

Joe Kerr

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Early Workers

Revised March 4, 2024

Letter #1

Letter #2

The Living Witness Doctrine

“The Way”: How I Got In and Why I Got Out by Vern C. Russell, which reproduces Kerr’s letter to Irvine Weir

Who Was Joe Kerr?

JOE KERR was born in 1881 in Wanlockhead, Dumfriesshire, Scotland, and grew up in the small village of Philipstown. He was a convert of Ed Cooney and entered the work in 1902. Joe was one of the eight pioneers of the work in South Africa in 1905, along with Alex Pearce, John Cavanagh, Wilson Reid, Mary Moodie, Martha Skerit, Lilly Reid and **Barbara Baxter**.

Joe’s long-time childhood friend, Archie Russell had been orphaned in the Tay Bridge Disaster in December 1879, and he and his siblings (a brother Thomas, sister Christine and perhaps more) went to live with their Grandmother Russell, who lived next door to the Kerr Household. The two boys became inseparable friends from early childhood, playing, going to school together and attending the same church. In their teenage years they belonged to the Presbyterian church youth group known as the “*Band of Hope*,” a temperance organization founded in the 1840s, which encouraged youth to sign a pledge to abstain from alcohol.

In their mid-20s, the two friends decided to enlist in the army and go to South Africa to fight the Boers (Boer War?). They consulted with their pastor, and he advised them to not go with guns, but with Bibles to help. So they decided to become missionaries and became Two by Two Workers, Joe in 1902 and Archie in 1904. Joe went to South Africa in 1905, about two years before Archie arrived in 1907 with his companion David Gibson. The trip cost Archie ten pounds and took six weeks sailing time.

The Russell family reports that as soon as he disembarked at Cape Town, Archie started preaching to the crowd who were mostly black or colored. There was a black man in the front of the crowd who kept nodding his head and smiling. Archie asked him if he understood English. The man replied, “Aye and a wee bit of Scotch.” Archie was amazed.

Somehow, Archie connected with Joe and the pair went all over the country preaching, often staying with Christian families. It is not known what became of Archie’s companion, David Gibson. Joe and Archie went to the Witwatersrand Diamond Rush in Kimberley, believing it would be a very promising mission field, especially in the “*tent city*” growing around the “*big hole*.” There they met the Koekemoer family of Dutch descent and their three daughters where they held meetings in their home and the family was converted. They spent several years in the area preaching in the open air and holding house meetings, as well as a night in jail for “*disturbing the peace*.” Eventually, Joe and Archie moved on to Johannesburg, as did the Koekemoers. Their eldest daughter, Gladys, became a Two by Two Worker, and began preaching with Barbara Baxter.

On February 3, 1915, Archie married Gladys (she was 23 and he was 35). Archie retired with the South African Railways as a fitter and turner, which he had been trained for in Scotland. Archie never drove a car, but cycled everywhere until well into his 70s. Archie died in the mid-1960s in South Africa. The Russell family moved around a good deal, starting and ending in Johannesburg. They had children, one of whom was a daughter named Ruth (Russell) Barnett. She and her son Rod provided some of these details.

On June 29, 1916, Joe married Barbara in Wynberg, Western Cape, South Africa. Both were 35 years old. They had three children: Norman, Doreen and Joe, Jr. Archie’s children affectionately called them “Uncle Joe” and “Aunt Barbara.” Ruth Russell said Joe was a good looking Scot with a marvelous sense of humor who teased everyone; and they loved going to visit them whenever they went to Cape Town on holiday. When Joe and Barbara married, they were forced out of the Two by Two Sect. Joe wrote **Irvine Weir**:

“It is about 39 years ago....We had a loan of beds etc. in the room we had and they sent the saints who owned these things and took them from us and left us the floor to sleep on. They forbid any of the saints to come near us, and I may tell you something that you may know already that the workers have almost the same power over the so called saints as the Priests have over their people. That is their strongest weapon. Then I had not any trade and all the unskilled work is done out here by the coloured and native people. I took a Diploma in Motor Engineering and later a Diploma in Fire Engineering and then a Diploma in Traffic Engineering, but it meant a lot of hard work and that was one of the reasons that I went blind.”

