

## J. C. O'Hair—Leader Among Leaders

by Timothy F. Conklin

J. C. O'Hair was pastor of North Shore Church in Chicago for many years. He was a key person in the founding of several Grace organizations and a leader of major importance in the early days of the Grace movement in North America. Many consider him to have been the foremost champion of the Grace message in his era. This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of his going home to be with the Lord.

John Cowan O'Hair was born of Irish parentage on December 31, 1876 in Little Rock, Arkansas, the third of twelve children (six boys and six girls), and raised as a Roman Catholic. The family lived in the same house on the corner of Fourth and Izzard Streets for over thirty years. John went through high school and business college in Little Rock and found his first employment there.

Trained as an accountant, he went to work in a law firm at the age of nineteen. About a year later he took employment with an insurance company in the same city. One of the partners from the law firm he had left, who was also a neighbor and a good friend, moved to Louisiana and about two years later invited O'Hair to consider a job

down there in the lumber industry.

Just before his twenty-second birthday he moved to Monroe, Louisiana to take a job in the lumber business. A few months later the company he was with went out of business because of the economic depression facing the nation. One of the officers in that company recommended O'Hair to a job in Kansas City, Missouri. He moved there and went to work for Daily Drivers Telegram. Mr. George Neff was the head of that enterprise and later became mayor of Kansas City.

This job, too, was not long lived. Not many months later he received an invitation from a friend back in Louisiana to re-enter the lumber business. He returned and went to work as an auditor for Central Coke and Coal Company at a large lumber mill located in a small settlement about 130 miles south of Shreveport between Leesville and DeRidder near the Anacoco River.

By his own testimony at this time, "I was an ungodly, ruined, immoral sinner and living in sin." About eight months later he met Ethel, the daughter of the superintendent of logging and railroad affairs, who was later to become his

wife. O'Hair had just relocated to a new boarding house and on the first day, while waiting impatiently for dinner, the proprietor told him to sit down, be calm, and perhaps read something. He asked what he should read, and she said, "Read this book, the Bible." The matron then handed him a Bible opened to the story of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego.

"As I look back, though I was nearly twenty-three years of age, I could not have quoted one single verse in the Bible. But I read that story and I came back the next day and read about Daniel in the lion's den. Then I asked her if I could borrow the Bible and take it over to my room." She told him if he was interested in these stories he should come to Sunday School next Sunday. As a further incentive for him to come, she offered to introduce him to a nice young lady. She explained that the preacher was teaching a series of lessons from the book of Daniel. "I'll never forget him with his piercing eyes, his gray hair, his long beard... he was a man of God with a real message."

On that Sunday O'Hair went to

the Anacoco River with a friend. "I was on the largest mule we had in the mule yard, he was about seventeen and one-half hands high, and I had a six shooter. We went out to the Anacoco River to shoot alligators and get some wild magnolias. And we accomplished our mission...Then when we went back home, this young lady to whom I was to be introduced was standing at the gate. The man that was with me said, 'Come over here and I'll introduce you to a lady.' He introduced me and I gave her a couple of the magnolias."

A few weeks later J. C. heard this young lady sing and give her testimony in a service. He was then attending church and reading the Bible regularly. "One night while I was reading the Bible I got under deep conviction." At midnight, just before his twenty-third birthday and literally at the beginning of the twentieth century in the close of 1899, J. C. O'Hair accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Savior in the solitude of his own room in an out-of-the-way small town Louisiana boarding house.

He continued working for the lumber company but was sorely persecuted for his new-found faith by his former rowdy companions. When a friend invited him to go to Mexico City, Mexico, he went to visit the friend in the Muskegon-Grand Rapids, Michigan area to talk about the trip. O'Hair did go to Mexico, first for a few months in Monterey, and then to Mexico City as originally planned.

"When I got to Mexico City I was in business, but I found out that the United States Ambassador there was a very warm, personal friend of my father. When I went to call on him he said, 'How would you like to be my private stenographer?' So I went to work as the private secretary of the United States Ambassador to Mexico."

After about a year in this prestigious position, O'Hair took leave and went to Kansas City, Missouri where his sweetheart had relocated. On July 11, 1901 he married his beloved Ethel. "When I arrived in Kansas City, we decided not to go back to Mexico, but we went down to Hornbeck, Louisiana, about sixteen miles north of Leesville" Their first child,

Robert, was born in August, 1902. Kathleen, the second child, was born in 1904 after the family had moved to St. Louis where J. C. pursued his career in the lumber/housing development business. In time, a total of six children were born to J. C. and Ethel.

