

Sunday, February 17, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 93 War: the Baptism Controversy of the 1930s

Introduction/Review

- In the previous two lessons we dissected W.A. Haggai's booklet *O'Hairism! Under the Searchlight of the Word* that first appeared in 1930. At the end of Lesson 92 we observed two phenomena: 1) as the 1920s gave way to the 1930s O'Hair appears to have grown more bold in writing about his views on baptism (this can be seen by the publication of *Seven Questions Concerning Water Baptism* and *Buried With Him by Baptism* in 1929/1930; 2) Haggai's attack on "O'Hairism" was largely leveled at O'Hair's position on water baptism and seems to be the first of its kind although it certainly was not the last.
- As the first half of the 1930s unfolded, a wider baptism controversy erupted within Fundamentalism of which J.C. O'Hair, Harry Bultema, and C.R. Stam played a major part. In this lesson we consider some of the aspects of that controversy.

Bultema and O'Hair Break Fellowship with De Haan

- In the 1930s, Bultema's circle of fellowship was widening to include Fundamentalist leaders. At Bible conferences he had come to know Dr. Harry Ironside, the pastor of the great Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, and the controversial J. C. O'Hair of the North Shore Church in Chicago. They shared mutual fellowship in premillenarian views and engaged in a disruptive struggle over the doctrine of baptism. (Boslooper, 67-68)
- According to Thomas Boslooper, "By 1933 Bultema was espousing in Muskegon what O'Hair was preaching in Chicago . . . namely, the doctrine of one baptism which is that there is one true baptism for this age of grace, the baptism of the Holy Spirit." (Boslooper, 68)
- "Harry Bultema, after having baptized a thousand infants, became convinced that not only infant baptism by sprinkling, but also baptism by immersion was unbiblical. Following a historical and linguistic investigation of the biblical texts he was positive that "baptism" never meant "immersion in water." For him "rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15) meant dividing the Scriptures into dispensations and although baptism by immersion was appropriate for the Jewish period of the Kingdom, it is not appropriate for the Age of Grace, the present dispensation. Thus, Bultema instead, like De Haan . . . switching from infant baptism by sprinkling to believer baptism by immersion, went from infant baptism to baptism by the Holy Spirit." (Boslooper, 68)
- "Colloquially "one Baptism" was "dry baptism" and was based on an extension of the dispensational division of Scripture upon which premillennialism was founded. Proponents were called "Drys." According to Bultema, water baptism in any form, was valid for the Jewish Kingdom dispensation whose conclusion came with the close of the ministry of the twelve

apostles. A new dispensation of Grace commenced with the Apostle Paul and, according to Paul, in Bultema's view, there is no baptism but the one baptism, a spiritual baptism." (Boslooper, 68)

- As we saw in Lesson 90, O'Hair's testimony regarding Dr. De Haan differs from Boslooper's. In *The Accuser of the Brethren*, O'Hair states that De Haan knew his position on baptism and agreed with it. O'Hair even goes so far as to state the following regarding De Haan's position on baptism, "He was as dry as I was." (O'Hair, *Accuser*)
- For a time, peace within the camp of the Fundamentals was maintained despite sharp disagreements over the baptism question, according to Boslooper.

"Ironside got along with congregation at Moody Church purportedly by not denying Baptism and with O'Hair and Bultema by not personally baptizing anyone. He left that to his assistants." (Boslooper, 68)

- In Lesson 90 we saw from Bultema's autobiography that he began to have questions about the baptism issue as early as 1925 and that he first taught publically on the subject at the Gull Lake Bible Conference. (Bultema, 132) According to Boslooper, Bultema first preached on the subject of one baptism to his own congregation in 1933. Bultema's own daughter Gloria, born in 1933, was the first child of his ministry not to be baptized as an infant. The espousal of these views with respect to baptism caused many to leave Bultema's church.

"100 families left his church over the issue. Many of these people returned to the Reformed churches, both Christian Reformed and Reformed Church in America, not necessarily because they could not accept Bultema's interpretation of Scripture but because they could not continue to endure the thought of not baptizing their own children." (Boslooper, 69)

- "De Haan broke with Bultema over the issue of baptism. Meanwhile De Haan had his own hands full when on a Sunday while he was away, J. C. O'Hair occupied his pulpit and, by the time De Haan returned, a controversy over baptism had arisen within his board. Until it was resolved the baptistery was covered and baptism temporarily discontinued. . . This conflict, however, was one of the contributing factors to De Haan's difficulties that led to his leaving Calvary Udenominational Church. At one time eleven elders and deacons resigned from the his Board, two of whom were "drys" (Louis Kregel and Chris Sonneveld, Sr.) and nine of whom were "Baptists." De Haan had accused the "drys" of creating a disturbance and splitting the church. From that point on, De Haan was highly critical of J. C. O'Hair and Harry Bultema and called them "hyper-dispensationalists." At one time the chief criterion for becoming a teacher in Calvary Udenominational Church was the disavowal of "hyper-dispensationalism." (Boslooper, 69-70)
- In *The Accuser of the Brethren*, O'Hair disputes the idea that "Bullingerism" or "hyper-dispensationalism" split De Haan's church. O'Hair maintains that "Bullingerism" was not taught in Grand Rapids until after De Haan wrecked his church. To prove his point, O'Hair cites a letter

addressed to Mrs. O. W. Cook from May 21, 1945 from a board member of Calvary Udenominational Church explaining why De Haan was deposed.

