

Through the Desert in a Cult with No Name...

They went through the desert in a cult with no name... for in **this** desert, you **can't** remember your name....

By Ken Armstrong

With apologies to the band *America* for the play on their lyrics ("A Horse With No Name," released in 1972), the members of *the cult with no name* go through a spiritual desert, alone and desolate, even in large groups. They are afraid to speak up, for fear of appearing to question the lessons their leaders teach them. They worry about being seen spending time with outsiders, especially members of "denominational churches." These poor, lonely souls are afraid of being shunned or excommunicated—cut off from friends and family—and condemned, or so they are told, to eternal damnation.

Some have found their way out of cult bondage, often with deep scars and broken relationships left in the wake. A number have written books and pamphlets in a passionate, almost desperate attempt to tell the world that any resemblance between the teachings of *the cult with no name* and biblical truth is purely superficial.

Anonymity and Ambiguity

Like many cults, members of *the cult with no name* appear innocent enough at first, only gradually showing their true colors to new followers as their lives become inextricably invested in the teachings of their leaders. Unlike most cults, however, this one has a



see final page for responses

To former followers, and to those who have encountered the group, they are known by a variety of nicknames—the 2X2s (two-by-twos), Cooneyites, Irvinites, Dippers, Carrollites, Go-Preachers, The Tramps and many others. As we'll see, those names have roots in the culture and doctrine of the cult. Yet even knowing these names is of little help because the Workers and their followers have been carefully taught to deny any such name.

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The leaders are called "Workers." They give up their material possessions to take up "the work." They usually appear initially to be itinerant evangelists, or merely simple, homeless people with a religious message to share. Their followers typically live ordinary lives, dress plainly, keep to themselves and are easy to mistake for members of some of the more legalistic mainstream religious denominations. All of this is very deliberate, and has been carefully, methodically cultivated over more than a century, to protect the Workers from the kind of scrutiny that comes with recognition and a cult identity.

But, what appears to be simplicity and devotion to religious teachings is, in fact, an iron-fisted system of domination, subjugation and abuse, with just enough Bible thrown in to give it an "old-time religion" flavor, which may seem to legitimize their authoritarian doctrine. And though *the cult with no name* hasn't yet hit the headlines with a major meltdown, it's probably just a matter of time.

Workers, in fact, wield a type of mind control and personal domination reminiscent of Jim Jones, who in 1978 killed himself and 913 of his Peoples' Temple followers in Guyana with poisoned punch, or of David Koresh, who burned to death with some 75 members in his Branch Davidian compound in Texas in 1993.

Still, *the cult with no name* remains so stealthy, so hard to detect, that it would be of little concern to the average

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person, but for one alarming fact: If some published statistics are accurate, there are perhaps 400,000 group members around the world today. They live and operate primarily in rural or low-income areas, but have also become established in middle-class and urban settings.

If the numbers are true, chances are very good that some who pay allegiance to *the cult with no name* may live or work near you.

So carefully cultivated is their anonymity that the group actually doesn't identify itself with any name. In some places, they have met legal requirements by registering an organizational name with government entities; however, knowing those names would do a person little good, as the Workers assiduously avoid using them.

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the culture and doctrine of the cult. Yet even knowing these names is of little help because the Workers and their followers have been carefully taught to deny any such name.

For simplicity, then, we'll just refer to *the cult with no name* as "the No-Names."

It is the very anonymity and simplicity of the No-Names and their followers that enables the group to grow largely undetected, like termites in the woodwork of a home, noticed only when the damage becomes too costly to ignore.

Cooney and Irvine: A Cult Is Born

In the late nineteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment had drawn to a close in Western Europe and North America. The Industrial Age was in full bloom, and with it the rapid growth of cities and the decline in status of small farms. As has been the case over and over again, economic upheaval left a class of people disenfranchised and ripe for a new message which would give them some sense of hope and self-esteem.

A new century was about to dawn when William Irvine's strange theology led him (in 1897) to part ways with the Faith Mission in Northern Ireland. Irvine, joined by Edward Cooney, took only a small band of followers as they began to preach a doctrine of strict legalism, fear and religious intimidation.

Irvine claimed that the true church must be a small group, based on a distorted interpretation of Matthew 7:14 ("...strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth

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unto life, and few there be that find it," KJV).

