

Sunday, December 23, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 85 Early Mid-Acts Leaders of the 1920s: J.C. O’Hair, Part 1

### **Introduction**

- At the same time that Harry Bultema was coming to understand dispensational truth and battling the Reformed Church, J.C. O’Hair began contending for the unique gospel, apostleship and ministry of the Apostle Paul.
- Mr. O’Hair presents a couple of unique challenges for the aspiring historian. First, aside from a tape recorded personal testimony (1955) and occasional personal accounts spread throughout his writings, much of what we know about Mr. O’Hair has been handed down by others who have written about him. Second, Mr. O’Hair never dated the works that comprise his voluminous writing ministry. This is very unfortunate; one is forced to piece together, on the basis of internal clues, when Pastor O’Hair’s works were written. This makes it very difficult to lay Mr. O’Hair’s writings on the table and read them in their chronological order and evaluate how his thinking changed over time. As a result, the *Grace History Project* was not able to conduct the same analysis with respect to Pastor O’Hair that we conducted for Dr. Bullinger.

### **Who Was J.C. O’Hair?**

- John Cowan O’Hair was born in Little Rock Arkansas, on December 31, 1876 and lived a remarkably full life: football coach, clothing salesman, building contractor, Presbyterian minister, secretary to the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, and pastor of the North Shore Church in Chicago, IL. (Stam, *GTG*. 244)
- “On July 11, 1901, while on furlough from Mexico City where he had been serving as private secretary to the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Mr. O’Hair was married (a marriage which lasted 56 years) to Miss Ethel Anderson, who had previously led him to the Lord.” (Stam, *GTG*. 244)
- “It was in June, 1923 that he received a call to North Shore Church (then Congregational) at the corner of Sheridan Road and Wilson Avenue in Chicago. Accepting the call, he assumed the pastorate of this then pitifully small congregation on July 17, 1923. He served there for more than thirty-four years with great blessing and success.” (Stam, *GTG*. 245)
- “In 1924 the church secured its own radio station . . . The call letters of this station were WPCC: “We Preach Christ Crucified,” and, from that time on, Pastor O’Hair preached the gospel continuously over this and other stations for almost thirty-four years and daily most of that time. All this time, he was also engaged in an extensive written ministry, publishing more than 150 books and booklets. In addition, he served as president of the official boards of both *World Wide Grace Testimony* and *Milwaukee Bible College* from their beginning until shortly before his death, when he became too ill to preside.” (Stam, *GTG*. 245)

- “He was stricken with a serious kidney ailment on July 14, 1956 but continued to preach with amazing energy until early December, 1957. He was in his eighty-second year when he departed this life, his hundreds of thousands of books and his powerful oral ministry having made a tremendous impact upon both the saved and unsaved in this and other countries.” (Stam, *GTG*. 245-246)
- Though not standing with Mr. O’Hair on the subject of Pauline truth, Dr. Louis Talbot offered the following tribute to the Pastor of North Shore Church in September 1953.
  - “My dear friends, when you and I stand before the judgment seat of Christ, that is when the Lord is going to give an estimate of our works, and that was ever before Paul . . . I have journeyed these thousands of miles from California to salute a great man . . . Many of us know him very, very well, and if you ask me to give an explanation of Dr. O’Hair’s great influence and ministry . . . I wish I knew as much about the Word of God as he has forgotten. . . The folks who disagree with him—I want to tell you brother, they respect him. And I respect him as highly as you do. . . I do not know anybody who has been more maligned and more misrepresented than he. . . I think that John O’Hair reminds me more of the Apostle Paul than anyone does.” (Stam, *TCOT*. 250-251)
- According to Mr. O’Hair’s tape recorded testimony and the biographical information in the forward of *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* the following is a listing of some important dates in the life and ministry of J.C. O’Hair not covered in the narrative above.
  - 1916—Ordained by the West Texas presbytery
  - 1917—Madison St. Church in Oak Park (Chicago)
  - 1921—Came to Pacific Garden Mission
  - 1923—Became the Pastor at North Shore Church in Chicago, IL

### O’Hairism

- Of the many books written by J.C. O’Hair is one titled, *The Accuser of the Brethren*, which the *Grace History Project* believes was written in 1945 based upon the internal evidence. One of the functions of *The Accuser of the Brethren* is to answer the charges of “Bullingerite” and heretic leveled at Mr. O’Hair by W.A. Haggai (Pastor of Brookville Baptist Church, Brookville, Mass.) and David Otis Fuller (Pastor of Wealthy St. Baptist Temple, Grand Rapids, MI) in their booklet *O’Harisim! Under the Searchlight of the Word*. In answering what he feels to be unfair characterizations, O’Hair sets forth some of the early history regarding his ministry and the resurgence of Pauline truth.
- According to Pastor O’Hair he had already rejected water baptism for the dispensation of grace when he accepted the pastorate of the North Shore Church in July 1923.
  - “In July 1923, more than twenty-two years ago, I was called to be the pastor of North Shore Church, 1011 Wilson Ave., Chicago. When I was considered at the congregational

meeting, Dr. John C. Page, formerly of Moody Bible Institute, then a member of the North Shore Church, told the members in very plain language that Mr. O’Hair did not believe in, or practice, water baptism. I received the unanimous vote of the congregation, including the vote of Dr. Page. No one has been baptized by me during these years. I have not changed my mind during these twenty-two years. On the contrary, I am more thoroughly convinced than ever before, that what I have believed for more than twenty two years is in harmony with the Word of God rightly divided.” (O’Hair, *Accuser*)

