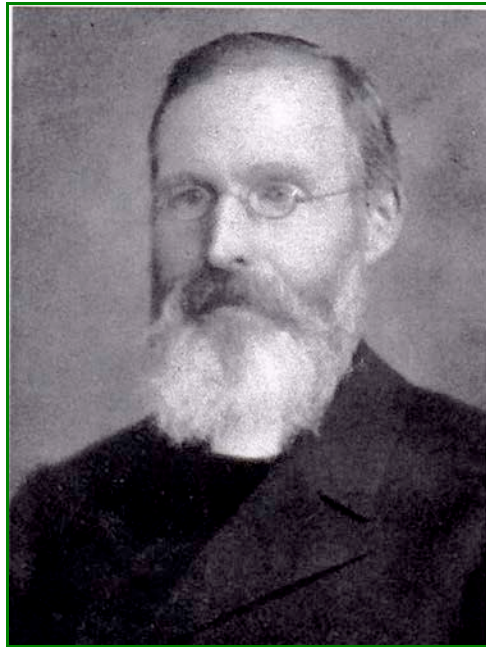


CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Occasional Papers in History and Theology

Paper No. 6

THE STRANGE CASE OF JOHN STRANG



Evangelist John Strang

by

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The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of as paper does constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein

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John Strang was one of a number of British evangelists who came to Australia in the nineteenth century to assist in the establishment of churches. After short ministries in Britain he accepted an appointment in 1874 to remote township of Strathalbyn in South Australia. He returned to England in 1876 but was sufficiently encouraged by what he saw in Australia to return in 1878. But worn out by the relentless pace of short ministries he became disillusioned...This is his story.

In the second half of the 19th Century a number of British evangelists came to Australia and assisted in the formation and development of Churches of Christ. Among these was John Strang.

Training

John Strang was born in Linlithgow, Scotland 1843. He grew up as a member of the Free Church of Scotland but later joined the Baptist Church, then Churches of Christ. Strang's move from the Baptist Church to Churches of Christ was probably seamless and may have been influenced by his association with T.H. Milner. Strang joined a ministerial training class led by T.H. Milner in 1863 under the auspices of the Scottish Churches of Christ Annual Meeting. On the death of Milner (1866), this scheme was combined with one conducted by David King in Birmingham and Strang was transferred to that. He spent three years under the tutelage of Milner, and one year with King.

At the time, associated Churches of Christ in Britain were going through a process of internal debate about the nature of theological college-based training, and about the nature of ministry itself. The need for trained clergy was increasingly recognized but there was some opposition to the idea of a centralised theological college. Moreover, the prevailing view on ministry was that it should be largely based around evangelists who stayed with a church for a short time, and then moved on. Local churches remained under the control of lay elders. This seemed to many to be the apostolic model.

The training institutes established by Milner and King were an accommodation to these ideas. Trainees went through a kind of internship combining teaching by a prominent leader and ministry experience via attachment to a local congregation. While attached to King, Strang was engaged as an evangelist to work among the Birmingham and district churches. Watters has noted that only men of talent completed the full program, lesser talents were returned to local churches "to render improved service"¹. In the light of this, Strang would have been recognised as having good ministerial potential.

The Influence of Milner and King.

Thomas Hugh Milner was an interesting character. Born in 1825 he was baptised at the Bristol Scotch Baptist church, Edinburgh in 1842². It might be noted that Scotch Baptists generally differed from the more Calvinistic (i.e. predestinationist) English Baptists and espoused some ideals cherished by Restoration Movement³ churches including the centrality of the Lord's Supper and the desire to base faith and practice on the New Testament. It is likely that Strang was initially numbered with the Scotch Baptists, hence the relative seamlessness of his transition to Churches of Christ. Milner broke with the Scotch Baptists and he and his followers formed an independent congregation which later linked up with Churches of Christ. With Milner came a new journal, *The Christian Advocate* (1857)⁴. Through this, and his preaching, Milner became very influential.