“I am not interested in getting into a controversy on the subject of water baptism. I am a member of Calvary Udenominational Church in Grand Rapids, the church of which Dr. De Haan was formerly pastor. I am also a member of the official board, and went through all of the difficulty which Dr. De Haan mentions in his letter. To me water baptism is a minor point, and I can see no need for division because of this doctrine, as it is not essential for salvation.

Calvary Church was organized as an undenominational church, with the matter of baptism left up to the individual member, that is the mode such as sprinkling, pouring, immersion, infant baptism, or no baptism. The constitution of the church made it clear that baptism would never be made an issue, nor would it be compulsory for membership in the church.

I can truthfully say that Rev. J. C. O’Hair is not guilty of preaching baptism from the Calvary Church pulpit, nor had he anything to do with the split in Calvary Church. The difficulty at Calvary Church was internal. It was caused by Dr. De Haan’s inability to work harmoniously with his official board. This led to the resignation of fourteen members of the board who were not in agreement with Dr. De Haan’s policies or conduct. Twelve of these fourteen men were Baptists in belief, and only two believed like Rev. O’Hair, that is, no baptism.

Dr. De Haan then sought a way out of these difficulties, and used these two board members together with a few other members of the congregation who were non-Baptists as scapegoats, blaming them for everything, and ordering them out of the church. Several good Baptists in the church also went out at the same time in sympathy with this minority because of the action of Dr. De Haan. I also left at that time, and did not return to Calvary Church for over two years until Dr. De Haan was deposed.

It is very distasteful to have to rehearse these matters, but I feel it is necessary in all fairness to Rev. J. C. O’Hair. There is absolutely no reason why Rev. J. C. O’Hair’s name should be brought into this controversy, nor should he be accused of instigating this split.” (O’Hair, *Accuser*)

- Once again, according to O’Hair, De Haan preached the same doctrines in Grand Rapids that he had been preaching in Chicago long before the split at Calvary Udenominational Church.

“For a long time before the split in his church, Dr. De Haan preached the same so-called “Bullingeristic” doctrines to his people that I taught, and if such teaching split his church (which was split months before his first member heard any real “Bullingeristic” teaching), Dr. De Haan split it.” (O’Hair, *Accuser*)

- Regarding the *O'Hairism!* booklet written by Haggai and endorsed by David Otis Fuller, O'Hair wrote, "If we had put a baptistery in North Shore Church, these brethren would never have condemned anything I teach, which is quite different from their deliberate falsehoods in their Baptist pamphlet." (O'Hair, *Accuser*)

The Controversy

- *The Controversy* by Pastor C. R. Stam records many aspects of the emerging baptism controversy within Fundamentalism that occurred in the early 1930s. In fact, *The Controversy* is the most complete volume in print for reading about this subject. All those interested in the history of the Grace Movement in the United States should read *The Controversy*.
- According to Pastor Stam, he became the Pastor of what is now Preakness Bible Church in 1930. (Stam, *Memoirs*, 81) In 1932, shortly after accepting the pastorate in Preakness, Stam wrote a booklet titled *Water Baptism, Is It Included in God's Program for This Age?* in an attempt to explain the baptism controversy that was beginning to swirl. (Stam, *Controversy*, 22)
- During the summer of 1933, Stam was scheduled to conduct a week of meetings on the subject of water baptism at Pastor Harry Bultema's church in Muskegon, Michigan. (*Controversy*, 23) Please recall from above that it was in 1933 that Pastor Bultema first publically taught his no water views with respect to baptism in his home church. According to Stam, in June 1933 Dr. Grey Barnhouse of Philadelphia, upset over the fact that Cornelius was going to be speaking at Bultema's church on the subject of baptism, demanded to know 'whether any others among our mutual friends had accepted this "hellish heresy." ' (*Controversy*, 23)
- Chapter Two of *The Controversy* is titled "The Christian Public Should Know", the majority of which was originally printed by Pastor Stam in a booklet in 1939 bearing the same name. The purpose of this chapter is to chronicle the printed exchanges between Dr. Barnhouse and Pastor Stam over the question of water baptism. Stam recounts that in the earlier part of 1933 he had a conversation with Dr. Barnhouse about water baptism that was cut short by unavoidable circumstances. Prior to ending the conversation, Barnhouse promised to write a clear statement about his views on water baptism for the July edition of *Revelation*. (*Controversy*, 29)
- Instead, Stam found an article in the July 1933 issue of *Revelation* – an article titled "Dispensationalism Running Wild," in which Barnhouse linked Stam's views with Bullingerism and advised those who arrange Bible conferences and select speakers to be on guard, and refuse to invite those who hold these false views. (*Controversy*, 29-30)
- Upon reading the article, Stam drafted the following letter addressed to Dr. Barnhouse. The letter is dated July 10, 1933:
 - "It was a shock to me to read your editorial in *Revelation* about "Dispensationalism Running Wild." You say that "Those who arrange Bible conferences and who select special speakers should be on guard, and refuse to invite those who hold these false