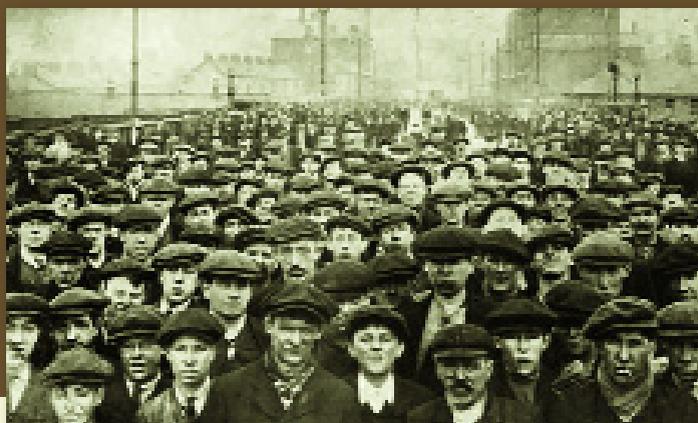
Claiming to be the only true church, Irvine and Cooney taught a strange, allegorical approach to the Bible which allowed them to make anything they wanted of it. The two began an approach to interpretation of Scripture which continues among the No-Names to this day, applying entirely new definitions to familiar words, ignoring context or translation, thereby allowing them to use the Bible to support a religion created out of whole cloth by its founders. For example, "leaders" and "authority" in Hebrews 13:17 refer to Workers; therefore, they teach, this is proof one must obey the Workers without question.

Part of the success of Irvine's new religion can be attributed to the demonizing of those who dressed well, obtained an education or held any profession or status. Such people, Irvine taught, were doomed to hell, while those who dressed plainly were heaven's aristocracy. Christians who refused to follow the teachings of Irvine and Cooney were called "Babylon," making it easy for the two to teach in their "gospel message" rants that Christians at large were the "great whore" of Scripture, and that only their own devoted fol-



Left to right: William Gill (overseer of Britain), William Irvine and George Walker (overseer of eastern North America), early Workers.

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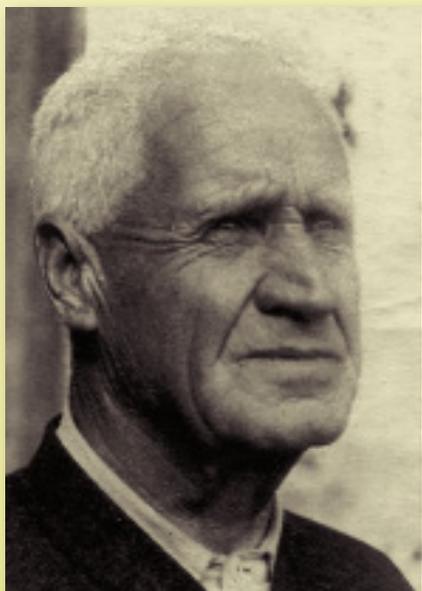
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In the early part of the twentieth century, these teachings caught on throughout the British Isles, where they attracted masses of people who had failed to share in the wealth of the era of factories and urbanization.

As is true with many cult leaders, Irvine gained his early following among people who lacked the educational background to critically evaluate his odd new religion, and he built excitement among his followers by teaching that Jesus was about to return, and that his followers were the 144,000 "remnant" spoken of in Revelation.

Irvine's strict doctrinal teaching and insistence on dressing like



William Irvine (1930's)

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tramps eventually became his own undoing. Though he continued to have followers, he was excommunicated from his own cult, as was Cooney, even as the cult began to expand its efforts to send Workers, two-by-two, into all the world. Though Irvine continued to travel and teach—spending his last years in Palestine awaiting the fulfillment of his prophetic vision—the group he founded began to systematically write a revised history that failed to make mention of Irvine and Cooney.

William Irvine died in Jerusalem in 1947. While the vast majority of the movement he started had "shunned" him, a loyal core of his followers continued to revere him.

More Power to the Workers

As they distanced themselves from the names of Irvine and Cooney, the group also became aware that Workers were not unanimous on points of doctrine. So it was that George Walker, William Carroll and Jack Carroll allowed a culture shift.

The emphasis on doctrinal unity demanded by Irvine went away. As long as Workers continued to insist on blind devotion to their teachings as the one true way, it wasn't important if they actually understood or taught a pure doctrinal message.

In the early years of the 20th century, Workers in Europe and North America, mixing with hobos and itinerant workers through

times of war and depression, established themselves mostly in rural areas, where they lived off of the gifts of others as they attracted new adherents. Although the Workers rarely had much education, they were armed with a regimen of lessons that were little more than slogans based on the No-Names' core teachings.