In 1905, when J. C. was twenty-nine, he was making \$600 a month and doing quite well. That year his father died and left his mother, an older invalid brother, two younger brothers, and four sisters. "For awhile I was the only bread-winner in the family and God wonderfully took care of us."

The next few years saw moves to Sedalia, St. Louis, and St. Joseph, all in Missouri. On July 2, 1911, J.C. moved his family to San Antonio, Texas. Each move was connected to his housing development enterprises. After a while he became a lay preacher for the Presbytery of West Texas and in 1916 he was ordained at Lockhart by this Presbytery.

J. C. held many street meetings and developed a special burden for the great crowds of servicemen stationed in the area. He would preach in front of the Alamo and then load his Stephens-Duryea car with soldiers who had responded to the invitation and take them to the local servicemen's center to deal with them further. Many soldiers were saved through this ministry.

He became more and more active as an evangelist and less and less active in business. "Then I finally decided, like Matthew, I'd leave all to follow the Lord, and I closed up my business." At the time he had about six houses under construction



and owed about thirty thousand dollars. A wealthy Jewish business associate offered to buy him out and he sold his interests at a handsome profit, which allowed him to go into full-time Christian service.

A Jewish-Christian evangelist who heard O'Hair preach in Texas was from the Chicago area. When he went home he spoke to others about O'Hair's work. This resulted in an invitation to consider being the superintendent of men at Moody Bible Institute, but because of his young family that position was not workable. However, these contacts brought another invitation which was more meaningful. Madison Street Church of Oak Park, a Chicago suburb, invited him to come and hold fifteen nights of evangelistic meetings, which he did. After this evangelistic campaign, the church asked O'Hair to become their pastor. He accepted this pastoral call with the understanding that he would still have liberty to occasionally be away to conduct evangelistic endeavors.

In the closing months of 1917, after seventeen years in business, all but one in the lumber/housing development industry, O'Hair entered full-time Christian work. He did this at a considerable reduction in income and with a wife and five children to support. "Some of my acquaintances called me a fool."

Because of his evangelistic concerns, he was introduced to Mel Trotter in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mel Trotter was a leading rescue mission evangelist and arranged for O'Hair to hold meetings at various missions around the country. J. C. made this circuit for some three years. In 1920 he was asked to speak at a branch of Pacific Garden Mission in North Shore Congregational Church in Chicago. He was asked again in 1921 and 1922. In June of 1923, while holding meetings in a Presbyterian church in Long Island, New York, he received a telegram asking him to become the pastor of North Shore Congregational Church. He accepted this pastoral call on the 17th of July; he was now forty-six years of age.

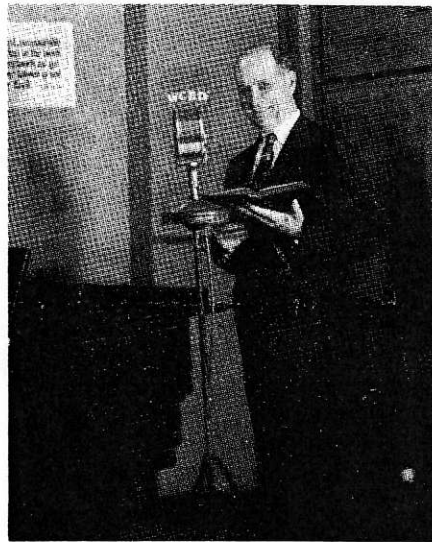
Some three years prior to his call to North Shore, he was involved in an extended evangelistic campaign based in The Gospel Center, on the



corner of Grand and Finney in St. Louis. He had temporarily gone to Indianapolis for some meetings with Jim Nipper at the Empire Theater. At the request of Jim, because of a large number of Pentecostals attending the meetings, O'Hair preached a sermon entitled "Three Reasons Why Tongues Ceased When Paul Reached Rome." The next night a Pentecostal preacher came to O'Hair and told him his message was unanswerable and he was therefore giving up tongues. He went on to say, however, his own serious contemplations about this problem had led him to conclude that the same unassailable arguments against tongues proved that water baptism was also no longer valid. He challenged O'Hair to openly and honestly consider this claim.

O'Hair went back to his room in the Washington Hotel and studied diligently until 2:00 A.M. He finally realized, "That man is absolutely right." In the providence of God, at those same meetings another man gave O'Hair a book which he said taught similar doctrine and was endorsed by C. I. Scofield, "Signs and Tongues and Visions Not God's Order for Today," by A. E. Bishop, a former missionary to Central America.