views.” One of the “false views” you mention is the belief that water baptism is not for this age.

Would you really want to gag the testimony of men who are fundamentally sound, just because they hold to a view about water baptism? If so, what about the many other sound men who preach and practice water baptism in entirely different modes and for entirely different reasons than you do?

With all the varied views as to this question, I do not see why a fundamental preacher should be refused admittance into a Christian pulpit simply because he has another view—on the grounds that it would cause division. What about the division that already exists? Certainly there is no united testimony as to water baptism now.

It seems to me that in the ranks of those who practice water baptism there is nothing but confusion. It is a question on which many of the greatest Bible teachers of the world are divided. This condition certainly indicates that there is something wrong somewhere. For myself, I have felt for some time; long before I ever knew there was such a man as Bullinger, that water baptism was no more intended for this age, than tongues, or any of the other signs of which we read in the book of Acts.

What seems so illogical and unreasonable to me is that you should advocate shutting the mouths of fundamentally sound men just because they do not agree about water baptism with the hundreds of preachers who cannot even agree with each other!

I am sure that many of the readers of *Revelation* would be very much interested to know whether you really mean what you seem to say in this editorial.

Wishing you the Lord’s richest blessing in your ministry for Him, I am,

Yours in our soon-coming Lord,

Cornelius R. Stam (*Controversy*, 30-31)

- Dr. Barnhouse acknowledged receipt of Stam’s letter and promised an answer by October, 1933 that never came, according to Stam. In May, 1937 Stam wrote a booklet titled, *Water Baptism* that found its way to the desk of Dr. Barnhouse. After reading the booklet, Barnhouse sent a mean spirited letter to Pastor Stam dated Nov. 4, 1937 which stated in part:
 - “My first thought on completing it was that I could understand better Paul’s statement that hands should be laid suddenly on no man, in other words that a novice should not be put into the place of teaching position, for I have seldom read anything that is more replete with false premises and falser conclusions than your leaflet. It is just one more expression of *Bullingerism* that has worked havoc in so many circles and has proved to be satanic in its divisive nature. . .

We quite agree that the one baptism refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit and that Romans 6 is also connected with the Spirit's baptism, but *just as there was one sacrifice which could be represented by the covering of Adam and Eve with skins, by the death of the lamb, by the death of the dove, by the offering up of Isaac and many other ways, so the one baptism of the Holy Spirit can readily be symbolized by the water ceremony no matter how it is performed.*

I pray you most earnestly to withdraw this ill-advised booklet and do not further disturb the weak ones for whom Christ died. In the name of the Lord I tell you, you will be held responsible for such a thing at the judgment seat of Christ.” (*Controversy*, 32-33)

- Time and space will not permit us to recount the lengthy exchange between Dr. Barnhouse and Pastor Stam chronicled in *The Controversy*. Interested parties are encouraged to read *The Controversy* for a more exhaustive treatment. Our goals have been to provide insight in the tenor and timing of the baptism controversy. As the quotation from Barnhouse above proves, the disagreement within Fundamentalism over water baptism was both nasty and personal. It is also important to note that 1933 was an important year in this emerging controversy. This was the year that Bultema went public about views on water baptism which led to his break with De Haan. In addition it was also the year when Dr. Barnhouse and others began their public attacks on O’Hair, Stam, and others.
- In *The Controversy* Stam also offers some insight into what happened to cause De Haan to change his mind. Stam corroborates much of O’Hair’s testimony regarding the beliefs of De Haan in *The Accuser of the Brethren*:
 - “This testimony by Pastor O’Hair as to Dr. De Haan’s former position on baptism was confirmed to me by Dr. De Haan himself when I visited him at his home in 1933. By that time, however, “something had happened,” as Pastor O’Hair puts it in his book.