T.H. Milner – mentor to John Strang – visited Australia in 1862 (source: Maston p. 154)

David King was, along with Milner one of the most influential churchman of the period. King took over the editorship of the *British Millennial Harbinger* in 1861. According to Thompson, under its previous editor Wallis, the *Harbinger* had been “almost single-handedly responsible for ensuring the continued propagation of Alexander Campbell’s writings”. King gave the *Harbinger* a more British slant aiming to “reproduce the thoughts of Brethren here”⁵. For the next decade or so, the *Harbinger* with its British focus was the main source of information for fledgling Churches of Christ in Australia. It was through that prism that the writings of the Campbells became known in Australia⁶. The period from 1855 to 1865 was one of growth in Churches of Christ in Britain (particularly in Scotland through accessions from the Scotch Baptists) and the development of its associational institutions.

Strang was trained against the background of the aforementioned debates and the early optimism about church growth. His association with King left a lasting impression on him, and probably influenced the later directions his ministry took. In a letter to King he wrote:

Your kind and encouraging bearing towards me when a student, your generous hospitality, and the progress I was able to make in fitness for the Master’s service, under your instruction, or supervision, have laid in me a debt of gratitude, which I may have failed in any adequate degree of knowledge but which I have never ceased too feel. Ever since that memorable September 24th, 1866, your life and work have led me to regard you as, as presenting for my imitation, the purest and greatest human examples.....⁷.

Between 1867 and 1874, Strang had ministries at Newcastle-on-Tyne, Carlisle, Liverpool (two years) and Glasgow (three years).



David King, prominent editor in British Churches of Christ - greatly influenced Strang
(source: *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* p.98)

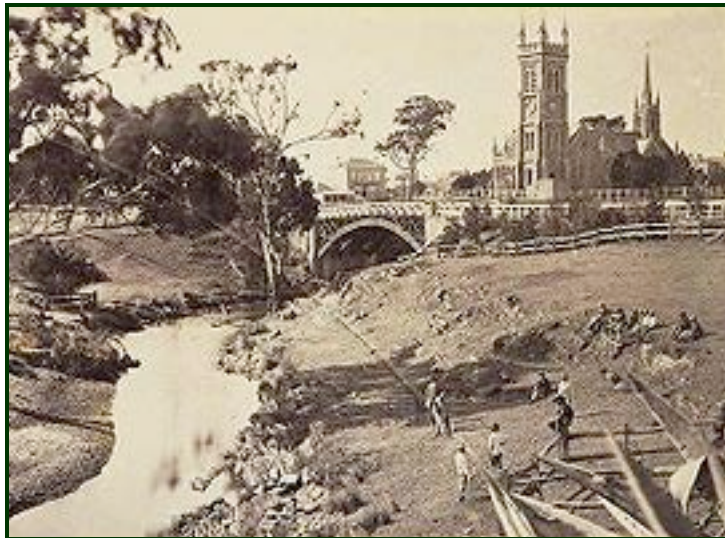
Early Ministry in Australia

In 1874, Strang came to Australia. In this he followed several other notable British evangelists including Matthew Wood Green, S.H. Coles, William Hindle, George Greenwell and Joseph Pittman. T.H. Milner himself briefly visited Australia in 1862 and it may be that Milner's favourable account of this visit inspired Strang to also come to Australia. The influence of the British itinerant preachers on Churches of Christ in Australia was incalculable. The British connection was a natural one with some early members having been members of British churches.

Strang's first appointment in Australia was to the church at Strathalbyn in South Australia. A warm welcome partially compensated him for damage to his library during a rough sea crossing. *The Australian Christian Pioneer* reports his arrival as follows:

On Tuesday evening 22nd inst [September, 1874] tea and public meetings were held here to welcome Bro. John Strang, evangelist, from Glasgow to his new field of labour in Strathalbyn and surrounding districts....About 200 sat down for tea, in the new chapel, which was tastefully decorated for the occasion.....The chairman [T. Magarey] said he could not but look upon Strang's coming...as but a providential answer to their prayers. He had heard of Strang for years; and Bro. Gore who had met him in England had always spoken of him with great respect.⁸

Despite this grand start, Strathalbyn would not have been an easy ministry, having been without an evangelist for several years. Strathalbyn was a developing country area approximately 100 kms south east of Adelaide. During Strang's time it was linked in a circuit with the churches at Point Sturt and Milang. It was thus a widely spread community.



A view of Strathalbyn c. 1869. Shown is the recently opened St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
(now a Uniting Church. Source: Wikipedia)

Strang visited and preached at other churches in South Australia. On 29 March 1875 he attended a meeting at the Grote Street church and participated in the decision to set up the Evangelistic Union of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The object of the union was to mobilise the resources of the stronger churches to help weaker "languishing country churches"⁹. This was one of the first wholly co-operative efforts in South Australia¹⁰ and mirrored co-operative efforts that were emerging in Britain. The development of such

enterprises in Australia distinguished Churches of Christ in Australia from the movement in the U.S.A. which initially eschewed associations which appeared “denominational”.