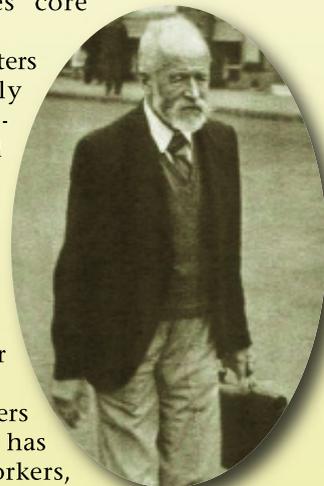
These tracts, letters and other loosely organized documents emphasized salvation by obedience to the Workers—and a code of religious practices which helped Workers build control over their disciples.

For three quarters of a century, little has changed. The Workers, under the direction of Head Workers, go out generally "two-by-two," remaining unmarried and avoiding attachments such as employment or possessions. While each Worker may have a unique spin on doctrinal points, most of them avoid anything more than the sloganized teachings and rules of behavior that were passed on to them.

With nothing more, they seduce those who are attracted to what seems at first to be just a simple message of religious obedience and the concept of exclusiveness.

Like the Serpent Seduced Eve

Since Adam and Eve declared their independence from God, it seems we humans have had, wired deep in our DNA, some desire to be



Edward Cooney

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exclusive members of a superior group. Even within the big tent of faithful Christ followers, this drive often results in sectarian loyalty and divisions based on religious practices, doctrines and traditions. Outside that tent, this drive opens the door for all kinds of dangerous teaching.

Using the methods that have served them since Irvine and Cooney, the No-Names continue today to capitalize on that human desire to know something special, or to be something special—especially when compared to people with greater social standing or material wealth. They proselytize by moving slowly and deliberately, identifying vulnerable and malleable targets. They draw them in gradually, keeping them at arm's length until they accept the notion that failure to obey their Workers will lead to excommunication and damnation.

Religion Without the Morality

Although the No-Names stake eternity on vague and disjointed ramblings that speak more about what they're against than what they're for, it seems their legalistic code of religious practice has little to do with any conventional morality.

In this context, the No-Names have redefined not only acceptable behavior, but even the very language they speak. "Adultery," and "fornication" in No-Name terminology are not physical sins, but spiritual ones, which refer to any association with denominational churches which might result in their exposure to biblical ideas or doctrines which might contradict the Workers' teachings. Thus, it seems, the sexual sins the words describe in the Bible have no real significance to the No-Names.

The Workers themselves are held to an unmarried life of work, though celibacy is not an important or heavily emphasized aspect of that life. The Workers are sent out two-by-two with other Workers of the same gender, and they are given a great deal of latitude in carrying out *the work*. Their doctrine, dating back to Irvine, forbids the Workers to accept payment for *the work*. Support usually comes by way of accepting room and board. There are reports of unmarried Workers living for long periods in the home of followers, with immoral behavior resulting, but rarely dealt with in more than the most superficial of ways.

Workers are apparently not bound to any strong code of ethics when it comes to their words. In fact, they are actually *encouraged* by Head Workers to mislead people through carefully crafted deceptions and outright lies, rather than admit the nature of their teaching to those who have not yet been adequately indoctrinated. A Worker would rather lie about the source

of his teaching or his affiliation with any group, than to be confronted with uncomfortable questions about the history, nature or beliefs of their cult. They will often make vague references to the Bible, or even to specific passages, but they will beat around the bush (even tell outright lies) to avoid answering questions about their beliefs or the source of those beliefs.

It's impossible to calculate the extent of the damage from these moral misdirections. There are rumors and anecdotes about sexual practices of some of The Workers, of course, but the secretive nature of the No-Names makes it nearly impossible to verify or collect any solid information, and their victims are typically either subdued with the fear of some form of shunning (not because of their promiscuity, but rather because of reporting it), or too ashamed to come forward.

The Subtle Task of Selling a Cult

Few people would respond with a great deal of excitement if they were asked to join a legalistic, mind-controlling cult. In fact, to lure in new followers, Workers must pull off one of the great bait-and-switch scams of all time.

The formula used by the No-Names varies a little by region, but almost always closely follows the pattern that has worked for them for nearly a century.

Regular members, who have "taken a stand," or "professed" are not permitted to discuss matters of faith with outsiders. That's the job of a Worker. This doesn't mean,

When approached about their beliefs, they will say little.... they might invite their curious acquaintance to a Sunday evening meeting, which takes place in a rented hall. They give their new prospect the address on a piece of paper that says, "Non-denominational gospel meeting."



The new member, who was attracted by the simplicity and lack of church structure, soon finds that this innocent-looking little group is not unlike the trap-door spider, which waits for its prey to wander by innocently before devouring them.



however, that these followers aren't expected to be actively recruiting.