That something was that several hundred members of a nearby Baptist church had begun attending Calvary Undenominational Church, and Dr. De Haan was beginning to soft-pedal his beliefs as to baptism. Thus, when he spoke to me in 1933, he said, among other things: “you know what I think about water baptism! Yet, sometimes I wonder whether it’s worth fighting about.” I replied that I would rather use the term “fighting for,” since, while I did not believe in going about with a chip on one’s shoulder, I did believe that any doctrine of the Bible is worth fighting for, and should be defended when it is attacked.

Since that time, Dr. De Haan had retreated farther and farther from his former position as to the “one baptism,” until now he has joined one of the Baptist denominations.” (*Controversy*, 68-69)

- In Volume 1 Number 5 (July, 1940) of *The Berean Searchlight*, Pastor Stam reports to his readers that his father Peter Stam died on Monday, June 10, 1940. In the next issue (Vol. 1 N. 6, Aug.,

1940) Cornelius seeks to disprove rumors that were circulating that his father died of a broken heart from his son's beliefs about water baptism.

- “Rumors have been widely circulated that the death of Mr. Peter Stam was caused largely by our views as to water baptism. A considerable number of our friends have been assured that he grieved over the stand we have taken, and that his grief ultimately resulted in his death. Unhappily, this impression had even been given from the pulpit.

It is hard to understand how anyone could be mean enough to oppose the truth by such methods, but the Father of lies is always busy. The much is evident: Those who stoop to use such carnal weapons must not have clear Scriptural arguments to present.

As to my father's position, it must be remembered that he was called of God as an evangelist, not a Bible teacher. He was the superintendant of a city mission, not the pastor of a church. But let no one think that he did not stand with us in these truths or that he sought in any way to hide his stand. As early as 1933, father wrote to a New York friend, *“For years I have studied the subject of water baptism and have come to the conclusion that it was no more intended for this age than tongues, miracles or any other signs. I realize that the practice of water baptism is old, but so is the confusion it has brought, and though the . . . has observed it without change over the period of history, if it is not in harmony with God's Word and program it should be dropped however embarrassing it may be.”*

To another friend he wrote, *“With all the various views on water baptism; all of them totally different from each other, I do not see why we should be considered unsound just because we do not agree with any of them. Certainly there is no unity at all among our fundamentalist brethren on this question. In fact it is the one great ritual that separates them. . .*

We sincerely hope that those who have helped to spread false rumors will ask God for forgiveness and seek to correct the impressions made.” (Stam, *TBS*, 8)

- Both Stam and O'Hair constantly express frustration over why their view cannot and will not be tolerated while the rest of the fundamentalists cannot not even agree amongst themselves about water baptism.

Much, Little, No Water

- On March 6, 1933 J.C. O'Hair addressed the President and Secretary of Illinois Christian Fundamentals Ministries' Association concerning the baptism question in letter titled Much Water—Little Water—No Water. In the introduction O'Hair states the following:
 - “I understand that there is to be a discussion of water baptism during the next regular monthly business meeting of the members of this Association. This is a much discussed

subject. May I request that the propositions that I am submitting in this letter to the members of this Association be given due consideration and that ample time be allowed for a full discussion of them. If sufficient time cannot be devoted to this discussion at the regular monthly meeting, which I understand is to be held at the Moody Church, Monday morning, March 12th, at 11 o'clock, could we not set a time for the discussion, and permit those to hear the discussion who are interested in the subject? May I expect the courtesy of ample time to present my view at the March 13th meeting? Trust that we may see the hand of the Lord in this discussion which you have arranged and the He may be glorified in the outcome of a Spirit-led meeting on the basis of the Scriptures only." (O'Hair, *Much, Little, No Water*, 1)

- In this dated letter from 1933, O'Hair is still very unclear about when the church the body of Christ began. He questions the traditional belief that the church began in Acts 2 but does not offer and definite alternatives.
 - "Were not all the apostles baptized before Christ said, "upon this rock I will build my church?" Were they not saved several years before they became members of the Body of Christ, if they became members of that Body on the day of Pentecost? According to I Corinthians 12:13, they became members of some body." (O'Hair, *Much, Little, No Water*, 9)
 - "I am quite sure that most of us, who claim to be Dispensational Fundamentalists, realize that there was a transition period beginning with the Day of Pentecost, whether we believe that Gods' dealing with the Nation Israel were suddenly cut off with the message of Stephen, recorded in the seventh chapter of Acts, or that the withdrawal of God's Kingdom offer to that people was gradual and not terminated until the close of the Book of Acts.

But we ask the question, what right has any one to say that we are living in the dispensation that began at the Day of Pentecost, and then qualify that statement by saying we should not observe the order of the second chapter of Acts or the eighty chapter of Acts, but go on to the tenth chapter of acts, and forbid some other Christian to carry that progress, by the same principle, on the close of the Book?" (O'Hair, *Much, Little, No Water*, 17)

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