In 1916, the same year Joe and Barbara married, another married couple was allowed to begin preaching. Perhaps Joe did not ask permission before their marriage took place. It is not known if Archie and Gladys left voluntarily. Archie and Joe and their wives joined the Plymouth Brethren. In his letter, Joe refers to E. H. Broadbent's book, "*The Pilgrim Church*." The author, Broadbent, was a Plymouth Brethren. Barbara died Feb. 24 1947, aged 64, and Joe died Dec. 17, 1966, aged 85, in Cape Town.

Two letters by Joe are printed below which were written in the 1950's using a return address in care of his son: Norman Kerr, 26 Raleigh Road, Mowbray, Cape South Africa.

Joe Kerr is the most famous for reportedly being the one who FIRST applied the Living Witness Doctrine (LWD) to the Two by Two ministry. Joe's explanation for the LWD is found in his letter dated **January 28, 1956**. Joe Kerr is generally recognized as being the one who initially proposed to Wm. Irvine that **Drummond's theory of "Biogenesis"** was applicable to Irvine's ministry. The Secret Sect states, "**Alfred Magowan**, many years later, reminded Cooney that Joe applied the natural law of Biogenesis, as discussed in "*Natural Law in the Spiritual World*," to the spiritual relationship of those in their fellowship" (*The Secret Sect* by Doug & Helen Parker, p. 18). Ed Cooney wrote:

*"William had been partially persuaded by **Joe Kerr** to accept the heresy that no one could be born again without meeting a Living Witness. Others held that that witness must be a sent preacher who had heard William or some preacher who had heard him."* (From Edward Cooney's Testimony, *The Secret Sect* by Doug & Helen Parker, pp. 115-116) Fred Wood wrote: "*The Living Witness Doctrine was said to have been brought in by a certain **Joe Kerr** and accepted by William Irvine. It would seem that our brethren still hold this, viz., 'That no one can be born again apart from hearing the gospel from one of their preachers'" (**Selected Letters of Fred Wood** compiled by Patricia Roberts, p. 59). More details about the Living Witness Doctrine will be given later in this chapter.*

John Long spoke highly of **Joseph Kerr**: "*For knowledge of the Scriptures, Kerr was the finest companion I ever had; and he was only twenty-one; however, Edward Cooney, and William Irvine sent him with me for a training; and did not leave a good man with me long.*" Reportedly, both George Walker and Joe Kerr had started studies in religious programs. "*Two of Irvine's prominent preachers, George Walker and Joe Kerr, had begun training for the Methodist ministry, but gave up their studies*" (**The Secret Sect**, p. 17).

THEN at the July, 1905, Convention at Crocknacrieve, unexpectedly, **Joseph Kerr**, who was about 24 years old at the time, altered the course of the Go-Preachers. Joe Kerr was:

*"...one of the most gifted and talented of the workers got a very prominent place by **William Irvine**; rather too much so for a novice. He attended a conference, in the Bridge of Allan in Scotland; and he was so disgusted with the way the Clergy preached; that he come to the conclusion that there are no clergymen saved. Without any charitable consideration of the conscience or opinion of others, he preached it at that convention. Irvine defended him, but **Edward Cooney** opposed him and tried to prove that John Wesley was a born again man.*

*"The unwillingness of Clergymen to conform themselves to the pattern as seen in Jesus is very manifest; and the neglect of faithfulness to their calling and office is to be greatly deplored; and a true and faithful witness who tells them the truth in love is to be admired, but to say that there are none of them born again is not true; and limits the power and grace of God to regenerate whomsoever he will. Then again, regeneration is a thing of the heart and cannot be always measured by external appearance, dress, salary or education. The Salvation of the Soul is by grace through faith to everyone that repents and believes in Christ Jesus; and the experience, testimony and fruits of any clergymen bear witness to the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ. Up to that time they all believed that; nevertheless, **Kerr's New Doctrine** introduced somewhat of what seemed to be absurd, and that the honest hearted could not believe without a violation of conscience and which hindered a true witness against error and wrong; and injured their own testimony..." (From: **John Long's Journal**).*

NOTE: The Joe Kerr who went in the work in 1902 should not be confused with the Joe Kerr who embraced Irvine's Omega teachings. Nor linked to the letters written by Wm. Irvine to Kerrs. Wm. Irvine also had a follower named Joe Kerr who was married to Sarah and had a son named George, who had a daughter Irvina (after Wm. Irvine); Nor to Joe's second wife, Nellie, whom he married in 1942 after Sarah died, and who was also an Omega follower. Sarah was a sister to Willie Edwards.