- Later in *The Accuser of the Brethren*, O’Hair informs his readers about how he became convinced that water baptism is not for the church during the dispensation of grace. This conclusion was arrived at during either late 1920 or early 1921 according to the clues left by O’Hair.
  - “More than two years before (1920) I became pastor of North Shore Church (1923) I was teaching the Bible for several weeks in the old Empire Theater in Indianapolis. The work there had been almost wrecked by the Pentecostalists and their fanatical teaching. The pastor asked me if I would give a series of messages on the Book of Acts, the dispensational place of “tongues,” “miracles,” “sign healing,” “visions,” “angelic visitations,” “laying on of hands,” “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” “the sign-gifts” of I Corinthians 12:8 to 11. . . The pastor of the assembly where I was teaching announced that I would speak on the subject, “Why Tongues and Signs and Visions Ceased After Paul Reached Rome.” The Holy Spirit used that message to deliver many of the Pentecostalists, including two of their preachers. One of them the following night said, “Brother, I am completely delivered from that fanaticism; but I was just thinking that the same dispensational explanation you gave for the elimination of these sign miracles would do away with water baptism for the dispensation and age of grace.” At first, I said “I do not agree with you.” But, after I searched and studied the Scriptures diligently and saw that in every chapter in the Bible where water baptism is mentioned there is a Jewish feast, holy day, a miracle, or sign-gift, or healing, or tongues, I came to the conclusion that water baptism stands or falls with “tongues, signs, and visions.” Any intelligent exegesis that rules out one must rule out the other. A few nights later, I stated my conclusion to the congregation where I was teaching. A gentleman came forward and said, “Brother, you believe very much the same that is taught in this pamphlet published by the Moody Bible Institute.” He handed me a pamphlet, entitled “Tongues, Signs; Not God’s Order For Today.” (O’Hair, *Accuser*)
- According to Mr. O’Hair’s testimony in *The Accuser of the Brethren*, after the close of his ministry in Indianapolis, where he came to understand the issue of “one baptism”, he moved on to Grand Rapids, MI where he taught the same thing.
  - “Shortly after I was in Indianapolis I went to Grand Rapids, Mich., and taught there what I taught first in Indianapolis. I made many return trips to Grand Rapids and always taught no water baptism in the dispensation of grace. But never once did I there or anywhere teach anything like the dispensationalism of Dr. E.W. Bullinger. Dr. Fuller and Mr. Haggai knew this when they wrote “O’Hairism” and they know that after I began to

teach in Grand Rapids, I never stepped aside from what I was teaching when they first heard of me. They know that I am teaching today dispensationally what I have taught for many years.” (O’Hair, *Accuser*)

- What this quotation demonstrates, among other things, is that Mr. O’Hair was spreading certain aspects of Pauline dispensational truth (no water baptism for the D.O.G.) far and wide from the earliest days of his ministry even before he took the pastorate at North Shore Church in July 1923. Once O’Hair became the leader at the North Shore Church and the radio broadcast was begun in 1924, even more people became exposed to O’Hair’s brand of dispensational teaching. Moreover, according to the preceding quote, O’Hair states that he had not changed or altered his dispensational teaching with respect to water baptism since the early 1920s when he first went to Grand Rapids to teach. Since *The Accuser of the Brethren* was written in 1945, the words of O’Hair thereby establish the nature and content of his teaching over a time span of twenty plus years. In short, O’Hair’s views, according to his own testimony, were the same in the early 1920s as they were when he wrote *The Accuser of the Brethren* in 1945.
- Those who presume that Mr. O’Hair always taught that the church the body of Christ started with Paul in the middle section of Acts will be disappointed to learn that the real story is much more complicated and complex. For some time during the 1920s, after accepting a no water position on baptism in Indianapolis in 1920, O’Hair still taught that the body of Christ began at Pentecost. At some point during the 1920s O’Hair wrote a pamphlet titled *Unscriptural Cathedrals: Married to Another*. This work contains no publication date, however, it does contain advertisements for other pamphlets that were already in print that offer some clues as to the timing of *Unscriptural Cathedrals*.
- That *Unscriptural Cathedrals* (UC hereafter) was written after 1920 is beyond dispute because within its pages O’Hair has already clearly rejected water baptism for the dispensation of grace. It is also equally clear that he still believed that the church began at Pentecost when UC was written. The quotations below can be found on pages twenty-five and twenty-six of the original pamphlet.
  - “It is rather a serious mistake to confuse the Kingdom message in Acts with truth which relates directly to the Gentile members of the Body of Christ.