Members typically dress and groom plainly and maintain an outwardly quiet, religious appearance. When approached about their beliefs, they will say little. If asked where they go to church, they will respond that it doesn't have a name, or its own building, but that they try to follow the Bible. They might invite their curious acquaintance to a Sunday evening meeting, which takes place in a rented hall. They give their new prospect the address on a piece of paper that says, "Non-denominational gospel meeting."

These meetings resemble a normal church service in some ways, though there's really no significant reference to God or salvation. The group sings a few hymns and hears a short message, none of which really tells much about the group or answers questions. However, after that initial meeting, the prospects will find that the follower who invited them is now a little more open to discussion about religious matters, especially when it comes to practices in the "denominational churches" with which the No-Names agree.

Gradually, the prospect is invited to home meetings, led by Workers in the home of an Elder (a professing member who is below Workers in pecking order). At these home meetings, the Workers will allow the prospect to gather more information about the group—that they take no offerings, their Workers accept no pay, they own no buildings and other relatively innocuous tidbits of information that may be attractive to many potential recruits.

The group seems sincere and simple, and they show genuine interest in the prospect. After a home meeting, two Workers will visit the home of the prospect and continue

to feed them just enough information to keep them coming back. They will answer questions about doctrinal issues with vague references to the Bible, avoiding any detailed or specific answers. After some time, they will be invited to a "convention."

In most cases, conventions are held in rural areas, on the farm of another Elder. There may be a thousand or more followers at these conventions—with hymns, messages and meals carefully scripted.

The idea is to continue feeding the prospect just enough information to make them feel comfortable, accepted and friendly. Afterward, they will continue to attend the home meetings, being brought along gradually to feel like a welcome and accepted member of the group.

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Questions are met with simple answers, or with a Bible reference. Eventually, the prospect is encouraged to "take a stand," or "profess." If the Workers, Elders and others have all played their parts well, the prospect will want to become more closely identified with their new friends.

Most people don't really realize how little they know about the group at this point. If they ask about the international organization, they will learn little. They're told that nobody remembers when the group was started—it has just always been there, they will say, all the way back to the original churches.

Gradually, however, new members will learn more about their new friends than they ever wanted to know.

Friendship Becomes Mind Control

A common thread among cults is fear of excommunication if the member fails to perform as expected, or if they don't conform to the lessons and prospects of the group. This pattern certainly holds true for the No-Names.

The bigger a member's network becomes in a cult, the more invested and connected the member feels, and the more complicated walking away will become. This is especially true if other family

members are faithful followers.

At the same time, new members quickly begin to find out how much pressure the Workers will exert on them. In most cases, Workers become controlling in every aspect of the member's lives. They will tell the member who to marry (and who not to), what to do with their money and more. New members will be expected to dress in simple attire like other members, to wear conservative hairstyles and to live plainly.

No-Name members are not permitted to enjoy most forms of entertainment—only No-Name teaching. Movies, television, Internet, drinking and smoking are

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strictly prohibited. Even reading is limited to approved material. Failure to obey can result in discipline or being excommunicated. Punishment is firm and swift.

As the cult begins to eat away at every part of a new member's life, individual thought, personal reactions, tastes or biases are discouraged. Anything that might draw them back into their previous life is systematically expelled and replaced with the Workers' edicts. The member is reminded constantly that only a "professing" member who is obedient to the Workers can expect salvation.

Old friendships are ignored and die, and are replaced by camaraderie with other cult members and by devotion to the Workers.

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Those who begin to question the doctrine of salvation by obedience face the stark prospect of walking away from all of their remaining friends—perhaps even close family members.

Each member is expected to advise the Workers if anything is going on in another member's life that might interfere with this immersion process. The new member, who was attracted by the simplicity and lack of church structure, soon finds that this innocent-looking little group is not unlike the trap-door spider, which waits for its prey to wander by innocently before devouring them.

Escape Is Possible

In his 1962 Oscar-nominated title role in *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, Burt Lancaster finds himself in the infamous prison in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Though told the prison is impossible to escape, he sets out on a determined path to prove the opposite.

Mind-controlling cults are much like that prison island. For most of the cult prisoners, walls are unnecessary to keep them inside. Fear of what an escape attempt could mean provides a deterrent more formidable than any prison walls. Those who begin to question the doctrine of salvation by obedience face the stark prospect of walking away from all of their remaining friends—perhaps even close family members.

Yet, there are many who do walk away, some of them still able to trust God despite what others have done in his name.