The leading of the Lord through O'Hair's diligent Bible study had brought him to see the unique truth of the Body of Christ, as distinct from the nation of Israel, which God revealed to the apostle Paul. For some thirty-five years as pastor of North Shore Church (because of doctrinal convictions, the church changed its name to North Shore Church on January 9, 1929) he was a champion of this dispensational teaching. Not only did he preach this message in his own pulpit, he was actively involved in conferences and speaking engagements across the United States. Many nationally known pulpiteers spoke at North Shore as well, such as William R. Newell, Arno C. Gaebelein, G. Campbell Morgan, Harry Bultema, and Louis Talbot. Furthermore, he published over 200 booklets and over a dozen illustrative charts which featured the distinctive dispensational truth of the church age.



One year after he became pastor of North Shore Church, until his death on January 14, 1958, O'Hair had a very fruitful radio ministry. In 1924 the church installed its own broadcasting station, WDBY (which some were fond of saying meant We Delight in Bothering You). Since the station was in a highly populated area, added to the fact that receiving sets in those days were not very selective, listeners nearby could hear the signal across most of the dial. In 1929 Charles F. Baker joined the church staff as engineer of the station (now known as WPCC—We Preach Christ Crucified) and was in the process of building a more up-to-date transmitter when litigation by another station resulted in the cancellation of the government license, based upon a quota system which Congress had recently established. After 1932 Pastor O'Hair broadcast his Bible messages over several Chicago area stations, including WMBI, Moody Bible Institute; WCBD, Zion, IL; WAIT; WGES; and at the time of his death, WLS, the powerful 50,000 watt station, with Bill Pearce as his announcer and musician.

Pastor O'Hair often said that four Jews significantly affected the course of his life. The first was one who invited him to Louisiana to work. Had it not been for this Jew, he would not have met the one who was to be his life-long companion in marriage, and he would not have been saved at the time and in the way he was saved. The second Jew was the wealthy one in Texas who bought out his construction busi-

ness and freed him to go into full-time Christian work. The third Jew was Joe Flacks, who happened to hear him preach in front of the Alamo and invited him to come to Chicago where he was to enjoy such a fruitful ministry. The fourth Jew to influence O'Hair was the apostle Paul, who meant so much to him, but, he sometimes said, also got him into a lot of trouble, referring to all of the opposition and persecution he received for standing for the unique Pauline revelation of the dispensation of the Mystery.

"I do believe that the message of the dispensation of the grace of God and the dispensation of the Mystery, which are identical, the distinctive ministry which the Lord gave to and through the apostle Paul, is the greatest need of this age today. It is God's answer to every ism and ill with which the church of Jesus Christ is afflicted."

Pastor O'Hair was instrumental in founding World Wide Grace Testimony (now Grace Ministries International), and played an important role in establishing Grace Gospel Fellowship and Milwaukee Bible Institute (now Grace Bible College, Grand Rapids, Michigan). He was a model and a motivation for many people who then were and to this day are ministers of dispensational truth and the gospel of the grace of God.

At his funeral, conducted by Charles F. Baker and Cornelius R. Stam, North Shore Church was packed, not only with hundreds of those who had been blessed through his ministry, but also there were in attendance a number of ministers who had bitterly opposed his Pauline dispensationalism, now showing their respect for a great man of God who had been true to his convictions about the inspired Word of God. We would do well to remember with thanksgiving this great leader in the Grace movement on this the thirtieth anniversary of his homegoing.

