

The Cooneyites

The Cooneyites are also known as Irvingites, Go-preachers, Two-by-two's, Workers, the Church with No Name, the Nameless House Church or the Christian Convention Church. They insist that their movement has no name and will refer to themselves as "The Way", "The Jesus Way" or "The Truth". They are thought to have about 40,000 members worldwide.

Their founder, William Irvine came to Ireland as a Faith Mission Pilgrim. In 1897, he began teaching that preachers should receive no salary and should be homeless. Others, including Edward Cooney, joined him and the message began to spread.

In 1900, the Faith Mission and Irvine parted company. That same year, his followers held a convention in Rathmolyn which lasted for three weeks. Irvine, a powerful orator, convinced his followers to call themselves "workers," to sell all of their possessions, and to take vows of poverty, celibacy, obedience and self-denial. Before long his movement attracted followers in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

In time Irvine began to claim that his followers were the 144,000 of Revelation and that the end of the world would come in 1914, after which date no one else would be saved. These ideas caused controversy in the movement and a split resulted. Irvine was excommunicated by his own followers. Edward Cooney became the leader but he too met with opposition and in 1928, he was also ceased to be recognised as a worker.

Irvine moved to Jerusalem and wrote hundreds of letters to the four hundred or so followers (he called them "the Little Ones") who had been excommunicated along with him. He remained in Jerusalem until his death in 1947.

God

Cooneyites are Unitarian: that is, they believe that God is one person and deny the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus Christ is called Saviour, but only to the degree that he was a good man who vicariously atoned for humanity's sins. The Holy Spirit is a force that represents God in action.

The Bible

They declare the Bible to be a "dead book" that can only be understood through their preachers. Only the English King James Version of the Bible may be used.

Salvation

An important belief of the Cooneyites is their conviction that in order to be saved it is necessary to hear the gospel from a Cooneyite preacher. This, however, is not what is generally told to outsiders: the message conveyed to them is that salvation is based solely upon faith in Christ and rigid adherence to a holy life.

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith was originally opposed — they called those who taught it "Calvary ranters" — now it is just ignored. The work of Christ on the cross has little place in Cooneyite teaching. Even references to forgiveness of sins for salvation have been removed from their hymn book. For Cooneyites, salvation is dependent upon being a worthy disciple of Christ, by following the example of Christ the perfect preacher. They interpret the words from Romans 5:10, "we shall be saved by his life", to mean that they will be saved if they conform their lives to that of Jesus, the homeless poor preacher.

It is taught that salvation can be lost at any time and the diligent pursuit of holiness is a daily preoccupation of each member. Members are taught to lead a strictly disciplined life. Although in former times television was forbidden, along with dancing, smoking, and consumption of alcohol, many members no longer adhere to these rules.

The Sacraments

Cooneyites practice baptism by immersion, oppose infant baptism, and observe the Lord's Supper each Sunday — using grape juice; not wine. Previous baptisms performed outside Cooneyite circles are not recognized: new members must be re-baptised.

The Church

The Cooneyites are anti-denominational. When the group was founded in the 1890's, the mainline denominations were seen as sectarian and snobbish. Their initial protest against organized religion has been institutionalized in their teachings.

They do not accept that their movement only began in the last century and if challenged will tell you that there have been groups of them scattered throughout Europe since the first century. They claim to practice a church life that can be traced back to the apostles and that their preachers are direct descendants of the apostles. In actual fact their founder, Irvine, simply adopted the evangelistic methods of the Faith Mission of his day and copied the religious convention meetings of the Keswick movement.

Evangelism

The method of outreach is either by door to door visitation or "non denominational" missions.

Organisation

The Cooneyites have no headquarters, they do not construct or own meeting places and they do not seek to hold any legal status. Rather theirs is an association of house churches. They hold annual conventions in numerous locations around the world and meet locally in members' homes on Sunday and Wednesday evenings each week.

Members are organized into two classes. The "senior members" or "senior brothers" are full-time missionaries and preachers. The general membership hold secular jobs.

Those recognised as preachers are men and women who have given up all their worldly possessions and live according to Jesus' words in Matthew 10 — working in pairs, taking no money etc. They take vows of poverty, abstinence from sexual relations, and obedience and must walk as Jesus with no permanent place to lay their head. In the early days Cooneyite preachers often lived as street people; today they move into members' homes when they are in the district and it is the members who keep them. Senior preachers are appointed to oversee the work in each region.

Whilst often highly critical of the institutional church with its hierarchy, the Cooneyites themselves have a very powerful and coercive hierarchy. The preachers often rule with "iron fists" and exert enormous power, using the threat of excommunication to obtain obedience. Excommunication is highly organized: an out-of-fellowship member will find all doors closed throughout the world.

It is believed that since these roving preachers have conformed to Christ's pattern of life that only they may offer true teaching in the faith of Christ. They undertake no formal theological training as they believe the Spirit will control and empower their speech. In reality they undertake regular and intensive training at the conventions. Convention speakers, who are mainly "senior workers", restate accepted teaching. As there is no formal body of doctrine, conflicting views are at times presented, but debate and discussion is frowned on.

Distinctive Practices

The Cooneyites are anti-intellectual. Higher education is frowned upon. Books, including theological works, are not to be studied.

They are pacifists: members may join the forces but are forbidden to bear arms.

Their wedding ceremonies are civil ceremonies because the ministers do not seek licenses to perform religious ceremonies.

The Cooneyite movement is characteristically secretive. They do not print literature stating their beliefs, and members will not discuss them openly. Cooneyites will present their views in such a

way as to appear orthodox and present themselves as non-denominational preachers of the gospel. Indeed they have often been so convincing in doing this that they have been allowed to hold missions in church halls.

Question For Discussion

1. If someone presents himself to you as a preacher of the gospel what questions should you ask to determine if his views are orthodox?