

Church or Cult?

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The Church with No Name: Church or Cult? By Rev. Danielle Martell, Priest: St. Andrew's Church

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Unabridged version, May 30, 2019 below:

I'll never forget the feeling the first day I arrived at a the "Bible study" my landlord hosted upstairs above my basement suite. As an evangelical, Anglican priest, I had every expectation that attending Bible study would enable me to contribute and ask questions and learn like everyone else. I quickly discovered that things were different in my landlord's "church with no name." I couldn't quite place the denominational roots but my landlord was friendly and I thought we were both Christians, so why not go to Bible study upstairs, right?

Prior to my attendance, I was informed that I could come, but only to listen, which implied that I was not to speak. Bizarre. At this point I had been a Christian for 32 years, had two degrees in the Bible, and I had never been not permitted to speak in Bible study. However, I took no offense. After all, I'm a priest. When do I get the chance to show up at Bible study and not contribute? Brilliant! This is holiday Bible study! Can't wait! I knew these people were King James, New Testament only believers, so, as a woman, I wore a skirt to be respectful of what I thought might be an additional custom. Good thing! All the women at the study were in skirts with buns on their heads. "Where was I?" I wondered...

They sang hymns and I knew none of them, which is odd for someone who grew up in the church as a pastor's kid. When it came time for the Bible, oddly enough, there was no scripture reading. Instead, the people, one by one, gave "testimonies," which amounted to their own unique thoughts on an assigned chapter of the Bible, stating what verse they liked and why. They used our orthodox sounding vocabulary but with strange statements like, "I hope I can be worthy of Jesus." There was something about this meeting that I couldn't quite place. It was like walking in a familiar land and yet not being able to feel the ground beneath my feet. I could never quite place where I was. It was familiar, yet strange, and never quite home. I was steeped in the Christian tradition. I spoke the language of the people of God, and yet, in this "Bible study," I couldn't quite grasp their speech. I was an absolute foreigner, even prohibited to speak. Where was I?

I recalled my landlord informing me that their group had no name. They were just "The Way" or "The Truth," which I later learned were names the insiders used to refer to themselves as. Sometimes they call themselves "The Testimony." In fact, they have many names but they are taught to claim no official name.[1] After attending week two of "Bible study," my landlord lent me the only official publication of the group, which is their hymn book called, Hymns Old and New. I googled this book and it was then that I discovered why I felt like my feet were floating ungrounded in that place. I, in fact, was in a cult! Not only that, but this cult meets weekly and I had just signed a one-year lease to live in the basement suite beneath this cult for a year!

I started researching. I soon discovered that the nature of this cult is secretive. Fortunately, in the past several decades, as people have left the cult and become genuine, orthodox Christians, they have been working to expose the cult through books and publishing on the internet. The church with no name is known by many names, but their most common name by outsiders tends to be the Two-by-Twos because their workers (leaders in the cult) go out preaching in pairs, penniless and homeless, staying in the homes of their members.

The workers teach that they must give up all their possession and take no money for their work and that you know you're in the right church because of the great sacrifice they make. The workers intentionally do not publish any of their doctrines. This keeps their teachings secretive. They also distort orthodox Christian vocabulary by redefining traditional meanings to suit their belief structure. It is not until you have been in the cult for many years, that you really start to understand what the workers truly believe. By then, it is hard to leave because you have well established patterns of living within the cult. You will also have developed beliefs about god, deep friendships, and you may even have important business connections within the fellowship.

The cult was started by William Irvine in Ireland in 1897 but it has since spread all over the free word. It's hard to know how many people are members because the workers do not keep public records; but some have estimated that there are between 250,000 to

650,000 or even more members in the world today. One of the most valuable books on the historical origins of the cult is *The Secret Sect* by Doug & Helen Parker with a forward by J.I. Packer. According to Kathleen Lewis, author of *The Church without a Name*, "The workers sometimes buy as many copies of the book [*The Secret Sect*] as possible and burn them so that people cannot obtain them." [2] The workers claim that the origins of their sect go back to Christ but they are secretive about their true history. Lewis' book walks through many of the doctrinal problems of the cult.