Strang returned to England in 1876 after spending a little time Melbourne where he had the opportunity of visiting the churches at Hotham (North Melbourne) and Castlemaine. In a letter to the *Ecclesiastical Observer*¹¹ he wrote with some enthusiasm about improvements to his health and the “good work being done in the colonies”. Nevertheless, he sounded a few warnings. He expressed concern that a heavy emphasis on “additions” was leading to an “over sensationalism in preaching” and a failure to enunciate “first principles”. Ominously, in the light of subsequent developments in his career, he observed:

Moreover this feverish desire for additions too often leads churches to estimate the value of the evangelist by the number of baptisms reported, than which nothing could be more false and misleading.¹²

The problem identified by Strang continued into the 20th century. It is a hazard of local church autonomy in evangelical churches. Its corollary is that ambitious preachers might seek ministries in situations where they are likely to be successful in “adding numbers” rather than going into ministry situations where they were most needed.

Return to England

Back in England Strang linked to the Midlands division of Churches of Christ based on Leicester. Between 1876 and 1878 he had ministries in some thirteen churches.

This was not inconsistent with the role of evangelist as currently perceived, but it was a punishing program for man a man of indifferent health. It is perhaps not surprising that he sought to return to Australia.

During this time in England he married Janet Haldane. Janet Haldane’s family background is not known but she may have been related to the brothers Robert Haldane (1764 – 1842) and James Haldane (1768 – 1851). The Haldanes became leaders of a large independent congregation and their theology greatly influenced the young Alexander Campbell in Glasgow. It is noted that Strang’s mentor, Thomas Milner, had once been a member of a “Haldane/Baptist” congregation in Edinburgh which joined Churches of Christ.¹³

Strang in Sydney

Strang and his new wife moved to Sydney in April 1878 and entered into ministry at the Sydney (Elizabeth Street) church. Not long after his arrival he attended a lecture given by the Rev. James Jefferis LLB¹⁴ in the Protestant Hall in nearby Castlereagh Street. Strang was greatly impressed by the lecture which was later published in the magazine of the YMCA under whose auspices it had been given. Strang was prompted to write to the *Australian Christian Pioneer* (one of a number of colonial journals of Churches of Christ in Australia) giving an account of the lecture and his reaction to it.

Strang’s letter contained a long extract from Jefferis’s lecture which opened with the following words:

If I were asked to give the chief causes of the present alienation of the workers from modern Christendom, I would be inclined to attribute to defective modes of worship, to wrong methods of teaching, and above all to a want of genuine spirit of brotherhood which ought to be found in the Christian Church in a higher degree than anywhere on earth¹⁵

By way of elaboration, Jefferis argued that the wearing of vestments, the use of ecclesiastical trappings, theatrical posturings and the like were alien to ordinary people. In the “free” churches there was tendency for them to degenerate into “one man” shows where ministers became the soul mouthpiece of the congregation and preaching was often an elaboration of what the Scripture said more succinctly. There was a failure to educate and develop the talents of the whole congregation and equip it to deal with problems of the modern world. Jefferis’ warnings about defective modes of worship, wrong methods of teaching and the want of a genuine spirit of brotherhood would resonate with many in Churches of Christ today.

Certainly Strang was very impressed. Much of Jefferis’s lecture fitted well with his Restoration Movement aspirations (particularly a belief in the “priesthood of all believers”) but Strang deplored the fact that Churches of Christ were not actually practising their claimed ideals. “We have not risen, as a brotherhood, to a true appreciation of our distinctive principles” he wrote “as a consequence, these they have often been unworthily represented”. His view was that reading and reflection among members should be strongly encouraged to enable members to better address life’s problems (rather than rely on a ministerial mouthpiece) and that the talents and “gifts” of all should be utilised in the furtherance of the gospel [citing 1 Cor.14].

Strang spent five years at the Sydney Church (April 1878 – May 1883), probably the longest ministry of his career in Churches of Christ. This interlude gave him the opportunity to serve as a pastor and a teacher, ministries which seemed to be closest to his heart.

