasting 4 weeks. *[Jack Carroll and his sister, Francis/Fanny entered the work]*

1904: The **FIRST** four young Workers headed for **Canada** and arrived in Montreal, Quebec, on August 13. They were Harry Oliver (23), Tom Craig (22), George Buttimer (21) and John Doak (25).

1904: The **FIRST** two Workers set foot on **Australian** soil; they were John Hardie (34) and Alex "Sandy"**Alexander (28)**.

1905: The **FIRST** six Workers to pioneer **New Zealand** were Annie Smith (28) and Fannie Carroll (24); Adam Hutchison (28), Joe Williamson (32), Maggie McDougal (31) and Frances Hodgins (26).

1905: The **FIRST** eight Workers who ventured to **South Africa** included Wilson Reid (24), Joe Kerr (24), Martha Skerritt (22) Barbara Baxter (24), Alex Pearce (29), John Cavanagh (27) Mary Moodie (38) and Lily Reid (26).

1905: The FIRST [Official Workers' List](#) was distributed, containing 200+ workers' names.

1906: All the workers were required to accept, believe and promote **The Living Witness Doctrine**; i.e. that Irvine's workers were God's ONLY true preachers, and that salvation could ONLY be acquired by professing through one of them; i.e. *"Life begets life. Without life, there can be no life."* *"A person may be born again through a living witness, without one — never."*

1914: World War I began. Willie Gill registered the group with the British Conscientious Objectors Board under the name: **"The Testimony of Jesus."**

THE OMEGA GOSPEL: Wm. Irvine saw the period leading up to Aug, 1914 as the end of the Age of Saving Grace, and believed God had appointed him to bring the last message of Jesus Christ to the world before the judgment. He believed that he and the Apostle John were to be the two witnesses of Rev. 11, who would have power over plagues and droughts and would be killed and raised up after 3-1/2 days. He encouraged people to prepare for a great famine, and urged them to sell their homes and farms and invest their money in food and other provisions that would enable them to survive this impending calamity. He referred to his earlier teachings as his *"Alpha Gospel,"* and his later beliefs as his *"Omega Gospel."*

1914, The Division of 1914: Irvine's new revelations were not well received by the other leading workers. Some felt certain that in the beginning, Wm. Irvine had been *"highly favored by God."* HOWEVER, they drew the line at his Omega Message, and some felt that, like Saul, Irvine had lost *"his anointing."* Eventually, the other leading workers refused to submit to Irvine's leadership any longer, and offered him a position as one of them, which he refused. After that, they refused to give him opportunity to speak at conventions in their fields, and began to turn his friends against him, and to excommunicate any who were loyal to him. In time, Wm. Irvine and the other leading workers parted ways, and the group split for the **FIRST** time. The majority of the friends followed the leading workers, yet some believed and followed his Omega Gospel and followed Wm. and his new revelations. Some reasons given for Irvine's departure are that Irvine (1) had too much pride, (2) made wild, embarrassing prophecies, (3) became mentally unbalanced and (4) was morally indiscreet.

1913-14: The **FIRST** edition of *Hymns Old and New* was published, consisting of 256 hymns. Many hymns were taken from popular Christian hymnbooks. [Additional Information](#)

1919: William Irvine moved to Jerusalem. Those believing his *"Omega Gospel"* continued to support him financially via correspondence. Calling themselves the *Message People* or *The Witnesses*, they took no official name, and there are still members of this group who believe they alone know the true meaning of the Scriptures, as written in Irvine's letters to them.

1921: The Staffordshire Workers' Convention was held with a commemorative photograph. 200+ workers were present. *[Some pictured are: Ed Cooney #69; Geo. Walker #17; Jack Carroll #93; May Carroll #201.]*

Ed Cooney refused to recognize territories of others, or to stay in one himself. He was against taking a name for the group and didn't believe in the Living Witness Doctrine. He didn't believe baches or conventions were scriptural. The workers asked when he was in their fields that he not teach anything contrary to what they did, but Cooney would not agree.

1928, The Division of 1928: Ed Cooney was excommunicated and the **SECOND** split in the group occurred. Those siding with Cooney left and this group still exists. Cooney's followers took no official name, use the **1951 *Hymns Old and New***, and are called by others *"The Cooneyites."* Cooney continued as an itinerant, unmarried, evangelist until his death in 1960.

1929: Central Bible Truth Depot, London, published a warning pamphlet titled: **The Cooneyites or Go-Preachers and Their Doctrine.**

1930, July 19-20: At a conference of workers, a decision was made to bury the past and repair the breach between Jack Carroll and George Walker. This was held in/at W. Hanney in England. **A Statement** was signed by 16 workers that read: *"It was unanimously*

agreed by all present that THE PAST SHOULD BE BURIED, and that in the future all would use their influence to discourage anything that would disturb the peace in God's family, adhering to the teaching and example of Jesus."