Another helpful resource is "A Search for 'the Truth': The Worker's Words Exposed" by Lloyd Fortt. In this book, Fortt gives a dictionary definition from A to Z for nearly 200 pages of words where the workers have redefined orthodox Christian terminology and twisted it for their own purposes. For instance, when evangelical Christians talk about the gospel, they generally mean something along the lines of this: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and that "...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). [3] Because God loved us, he sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God. Through faith in Jesus we can have salvation and live eternally with God (Jn. 3:16). Salvation is a free gift of God's grace. In order to receive salvation, we must be born again by water and the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:5-7). The gospel is God's good news that changes our lives and the Holy Spirit leads us in being disciples of Jesus in God's kingdom life.

According to Fortt, however, the workers have a very different definition of what the gospel is. The gospel is more of a lifestyle that they think the New Testament apostles lived. Based on Matthew 10, the workers believe the disciples went out Two by Two, not just as a one-time mission, but as the pattern of ministry set up by Jesus for all time. According to Fortt, "The workers' 'gospel' is anything that the workers teach. Quite literally, what they teach as the 'gospel' consists of: the style of their ministry, and meetings in the home." He goes on to add, "The 'gospel' preached by the Two-by-Two's is this: the true preacher must sell all that he has and go out preaching the 'gospel,' which is, that the true preacher must sell all that he has and go out preaching the 'g—' ad nauseum." [4]

The members in the cult are taught to have no assurance of their salvation. Lewis explains, "There is no assurance of salvation, ever, until after death." [5] This is because unlike evangelical Christians who believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, this is not so in the cult. Rather, they ultimately believe in works-based righteousness as the means to achieve salvation. Members need to be in the right church through professing faith through a worker and obeying the workers. Lewis affirms this by commenting that you "buy salvation with your obedience to the workers... They believe the gospel is the workers and the meetings in the home. They believe in form rather than in faith." [6] This means the blood of Jesus is not sufficient for salvation. [7] Instead, the workers are essential for salvation.

According to Lewis, "Perseverance of the saints means being faithful in following the workers until death." [8] She also explains that "Forgiveness is for the past, not the present or the future. One can lose out at any time." [9] You have to believe the teachings of the workers, profess belief through a worker, attend the home meetings, and keep obeying workers. That's how you get and keep salvation but still have no assurance of it. Lewis states, "The workers believe we are saved by our attitude towards the workers more than by our belief and understanding of God's word." [10]

In the cult, Jesus is not to be worshipped. Lewis exposes the teaching of the workers who say, "We do not worship Jesus. He refused to be worshipped." [11] As for other contradictions to orthodox Christian doctrine, the workers also do not believe in the Trinity. They believe that Jesus was only a man and not God. Some believe that he became god-like or divine. In *The Secret Sect*, Doug & Helen Parker help us understand that Jesus is considered "the pattern preacher... They [the workers] do not hold the doctrine of the divinity of Christ as it is believed by Christian denominations who teach his pre-existence as God's eternal Word through whom all things were created." [12] In addition to this, the workers also do not believe that the Holy Spirit is God. Instead, according to Fortt, he is a more of "a mystical force from God, comparable to man's spirit, only much superior. Perhaps even God's attitude!" [13] As for God the Father, they believe he is the Creator, but he is not considered a person in the orthodox Christian sense. According to Fortt, "God is spirit only." [14]

I once heard a worker explain the two natures of Jesus during a "Gospel Meeting." Rather than affirming the Christian doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man, he claimed that the two natures of Christ are that Jesus is the fullness of human weakness and the fullness of human strength. This teaching, of course, has no basis in scripture. That same worker said from the pulpit that he did not believe in original sin and furthermore that Jesus had sin in him at one point in his life but that he overcame sin and became sinless later on in his life. [15] I deeply grieved for the people listening to him preach who genuinely sought God and yet had no idea they were being fed a lie.