“Never far away when the brethren were busy”

An account by John Lockley Jnr. of a working bee at the Sydney church provides a quaint insight into Strang as a pastor. It seems that during in the 1870’s the Sydney church decided to stop using fermented wine in their weekly communion services. The problem was where to find supplies of fresh grape juice. A source of grapes was located at Fairfield and every year a working bee was held in the Elizabeth Street chapel to squash the grapes, boil the mix, strain off the pith and seed, and bottle sufficient extract to last for the ensuing year. This work was largely done by the women of the church.

In his account of the annual “day of the wine making” Lockley recalls the main participants:

Not many men came to the wine-making...Mrs. Strang and her Maggie would come after the Haleys [previous minister and his wife] went to New Zealand. And I think old John Strang came along during the afternoon and had a look at things through his glasses. He was never far away when the brethren were busy¹⁶

It was hardly fair to call John Strang “old” at that stage - he was barely forty years of age - but with greying hair, glasses perched on the end of his nose and a rather studious disposition, he might have appeared that way to the young Lockley.



The original meeting house of Sydney Church of Christ in Elizabeth Street

(The building was sold in 1895 and converted for other uses. Photo was recently discovered in the City of Sydney archives)

For all his pastoral interest, Strang continued to “do the work of an evangelist”. The surviving records of the Sydney church reveal many baptisms during the five years he was at there. Henry Exley passing through Sydney around 1880 commented that “Sydney is not an easy field....but the church has the good providence of having for its evangelist John Strang....a man loved and esteemed by all who knew him”.¹⁷

Strang’s time in Sydney was arguably the most enjoyable of his ministry with Churches of Christ, providing an opportunity to raise his young family in a settled situation. One of his last acts before leaving Sydney was to perform the wedding of Marcus Clark and Pattie Day at the old Newtown Chapel. Marcus Clark subsequently headed one of Sydney’s largest retail chains. The Newtown Chapel was sold in 1884 and the church relocated to Enmore.

Leadership Roles in Melbourne

In June 1883, Strang moved to Cheltenham church in Victoria. He was the Conference essayist in 1884 when he addressed the subject of “the Fundamental Plea of the Disciples” [of Christ]. The Conference essay was intended to be a “state of the movement” discussion.

In June 1885 he moved to the inner city church of Lygon Street following eminent preachers such as J.J. Haley and G.B. Moysey. Lygon Street, one of the “mother churches” in Victoria, was still basking in the afterglow of the glory years of H.S. Earl when every Sunday night brought forward many “decisions for Christ”.

In 1887, Strang was elected as President of the Victorian Conference, that year held in the Swanston Street chapel. He served again as President in 1888 – held in the nearby Lygon Street Chapel. The office of Conference President was regarded as the highest representational office in the state.

Back to Being a Field Evangelist

In 1888 he returned to being a field evangelist under the auspices of the Victorian Home Missions Department. He continued in that capacity through 1888 to 1892. During that time he served churches at Bairsdale, Wimmera, South Melbourne, Wedderburn, Traralgon, Surrey Hills and Corowa NSW. How he managed to cope with the constant moving, the stress of outreach preaching, and the demanding (and sometimes unrealistic) requirements of local

churches can only be imagined. However he found time to deliver the Conference sermon in 1890 on the subject of “The Law of Development as Seen in the Kingdom of God”. At that Conference, five churches were admitted to Conference, including one in the NSW border town of Corowa.

Events at Corowa NSW

Corowa Church of Christ resulted from the decisions by two local residents to seek baptism (immersion). This followed an intensive study of scripture. There being no immersionist communion locally, the two men decided to travel to Melbourne to be baptized. There was no indication that they had any previous background in Churches of Christ.

The story, related somewhat triumphantly in the *Jubilee Pictorial History*¹⁸ was that when one of the men fell sick and was unable to make the journey, they communicated with F. Illingworth, a leading Churches of Christ layman, in Melbourne. Illingworth arranged for W.D. Little (a Home Missions evangelist) to go to Corowa to receive the duo’s confession of faith and to baptize them. They were baptised in the River Murray on 31 March 1889. Immediately afterwards the Lord’s Table was set up in an unused store belonging to Charles Johnson, one of the new converts. Little stayed for a short time in Corowa and it seems that the numbers grew. In 1890 the new church felt sufficiently confident to apply to the Associated Churches of Christ in Victoria for admission to their Conference.