1941: The second World War began. George Walker registered the group with the USA under the name of "Christian Conventions," and stated: "...during the closing years of the last century and the first years of this century a number of people in the British Isles and in America... became fully convinced that there should be a return to the methods...carried out by Christ and His first disciples...and in due time, a number of these people went forth to devote their lives to the preaching of the Gospel according to the teaching and example of Christ as given in the New Testament, i.e. "Two by Two" and without salary or making appeals for financial assistance, putting implicit trust in God and His promise...As a result...many people expressed their desire to be in fellowship with such preachers and this led to regular gatherings of small assemblies in homes for worship and study of God's word."

1947, March 3: William Irvine died in Jerusalem at age 84 from throat cancer. He is buried in Zion Cemetery, Jerusalem without a tombstone. **Additional Information**

1951-52: Third Edition of *Hymns Old & New* published. Of 335 hymns, 43% were written by outsiders.

1954: Doug Parker distributed thousands of his report, "A *Spiritual Fraud*," uncovering the hidden history of the group.

1960, June 20: Edward Cooney died at age 93 in Mildura, Victoria, Australia, 32 years after his excommunication. His influence has lived on through the well known Hymns he wrote: *Jesus Died for Sinners; As We Gather; Our God, Our Father; Here We Come; and Lord, We Are Met Together*. These are the ONLY hymns for which the the author's name is not given on the Hymn Author List.

1982: The **FIRST** book is published about the history of the group: *The Secret Sect* by Doug & Helen Parker.

1987: Fourth Edition of *Hymns Old & New* is published. Of 412 hymns, 26% were written by outsiders.

1990: The historical facts were well on the way to becoming common knowledge of the friends through mass mailings and internet.

SOME EXPLANATIONS

During the closing years of the last century and the first years of this century, a number of people in the British Isles and America...in the several churches of which they were then members...became fully convinced that there should be a return to the methods and purposes taught and carried out by Christ and His first disciples. This conviction led to...religious meetings, and in due time a number of these people...devote(d) their lives to the preaching of the Gospel according to the teaching and example of Christ as given in the New Testament, i.e., "Two by Two" and without salary ...putting implicit trust in God...As a result...many people...desired to be in fellowship with such preachers and this led to regular gatherings together of small assemblies in homes for worship and study of God's word." (***George Walker, 3 page Letter to US Selective Service, 1942***)(**Transcript of 3 page letter**)

"Our mission was started by William Irwin, a Scotchman, seven or eight years ago. Others followed him. I myself was a Civil Servant in Dublin. I resigned my post, sold all that I had and gave to the poor, and went out to preach." (***Wilson McClung***, Overseer of New Zealand, **Feb. 16, 1905** Impartial Reporter)

John Long's Journal confirms that Wm. Irvine was the founder of the Two by Two sect.

Goodhand Pattison's Account confirms Wm. Irvine was the founder.

In 1976, **Tharold Sylvester** personally arranged for **Joshua Gamble from Ireland** to make the whole round of conventions on the West Coast in America, including Walla Walla, WA, Gilroy, CA and Casa Grande, AZ conventions, and asked Joshua to publicly mention the subject at each convention, with the purpose of trying to dispel the "continuous unbroken chain" myth. Evidently Tharold thought that the word of someone from "where it all happened" would have more weight. He mentioned William Irvine's name along with the names of several other early workers. Joshua made it clear that there was no continuous ministry going out in this fashion and no recognizable fellowship of this type before the late 1890s. Several have reported hearing Joshua Gamble mention this from the platform. [Joshua Gamble is the uncle of Thomas Gamble, current Ireland Overseer]

"Ninety years ago, a letter came from Ireland. We heard about those with no home, no name, etc. Forty people made their choice. Sixteen went out in the work—that was the beginning... There is not a country not open to the gospel now. It is the most marvelous thing ever to happen." [***"Ninety years ago" = 1987 Minus 90 years = 1897***] Funeral Service for Erling Omdal, Oct. 6, 1987, Eagle Bend, Minnesota, spoken b y **Garrett Hughes** (deceased USA Worker Overseer)

Garrett Hughes also made numerous references from convention platforms in his last years relative to "*the beginning of days*," first workers, first conventions, etc. One in particular was at Hunter, North Dakota in 1988, 1989 or 1990. And Garrett would know about these things since his relatives were some of the very first to profess in Ireland, in the Rathmolyon, Ireland mission where 40 professed and 16 went in the work. His mother, Mary Ann (Gill) Hughes' brother, Willie Gill, became Overseer of England and her two sisters, Emma and Jennie Gill, were the very first sister workers to go out preaching in Irvine's new movement in 1900 and are shown on the 1905 Workers List. Garrett's parents Fred & Mary Ann (Gill) Hughes professed through Wm. Irvine in North Dakota.