Letter #1 by Joe Kerr

From: Joseph Kerr
c/o Norman Kerr
26 Raleigh Road
Mowbray, Cape South Africa
(no date given—sometime in 1955)

To: Mr. Irvine Weir
27 Fore River Avenue
N. Weymouth (91) Massachusetts, USA

My dear Irvine (Weir),

I am sure that you will think that I have forgotten you, but I have been on the sick list again, and I finished up with a bad dose of virus flue. I am still confined to the house and today I thought I was sufficiently well recovered to try my hand at a letter. I have had a couple of letters from Sweetland and have replied. Eddie [Cooney] gave him my address to write to me.

There is no possibility of mending the Testimony. Its foundations are wrong. They are not sound on how men are born from above. Salvation is the work of God, and it is God who must open men's eyes and turn men from darkness to light. "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him and no man can come to me except it were given unto him of my Father," John 6:44, 65.

It was the Lord who opened Lydia's heart Acts 16:15; it is as many as are ordained to eternal life who believe. Acts 13:48; We need to get into the place where we are workers together with God. 2 Cor. 6:1;

Remember that Salvation is in three tenses (this is something the Testimony never understood.)

(1) We have been saved. "For by grace have ye been saved." Eph 2:5 and 8 R.V. This is the salvation of the Spirit. 1 Cor. 5:5;

(2) We are being saved. "Unto us which are being saved, it is the power of God." 1 Cor. 1:18; R.V. 2 Cor 2:15; R.V. This is the salvation of our life which we are working out day by day. Phil 2:12-16;

(3) Then there is a salvation which is nearer than when we believed. Rom. 13:11; A salvation ready to be revealed in the last days. 1 Peter 1:5 This is the salvation of your body, which will take place at the revelation of the sons of God. Rom. 8:19. R.V. This is the redemption of the body. 8:23; or the redemption of the purchased possession. Eph. 1:14.

The 1st and the 3rd salvation mentioned is the sovereign work of God. Called in Eph. **"the gift of God."** The 2nd is something that is carried on between the Lord and ourselves. It is the salvation of our lives. It is possible for a man to be saved and to lose his life. Matt. 16:26. R.V. Some people will stand at the Judgment seat of Christ and will have all their works burnt up, but they themselves will be saved yet so as by fire. 1 Cor. 3:15; That side of truth the Testimony have no knowledge of. "Salvation is not of works lest any man should boast," but their salvation is definitely of works. Eph. 2:9.

Irvine, it is no good trying to bolster up the old thing—it is better to admit that it is built on a wrong foundation and to put in the right foundation. None of the people in the Testimony have any knowledge of the difference of a man standing in Christ and a man's state. What God has made us in Christ and the extent to which we have sought to bring our state into line with our standing.

You are wrong when you say that we gather together on the Sunday morning to remember Christ's death. We gather together to proclaim His death. 1 Cor. 11:26. R.V. We proclaim that all we are and have has come to us through the death of the Son of God. When doing this we remember Him in His love and sacrifice and the proof that we are right with God is seen in the effect it has on our lives. We were crucified with Christ, we are dead with Christ. Rom. 6:6, 8; The body of sin has to be destroyed or made ineffective. V.6; That is our standing in Christ. Now how do we measure up to it experimentally.

You said that I was to tell you how they treated me when I left the Testimony. I am not sure if these things are profitable. It is about 39 years ago, and to recall some of these things is contrary to the spirit of Him who has put all our sins in the depths of the sea. We had a loan of beds etc. in the room we had and they sent the saints who owned these things and took them from us and left us the floor to sleep on. They forbid any of the saints to come near us, and I may tell you something that you may know already that the workers have almost the same power over the so called saints as the Priests have over their people. That is their strongest weapon.

Then I had not any trade and all the unskilled work is done out here by the coloured and native people. I took a Diploma in Motor Engineering and later a Diploma in Fire Engineering and then a Diploma in Traffic Engineering, but it meant a lot of hard work and that was one of the reasons that I went blind.

However, the Lord looked after us and here we are glad that He saved us and opened our eyes to what we had been led astray by. And now it is up to us to see that we walk with the Lord in the light of His word. His word a light and a lamp. I will tell you more of this next time. I'm tired.

Love in Christ Jesus to all.