Christian Tabernacle Corowa NSW (photo: Maston, 1903 p332)

John Strang was appointed as a Home Mission evangelist to the church in 1891. His licence to perform marriages was gazetted in NSW in September that year¹⁹. Charles Johnson subsequently lent money for the purchase of land and the erection of a meeting place (the Christian Tabernacle – see photo). Later the church linked to the Associated Churches of Christ in NSW, the jurisdiction to which Corowa properly belonged. But this was after Strang’s time there. For Strang, his time at Corowa became the catalyst for some long standing concerns.

Petition to the Presbyterian Church of Australia

In March 1892, Strang applied to the Presbytery of Wagga Wagga for admission as a Minister of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. In support of his petition, Strang supplied references and documents from the following:

1. the deacons of the Christian Chapel, Elizabeth Street, Sydney;
2. Cheltenham Victoria Church of Christ;

3. Officers of Lygon Street, Carlton, Church of Christ;
4. Home Missions Committee of the Churches of Christ in Victoria.

The Wagga Wagga Presbytery resolved to recommend Strang's petition to the General Assembly with request that the General Extension Committee provide employment for Mr. Strang until the decision of the Assembly was known.

Strang resigned from his ministry at Corowa and was sent to the Presbyterian Church at Woodburn on the Richmond River in northern NSW. This parish covered a fairly large geographical area and was in a run down condition. His petition came before the General Assembly twelve months later with an enthusiastic endorsement of the Woodburn elders and 164 members and adherents. The General Assembly accepted the petition and exempted Strang from serving the usual (three months) probationary period on the grounds that he had seen serving for nearly twelve months with the (Presbyterian) Church Extension Committee.

Why the Change?

Strang was trained in the heartland of Churches of Christ in England and Scotland and had served two terms as the President of the largest Conference jurisdiction of Churches of Christ in Australia. Based on his editorial work in *The Australian Christian Standard* and his addresses to Conferences and local churches, there can be no doubt about his commitment to the so-called Restoration Movement. So what prompted this change so late in his vocation?

For much of his ministry he had served in pioneering roles in churches which were in crisis, where local support systems were inadequate, and basic fundamental Christian education had not occurred. Teaching in rented halls, baptizing in town waterholes and ministering to start up churches might have seemed apostolic - very Pauline - but it was hard work, and would have been particularly difficult for his wife and family. There was no bishop, no "pastor to pastor" and often, no nearby colleagues to whom he could talk. And Strang was a gentle soul, and not very robust in health.

Ministerial burnout was not recognised as a professional hazard for ministers until the mid 20th century. Strang had been in 20 demanding ministry situations – apart from casual preaching – in as many years. And it was also clear that he was beginning to have serious concerns about some the directions and emphases he could see within Churches of Christ.

In his petition to the Wagga Wagga Presbytery, Strang offered the following explanation for his decision to apply to enter the Presbyterian ministry:

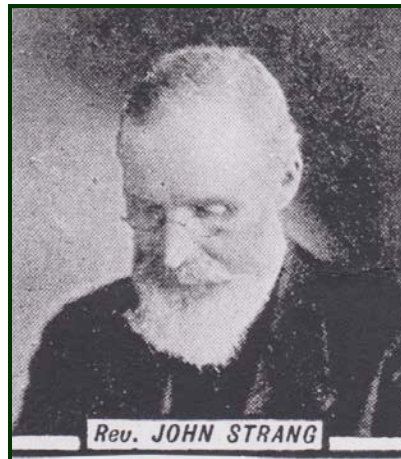
Work among the associated Churches is I regret to say, narrowing down to a sort of baptismal crusade, with the result that too often the people are converted to baptism rather than Christ. With me, the tendency has been to magnify the Saviour more and more as the sinner's only hope. And from rigid views about that, I have come around to the belief that infant baptism rests on a scriptural basis, and is adapted to a means of grace both to parents and children.²⁰

There are echoes here of comments he had made previously about Churches of Christ in Australia

"Magnifying the Saviour" is fully consistent with baptism into Christ, of course, and Strang would have recognised this. However, no Churches of Christ historian today would deny that

there was an element of rigidity in the way the message of salvation was sometimes presented, with immersion stressed as a point of exclusion rather than faith in Christ as a point of inclusion. And the situation at Corowa, where baptism (immersion) stood as the very rationale for the new church's existence would not have helped.