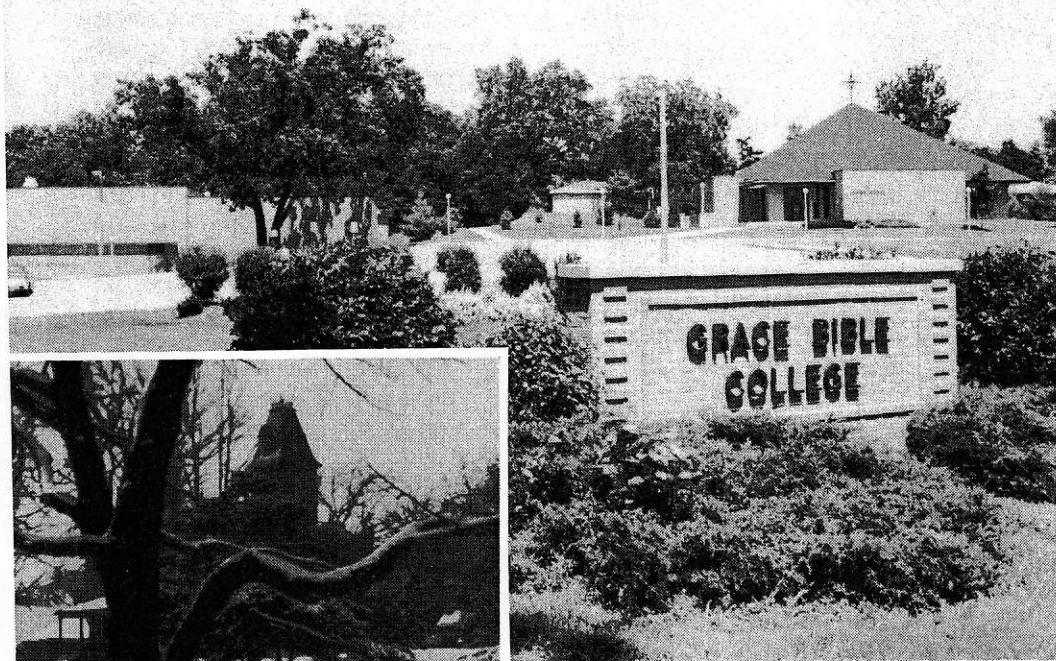


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# Grace Bible College

Dr. Samuel R. Vinton, Jr.,  
President



## Honor To Whom Honor

by Charles F. Baker

“Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear: honor to whom honor” (Romans 13:7).

As a Christian Bible college we feel it is fitting to honor the late Pastor J.C. O’Hair on this the thirtieth anniversary of his departure to be with Christ. In many ways Mr. O’Hair was instrumental in the founding of our college.

Just when was Grace Bible College begun? Was it 1961 when the school was moved to Grand Rapids and its name was changed to Grace Bible College? Was it 1945 when the newly organized Grace Gospel Fellowship decided to upgrade and support the already existing evening school known as Milwaukee Bible Institute? Was it 1939 when the pastor of Fundamental Bible Church developed a curriculum and originated the evening Bible institute? Or was it 1925 when Mr. T. R. Huston, who had previously founded Wisconsin

Fundamental Bible Conference Association, invited Pastor J. C. O’Hair of Chicago to become the teacher of the weekly Fundamental Bible Class in Milwaukee?

It is my opinion that the ultimate credit and honor for the beginning of Grace Bible College goes back to at least 1925 and belongs to two men. Humanly speaking there would be no Grace Bible College today as we know it if Mr. Huston had not invited Pastor O’Hair to become teacher of that weekly Bible class. Mr. O’Hair faithfully taught that class every week from 1925 to 1932 when he recommended to members of the class who wanted to form a “Grace” church that they call me to be their pastor. After the transition had been made and the church had been founded, I continued the weekly Bible studies which Pastor O’Hair had taught. As far as I know, Mr. O’Hair came to Milwaukee for the class every Thanksgiving from 1925 until the year

before his death in 1958.

Back in the early days of the Grace movement we didn’t have to elect someone to be our leader: everyone simply recognized that Pastor O’Hair was the leader. He was the one who had called and planned the Bible conferences which were held from time to time. We never felt that he pushed himself into prominence; rather he pushed us younger fellows into places and opportunities of service. We had our personality and doctrinal problems, but J.C. was a true ambassador of reconciliation. He kept us on an even keel, but never compromised on biblical principles.

Pastor O’Hair was responsible for creating the first organization in our Grace movement, Worldwide Grace Testimony, in 1939, which has now evolved into Grace Ministries International. While Grace Gospel Fellowship was the brain-child of Pastor Herman Reich in 1944, Pastor O’Hair did not serve on its board, since he chaired the boards of both the school and the mission.

In the controversies within fundamentalism, especially during the 30s and 40s, over water baptism and dispensational theology, Mr. O’Hair bore the brunt of the unfair and often untrue charges and criticisms. I would not think of comparing him with the apostle Paul at Jerusalem in Galatians 2, but if he had not been bold and stood steadfast during those days, as Paul did in Jerusalem, it is doubtful that today there would be any organized testimony to the Pauline revelation of the grace of God.

In Romans 13 Paul tells us to pay our debt—to owe no man anything. I think we Grace people owe a debt of gratitude to John C. O’Hair. Let us pay honor to him and to those who deserve such honor for maintaining our scriptural and spiritual heritage.