Kathleen Munn Lewis, in the introduction to her book, *The Church Without a Name*, has this to say, "I had been totally committed to the 2X2 Church and for most of my life had attempted to draw others into its system. Since I came to know the real Truth about Jesus, who he is and what he did for me, can I do anything else but testify of his grace, mercy and love to the world and especially to those who are still in bondage to William Irvine's doctrine?"

Without the truth of God in their hearts, every man, woman and child in the world is a potential victim of hyper-legalistic religion and cults. Many intelligent people have been drawn into cult teaching. Like the frog in the pot, the heat is turned up gradually, imperceptibly, until the victim is cooked without having suspected a thing.

God's promise to us is that if we honestly seek him, he will not hide from us (Matthew 7:7-8). Yet without him, it makes no difference whether we're involved with a cult or dedicated to world peace. We are destined for eternal separation from God and from everything good, lost in the outer darkness much deeper than the experience of cult members.

The best defense against cults like the No-Names isn't education, or worldly wisdom or experience. It's God and God alone.

He offers his grace freely to all who seek it. By taking that free gift, we place our hand firmly in the hand of the One who can protect us from evil, including *the cult with no name*. □

Ken Armstrong is pastor and teacher of Wildfire Christian Fellowship, in Grants Pass, Oregon. For more information about Wildfire, visit www.WildfireCF.org.

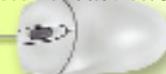


ONLINE INTERVIEW
AT PTM.ORG

www.ptm.org/Armstrong

Join Greg Albrecht as he talks with pastor and author Ken Armstrong about his journey—an amazing story of God's grace!

THE PLAIN TRUTH



Our Sept-October cover story about the No Name cult is controversial, even among its former members. One of the first responses from a former member (who has expertise in No Names history but wishes to remain anonymous) asked for redactions. Here is our clarification based on that informed feedback.

Clarification:

It has come to our attention that our Sept.-Oct. cover story, "Through the Desert in a Cult With No Name" may need some clarification. Our author, Ken Armstrong compared No Names workers to Jim Jones and David Koresh. According to some, the workers do not wield this type of mind control and personal domination; however, their group does contain many cultic elements.

Apparently the reference to 144,000 is a splinter group teaching, not one held by the primary group today. Our article alludes to documents published by the No Names. We understand that they do pass around notes taken of sermons by workers, and perhaps some letters that members write to each other. But they have no tracts or booklets, and apparently boast of that fact.

Our article made reference to control allegedly exercised by workers over member's lives and that celibacy for workers is not important or heavily emphasized.

It may be more accurate to say that workers don't approve of some occupations but they do not control marriages and financial decisions of members. It may be more accurate to say that workers must leave their work if they marry. Their "sacrifice" in terms of living a celibate life is the chief aspect of their life that "elevates" them above laymembers.

—Plain Truth

Our author responds:

*The sources I used for this article are good and solid. One of the many sources I used is *The Church Without a Name*, a book by Kathleen Lewis, who is also a former No Names member. She differs with the other former No Names member who asked for a clarification.*

Given the loose organization of the No Names I feel that ex-No Names members have many varied experiences and therefore have different opinions. Kathleen Lewis calls what happens within the No Names mind control. I can only conclude that the person asking for a clarification was looking for an article closer to their own subjective experience rather than the broader article which I wrote. To say that the article was not well researched would not be a true statement.

—Ken Armstrong, Grants Pass, Oregon

Former No Names members weigh in:

I have read the article by Ken Armstrong and want him to know that his account is extremely well-written. I was born and raised in this heresy and I can verify that it was a desert experience. I will be posting this article on my website which is dedicated to helping former members of the No Names whom we challenge to "step out of the 2X2 box of bondage towards freedom in Jesus Christ" (www.veteransoftruth.com). The article by Ken Armstrong and other similar articles have a way of opening the shutters over people's spiritual eyes.

—Denver, Colorado

Some members of the 2x2 group blew up about Ken Armstrong's article in the September/October Plain Truth because it was SO TRUE!! We at Veterans of Truth have been pummeled by these members over and over again. These hardliner 2x2s want their ears tickled, and an article like Ken's cut to the quick. It was an AWESOME article, otherwise the 2x2s would have said nothing. Even some of the so-called ex-members are not free. They still placate and support the 2x2s. I totally understand the cultic Christian term. There are so many flavors of heresies filling the church today, so many people want their ears tickled, and think it's all about being "good." Man SO complicates God's wonderfully simple plan of salvation. So many churches are just a facade. They have an appearance of looking orthodox, but they are rotting on the inside.

— Email