"Since early workers followed a Scottish preacher in Ireland before the turn of the 20th century, they have spent their lives traveling from home to home with little more than their clothes." (***William Lewis, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Minnesota Nov. 2, 1986***)

"Ireland is the only country where workers weren't imported, but rather exported." (***Sydney Holt, June 27, 1985 Letter***)

"The church does not have a name, even though it has existed at least since the turn of the century." (**Greg Kilgas**)

DENNIS JACOBSEN: "While I was in the work, I visited with a number of workers who have not only agreed and/or admitted that William Irvine started the 2&2 fellowship, but also some who have volunteered this information. Who? George Walker, Andrew Abernethy, Robert Darling, Tom Lyness and his sister Annie, Willie Jamieson and his sister Elisabeth, Jack Carroll, Dave and Emily Christie, Sam Charlton, and the Jardine brothers, just to name some of them. Many of these talked about "The Early Days." One of my companions, Charlie Krubb, was not there in the beginning of the Early Days in the "Old Country," (as they sometimes refer to Ireland and abbreviate it as O.C.) but he related in great detail to me what he had learned over the years. These things were not something that I believed anyone would repudiate, much less workers or ex-workers. Everett Swanson was another worker, who was not there in the O.C. as a first-hand witness, yet he also confirmed that he had been told what those first hand old-timers had told me. He was the first person I ever heard who used the expression in meeting **'we do not have, nor can we prove apostolic succession.'** Charles Wells was the first to relate to me that Wm. Irvine believed he was one of the two prophets of Revelation."

PROFESSOR OLIVER W. ROLFE: I met **Robert Darling** in 1958 at the Albuquerque convention; I then traveled with him to the three Mexican conventions. That is, he asked me to drive him in my car. I saw him every day for a period of weeks; he rode with me back to the Midwest where I was living at the time. We became good friends and corresponded regularly until his death in 1970. In 1967, he came to California, where I was then living, and I met him at the Gilroy conventions. He stayed with me between the two conventions, and we had great fun sight-seeing in the Bay Area. On this latter occasion I asked him about the beginnings of the church; he told me that it was started in Ireland by **one man (whom he did not name, but I assumed to be William Irvine)** after his sister had frozen to death because their parents had shut her out of the house. There was no mention at all of Switzerland. In fact, in all my discussions with him there was never the slightest implication that the church dated historically from an earlier time. He seemed to be somewhat distressed that so many people seemed to believe this. [by Oliver William Rolfe, Ph.D., Stanford University, 1967, Professor Emeritus (Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures) University of Montana, Missoula, Montana] NOTE: Robert Darling was on the **1905 Workers List**.

PAUL ABENROTH: "I do know that Dennis Jacobsen, Will Rolfe (a Montana University professor) and I, all three of us, visited enough with Robert Darling to get it clear from him that he did not believe or claim that the friends and workers existed before William Irvine. I questioned him about his 1967 Silverdale, B.C. Canada Convention message where he alluded to the origins and mentioned William Irvine by name. I asked him the following approximate question, 'Did you intend to leave the impression that before William Irvine there were no workers or professing friends?' He replied, 'What other impression could I leave?' He then continued by claiming that Abel was **'the firstfruits of faith'** in his day; Abraham was the **'firstfruits of faith'** in his day; and Simeon and Anna were the **'firstfruits of faith'** in their day."

PAUL ABENROTH: "A number of years later, in about 1985, **Tharold Sylvester** amazed me with a frank and unexpected candid moment at the Special Meeting in Pasco, Washington. Only a minute or two into his message, in his customary abrupt manner, he set the stage by declaring, 'Some of you folks are wondering: When did this thing start?' Much to my surprise, he even mentioned a book called **"The Secret Sect."** Obviously his intent was to respond to this book. He immediately offered an explanation substantially identical to that given me by Robert Darling about a decade earlier. The arguments he used actually corroborated the basic evidence supplied in that book. He did not call William Irvine by name, but he did specifically refer to him in an unmistakable context by which I knew who he was talking about. He did not try to refute the evidence in the book which shows that the friends/workers fellowship had its beginning with Wm. Irvine. Instead, Tharold's discourse was directed toward claiming a **scriptural precedent** for William Irvine being what Tharold called **'the first fruits of faith' in our day**. He cited the Bible characters, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Zacharias and Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary, claiming they were 'the firstfruits of faith' in their day." Therefore, it was reasonable to expect God could raise up someone to be the 'firstfruits of faith' in our day.

PAUL ABENROTH: "As recently as June, 2002, **Paul Sharp** spoke of the origins at Walla Walla Convention, calling it a **'regeneration.'**"

PAUL ABENROTH: "Before Jack Carroll died, Charles Wells and Everett Swanson had a visit with Jack about the origins of the fellowship. Jack shocked them with the statement, 'Boys, there is no such thing as apostolic succession.' In all fairness, let me say that I do not expect anyone to consider my recounting herein of Jack Carroll's statement to be firsthand evidence of Jack's statement. I only offer it as corroboration because it is consistent with all the other primary evidence I have seen."

FOR SKEPTICS...

IF IT IS TRUE...that the two and two ministry and church meetings in the home have continued through the centuries as bearers of God's Only True Way on earth from New Testament days to the present, then it should be easy to verify and find evidence to support that claim.

Just locate one of the following, bearing a date earlier than 1896:

1. hymn written by a friend or worker
2. printed hymnbook
3. photograph of a worker or friend
4. workers' list
5. letter written by a worker or friend

6. convention date list or speakers list
7. notes of any convention, funeral or meeting

Or find just one person who:

1. had a family member to profess prior to 1896
2. has heard of anyone professing prior to 1896
3. has known of any workers preaching prior to 1896

Compiled by Cherie Kropp-Ehrig