**This of course leads us to ask this question: "Just when did the Church, which is His Body, begin?"** Of course, we cannot agree with those who call John the Baptist the founder of the Church of Christ. Others say that the Church did not begin until the close of Acts. Certainly this does not seem to stand the test of Scriptures. Others believe that the Church began after Stephen was stoned in the seventh chapter of Acts. Others believe the Church began with the conversion of Cornelius in the tenth chapter of Acts. But the great majority of dispensational Bible students teach that the Church began at Pentecost. We know that the Body secret was not revealed during the Book of Acts, so far as we have any written record, but that should not be considered evidence that the Church did not exist before that revelation. . .

**Is it possible that the disciples of Christ during the first chapters of the Book of Acts were baptized into the Body of Christ and did not know it? We read in Acts 2:47, "The Lord added daily to the Church such as were being saved." Does this mean, to the Jewish Church organization or to the Body of Christ? One thing we may be sure of, is this; if the believing Jews and the believing Gentiles during the Book of Acts were really one in Christ, fellow-heirs in the same Body, with the same position and privileges, many of the "Jews which believed" did not realize it.**

**I have always believed and taught that the Church began at Pentecost, and while I know with that view there arise many questions and problems; the same is true, if we postpone the beginning of the Body of Christ to the time that Paul reached Rome.** We certainly learn in such chapters as the fifteenth and twenty-first chapters of Acts, and also the second chapter of Galatians, that there was one order for the Jews which believed and another for the Gentiles which believed. Paul recognized those two orders. Where Gentiles were not concerned, he became a Jew and as one under the law of Israel. I Corinthians 9:20 to 25. Acts 16:3. Acts 21:24 to 28. Whether we begin the Church with Pentecost or after the Book of Acts, we must recognize the transition period of signs and miracles, laying-on of hands, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, as outlined in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians, from the time the Twelve asked the question, "wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" to at least the day that Paul said, "the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles." Between these dates, God's order was certainly, "to the Jew first", and the Book of Acts, which is a record of that period, is more than eighty percent Israelitish." (O'Hair, *Unscriptural Cathedrals*, 25-26)

- The mind of O'Hair as reflected in the preceding paragraphs has much in common with standard Acts 2 dispensationalism. For example, he leaves open the possibility that the church began in Acts 2 but that the Apostles were not aware of it. In addition, he clearly states that he has always believed that the church began at Pentecost. Taking these facts into account, it is also important to observe that at this time in his ministry, O'Hair appears to be struggling to maintain his traditional belief that the church began on Pentecost in Acts 2 when he states, "and while I know with that view there arise many questions and problems; the same is true, if we postpone the beginning of the Body of Christ to the time that Paul reached Rome." The *Grace History Project* believes that statements such as these indicate a transition phase in O'Hair's ministry. While still officially holding an Acts 2 position he is aware of "questions and problems" that he cannot answer. Likewise, he sees problems with embracing that view the the church did not begin until the end of Acts. It appears that when *UC* was written that O'Hair had not yet considered the mid-Acts view as a viable option. The fact that he later rejected the belief that the church began on Pentecost is beyond dispute because when he wrote *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* in 1941 he classifies the Acts 2 position as faulty dispensationalism.
- Pinpointing an exact publication date for *UC* is problematic for the reasons listed in the introduction to this lesson. The following is the *Grace History Project's* best educated guess as to when *UC* was written. We have in our possession a pamphlet by O'Hair titled *Salvation: The*

*Elect or Whosoever Which?* which contains the dated notes from a message delivered by Pastor O’Hair at the Grand Rapids City Mission on Friday December 19, 1924. When one considers that this message was delivered late in 1924 it seems reasonable to assume that the notes did not appear in print until at least early 1925. In the back of the pamphlet there is a listing of other booklets and leaflets that were available for purchase. This list included the following: *Dispensational Colored Chart of the Whole Bible, The Christ of Christianity, The Sabbath, Divine Healing, The Second Coming of Jesus Christ, The Christian’s Relation to the Law, The League of Nations, Sanctification, The Program of Jesus, The Impossible Paradox*. Careful readers will note that *UC* does not appear in the listing of available materials as of early 1925. While this evidence is not beyond reasonable doubt, there does appear to be enough circumstantial evidence that as of at least early 1925, O’Hair was still holding an Acts 2 position as to when the church began.

- The *Grace History Project* believes that the 1920s comprised a time of transition for O’Hair and his ministry. Through the decade, he was doctrinally working through the implications of the no water position on baptism which he adopted in Indianapolis in 1920. When one considers that O’Hair was friends with many of the nation’s leading fundamentalists and that outright warfare over the baptism question did not erupt until the 1930s, it appears that during the 1920s O’Hair attempted to maintain many of his relationship with other fundamentalist leaders.
- We would be remiss if we did not thank Dr. Dale Dewitt for his help and assistance in pointing out some of the material contained in this lesson.

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