In addition to these things, the workers teach that the Bible is a dead book that needs a worker to make it come alive. Once a worker speaks it, then it becomes the word of God. Fortt quotes Everett Swanson saying, "Scripture is not the word of God until it is spoken by a worker." [16] This actually makes God very dependent on workers. Where would God be without them? According to Lewis, "The workers disagree with Christian dependence on 'the Word alone,' sola scriptura. They say, 'The workers' words give Life to the scripture.'" [17] This is contrary to God's word which states, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)."

Where does this cult exist? They meet in small house churches with normally up to 20 to 25 people, seeking to model New Testament churches, which met in homes. These small house churches are all over the lower mainland including Tsawwassen, Ladner, Surrey, White Rock, Langley, Abbotsford and many other surrounding areas. They have annual conventions that draw hundreds and sometimes thousands of people for several nights of meetings and camping. In British Columbia four conventions are held, three of which are in Glen Valley: Langley, in Salmon Arm, and Prince George. In Alberta there are another four conventions, which demonstrates that there are a significant number of home meetings being held in that region also. The cult stretches across the country, throughout the United States and across the free world.

The conclusion is, if you are ever invited to a "gospel meeting" that uses language that sounds orthodox and you feel like you are walking in a familiar place but, at the same time, like your feet just can't touch the ground, check out the name of the hymn book. If it is called "Hymns Old and New," you are not in church; you are in a cult. The people are lovely but their beliefs are devastating. Pray for them. Like all of us, they too need the Lord.

Footnotes

1 According to Kathleen Lewis and Doug and Helen Parker, their names include: The Nameless House Sect, Annual Conventions, The Cooneyites, The Two-by-Twos, Die Namenlosen, Les Anonymes, The Way, Go-Preachers, White Mice, The Tramps, The Jesus Way, The Black Stockings, Irvinites, Dippers, Reidites, Pilgrims, The Christian Church of Australia, The Truth, The Secret Sect, Faith Missioners, No Sectors, The Christian Church of New Zealand, The Testimony, Bunheads, The Fellowship, The Carrollites, The No Name Church, The New Testament Church, The Christian Convention Church. See Kathleen Lewis, *The Church without a Name*, 3rd Ed. (Global Publishing, 2004). See also Doug & Helen Parker, *The Secret Sect: The Nameless House Sect and Annual Conventions, The Cooneyites Also Known as Two-by-Two Preachers, Die Namenlosen. Les Anonymes, The Way* (Sydney: Macarthur Press, 1982).

2 Lewis, *The Church without a Name*, 35.

3 All scriptures are quoted from the ESV translation.

4 Lloyd Fortt, *A Search for the Truth: The Worker's Words Exposed* (Bend: Research and Information Services, 1972), 89.

5 See Lewis, 32.

6 Ibid., 65.

7 This sect has been criticized by Christian outsiders for not believing that the blood of Christ is sufficient to cleanse people from their sins. See Doug & Helen Parker, *The Secret Sect: The Nameless House Sect and Annual Conventions, The Cooneyites Also Known as Two-by-Two Preachers, Die Namenlosen. Les Anonymes, The Way* (Sydney: Macarthur Press, 1982), 100.

8 Lewis, 53.

9 Ibid. Lewis comments that "'Losing out' is a Two by Two term meaning losing salvation and being outside of the group." Lewis, 32.

10 Lewis, 79.

11 Ibid., 53.

12 Parker, *The Secret Sect*, 101-102.

13 Fortt, *A Search for the Truth*, 98.

14 Ibid., 86.

15 The worker's first name was Shaun. I do not know his last name. This was during a public Gospel Meeting held in Ladner, BC in September 2017. He was preaching with Colin Brodie and has since passed away. Kathleen Lewis also backs Shaun's theological statement by explaining that the workers do not believe in original sin. Lewis, 53.

16 Fortt, 26.

17 Lewis, 105.