J. [Joseph] Kerr

TTT NOTE: "The Testimony" was the term Kerr used to refer to the Two by Two church.

This letter by Joe Kerr was given to TTT by Vern C. Russell who wrote that Ed Cooney gave it to him. Presumably Irvine Weir gave it to Ed Cooney. Read Vern C Russell's life story: **"The Way – How I Got in...and Why I Got out."**

Letter #2 by Joe Kerr .

c/o Norman Kerr
 26 Raleigh Road
 Mobray, Cape South Africa
 January 28, 1956

Dear ____: (quite possible this was written to Irvine Weir)

Many thanks for the newspaper* that you sent. How did that man get hold of all that information? He is not altogether accurate in some things but has a lot that is. It is almost criminal all that they are doing & then denying that their origin is deceitful.

He has nothing right about South Africa. If you ever write to him, tell him that William Irvine was never working in South Africa—he only passed through, so I did not share in any divisions, — and that I cut my association with them 40 years ago. He states that I was the instigator of “The Living Witness” doctrine, and that I scooped up what was of William Irvine's kingdom in South Africa.

What they preach today about the “Living Witness” was not what I preached. I then taught the importance of preaching as follows:

1. That Christ said go ye therefore, and teach all nations — Matthew 28-19.
2. That it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them — 1 Cor. 1-21.
3. That God hath in due times manifested His Word through preaching — Titus 1-3.
4. That people could not hear without a preacher — Romans 10-14.
5. That it is woe unto me if I preach not the Gospel. — 1 Corinthians 9-16.
6. That they went everywhere preaching the Word — Acts 8-4.
7. That Philip went down to Samaria and preached Christ — Acts 8-5.

I gave instances such as that found in Acts 8-35, how the Lord sent Philip to preach to the eunuch but while I emphasized the need of a preacher, it did not mean that the preacher had to be one of us. **The idea that the preacher had to be William Irvine or one of his disciples was added to their doctrine after I had delivered my part.**

The mistake I made in my ignorance was that I failed to take into account the sovereignty of God, — God who could speak from heaven and save one, as He saved Paul, Acts 9. He could save Timothy through reading of the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3-15. I forgot that the greatest preacher that the Lord had was the firmament of heaven, and that there was no place in the universe where the voice of that preacher cannot be heard, Psalms 19-1 to 4. That is the preacher to whom Paul was referring in Romans 10-14 when he asked, “How could they hear without a preacher?” For he immediately quotes from that Psalm; Romans 10-18.

When I saw the mistake I made, I tried to correct it, but it was too late! It was something new for people who had not been in the habit of thinking for themselves, and so off they set with it to the ends of the earth! **Then it grew until they had it that the preacher had to be one [of the] Testimony, and one who had either professed through William Irvine, or one of his direct descent.**

I could not have preached that, for **I believe I was saved before I met the “Testimony” and I know that William Irvine had professed through the Rev. John McNeil.** So that theory could no more hold water than the one that says the Pope was a direct descendent of Peter.

In the book, Broadbent's “Pilgrim Church,” a book that is well worth reading, we learn that there have been people all down through the ages who have sought to walk as near to the truth of Scripture as they could. They were given different names and were badly persecuted.

I just had another letter from one of the deceived the A.M., asking for information regarding the truth. I met this man 7 years ago and told him a few things, which are just now beginning to filter into his mind. Now lots of love in Christ to you and your wife,

Your brother in Christ,

J. Kerr

***Newspaper is likely the 4-page newspaper titled Spiritual Fraud by Douglas Parker.**

See also: **Living Witness Doctrine**

TTT Editor's Note: Henry Drummond, Professor of Natural Science at the Glasgow College of the Free Church of Scotland wrote a book titled "Natural Law in the Spiritual World." Drummond believed that the laws of nature provided authority for Christian belief and practice. In the chapter titled "Biogenesis," he theorized that: "Life can only come from the touch of life."

Irvine and the workers took Drummond's theory and applied it to their fellowship. By 1904, the doctrine was held that only those who professed through Irvine or his "sent" workers could be saved. Since these workers hadn't experienced fulfillment outside of Irvine's way, they reasoned that Irvine's "way" must be God's true way and felt they owed their salvation to Irvine's revelation of "the way." It was binding on all the workers to accept this theory as fact, which was known as "The Living Witness Doctrine." However, some workers considered it heresy and left the work.