Baptismal regeneration has never officially been advocated by Churches of Christ. And while Churches of Christ today would still insist on the immersion of believers as the normative form of baptism, they would not deny the claims of others who professed their faith in Jesus as Lord and lived according to their profession. Essentially a movement for Christian unity, "Christians only, but not only Christians" has been a dogma within the Restoration Movement since its beginnings.



Reverend John Strang

(photo courtesy of D.Lightfoot, Ferguson Memorial Library. Source unknown)

Later Career

Strang settled in quickly to the more ordered conditions of a Presbyterian pastorate. In support of his petition to the General Assembly, the Woodburn congregation submitted the following:

The Rev. John Strang has now laboured in our midst for the past ten months with great acceptance; that he found the charge greatly disorganised and disheartened, but that through his energy, zeal and Christian tact he gathered the people around him again and has given us hope that that the cause at Woodburn has now entered upon a more healthy course; that his personal qualities have called forth our esteem and love for him as a minister of the gospel....²¹.

Woodburn offered him a pastoral situation in which he could flourish. He continued in this parish until 1902 when it was decided to divide it.

Strang opted to go to the new parish formed around Casino. There he seems to have been taken to heart by the townspeople. Unfortunately he died about two years after the change (May 1904). He was only 63 years of age and left a wife and children. An obituary advice on Strang prepared by the General Purposes Committee for the General Assembly recorded the following:

According to the uniform testimony of those who knew him, he was man of singularly quiet and peaceable disposition. He was a simple minded and modest man. He loved his people and loved his work among them. He was a faithful and able preacher, an affectionate pastor, full of concern for the

spiritual interests of his people and doing his best to guard them evil and to guide them in the way of life. They venerated and loved him for his kindly and generous spirit and the beautiful consistency of his Christian character.

The *Richmond River Times* of 20 May 1904 recorded similar sentiments, referring also to the esteem with which he was held by all the community and the high regard in which he was held by the ministers and members of all churches. *The Times* went on to describe Strang's funeral procession – led by the town band playing the "The Dead March in Saul" followed by family members and a large range of officials, dignitaries and representatives, and about 60 vehicles and 50 horsemen. This was a magnificent response from a relatively small town, and an eloquent testimony to the esteem with which he was felt. Yet, one wonders what the "simple and modest" Strang might have made of it all?

Strang had come a long way from his early beginnings in Scotland. Arguably, the loss to Churches of Christ was the gain of the Presbyterian Church. But the ultimate winner was the Kingdom of God.

"Well done thou and good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21)

Acknowledgement

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References

¹ Watters, ch. 4

² Thompson, p.51.

³ The name at one time given to the confluence groups aiming to restore the unity of church based on the (rather simplified) view they believed was reflected in the Testament. The term has been used occasionally in this monograph to avoid clumsy repetition of "Churches of Christ"

⁴ Thompson, p51

⁵ *ibid* p 56

⁶ When Eliza Davies arrived at the Newtown church in 1857/8 bearing a letter of introduction from Alexander Campbell the members knew little about him. The little church's main source of information had been the spasmodic arrival of copies of the *British Millennial Harbinger*.

⁷ Collin (page unknown).

⁸ Chapman, Vol. II p.303

⁹ Maston, p.69

¹⁰ There had been other limited cooperative efforts—see Maston, p69

¹¹ The new title David King had given to the *British Millennial Harbinger* in 1871. King was never particularly comfortable with the implications of the name *Millennial Harbinger* – see Watters. p80

¹² Chapman, p.303.

¹³ Williams, D. Newell et al., p.96

¹⁴ Jefferis was the progressive and influential minister of the nearby Pitt Street Congregational (now, Uniting Church). See entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* - <http://adb.abu/biography/Jefferis-james-3853>.

¹⁵ Quoted in “A Homily on a Text not Inspired” *Australian Christian Pioneer* 1878 in Chapman p.318 -319

¹⁶ Lockley, John *Memories* “Christian Messenger”, 21/4/1926. Lockley later became President of the then Kuring-gai Shire and later a gardening journalist for *The Sydney Morning Herald*

¹⁷ Coop, T and Exley, H. p150

¹⁸ Maston, p. 332

¹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald* 2/9/1891

²⁰ “Application from the Rev. John Strang to be received as a minister of the church” in Petition to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of NSW, 1893.

²¹ Petition to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW 1893

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