Oral Roberts: Son of Pentecostalism, Father of the Charismatic Movement

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Abstract

Oral Roberts was one of the most important religious figures of the twentieth century. He was born and raised in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, hence, a “son” of the Pentecostal movement. He first became famous as a Pentecostal preacher who conducted large healing crusades under his huge tent. By the 1960s, he became the best known Pentecostal in the world, founding Oral Roberts University in 1965. In the last part of his life, Roberts became a father of the charismatic movement in the mainline churches through his television ministry. For nineteen years, Roberts was a member of the United Methodist Church and helped lead the charismatic movement in the denomination. In his last years, he and his university strongly identified with the charismatic movement. Thus, the title, “Oral Roberts: Son of Pentecostalism, Father of the Charismatic Movement.”

Introduction

Oral Roberts was a Pentecostal pastor from Oklahoma who gained fame as a healing evangelist, television personality, and educator. Roberts not only founded Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but in his lifetime served as a leader in the burgeoning
world Pentecostal movement and later as a founding father of the charismatic movement. In the late 1940s, Roberts emerged from the Pentecostal subculture in Oklahoma to become one of the most acclaimed and influential religious figures of the twentieth century. In his long life of ninety-one years, he served as a Pentecostal pastor, a healing tent evangelist, a television pioneer, and the founder of a major university named after himself. He brought Pentecostal healing evangelism to the attention of the American public through his televised healing crusades, his many books and magazines, and, in his later years, through his prime-time programs on national television.¹

Oral Roberts was born into a movement that was persecuted, denounced, and ridiculed by the public and rejected by the mainline churches. According to David Barrett, the lowly Pentecostals were “more harassed, persecuted, suffering, martyred than perhaps any other Christian tradition in recent history.”² As a young man, Roberts felt the sting of this rejection but rose above it all during his amazing life and ministry. In school, he and his brother were often called “Holy Rollers,” a term he resented. He also had a severe problem with stuttering. As a child, he was derided by his school mates when he could not get out the words he wanted to say. Despite all of this, it was Roberts who, above all others, turned the tide and brought Pentecostals into the accepted mainstream of American society.³

Roberts grew up in the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Many Okies, as they were called, decided to move to California to escape the poverty they faced in Oklahoma. The most famous migrants from Oklahoma to California were the Tatham family from Sallisaw, Oklahoma. Members of a Pentecostal Holiness Church, the family was immortalized as the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s great American novel, Grapes of Wrath. In the novel, Grandma spoke in tongues. After arriving in California, the family worked in migrant camps, but later went on to find prosperity in Sacramento.⁴

The Roberts family did not follow the tempting trail to California, but suffered through the dark days of the Great Depression in Oklahoma. His father, Rev. Ellis Roberts, made a scant living through farming and pastoring local Pentecostal Holiness churches in the area of Ada, Oklahoma. Besides, he also held revivals in other Pentecostal
Oral Roberts never forgot the grinding poverty of his childhood.

**Oral Roberts: A Son of Pentecostalism**

Oral Roberts (born on January 24, 1918; died on December 15, 2009) was born Oral Granville Roberts in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma, the fifth and youngest child of the Reverend Ellis Melvin Roberts and Claudius Priscilla Roberts (nee Irwin). Both parents were ministers of the Pentecostal Holiness Church and members of the East Oklahoma Conference. He was raised in a Pentecostal church typical of the time and place.

The Pentecostal Holiness Church in which Oral Roberts was born and raised was formed out of the Holiness movement that flourished in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The denomination was the result of a merger of two Holiness/Pentecostal churches in 1911 in Falcon, North Carolina. They were the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church and the Pentecostal Holiness Church. The Fire-Baptized Holiness Church was founded by Benjamin Hardin Irwin in 1896 in Iowa. Irwin was a dynamic healing evangelist who taught a “third blessing” (after salvation and sanctification) which he called the “baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire” or simply “the fire.” The national church was organized in 1898 in Anderson, South Carolina, with both blacks and women serving as “Ruling Elders.” The Pentecostal Holiness Church was pioneered by the Methodist evangelist Abner B. Crumpler, who emphasized the second blessing of “entire sanctification” as taught by John Wesley.

Both churches accepted the Pentecostal baptism in the Holy Spirit as a third blessing and became Pentecostal after being influenced by the Azusa Street revival under the black pastor William J. Seymour. A member of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, Gaston B. Cashwell, brought Pentecost to both churches in 1907, after traveling to the Azusa Street Mission in 1906 and speaking in tongues. All the churches in Oklahoma were originally part of the Fire-Baptized Holiness section of the church.
Oral was raised in abject poverty. On his mother's side, he was descended from the Cherokee Indians and was proud of his Indian heritage in Oklahoma. In high school, Roberts played basketball on his Ada, Oklahoma, high school team and for a short time joined a local Methodist church with his teammates. In 1935 at seventeen years of age, however, he contracted tuberculosis and was bedridden for five months. Some of his family feared that he might never recover. Yet in his darkest hour of despair, Roberts heard a voice telling him about his future: "Son, I am going to heal you and you are to take my healing power to your generation. You are to build me a university and build it on My authority and the Holy Spirit." He was suddenly healed, however, after his parents and his older brother, Elmer, took him to a tent revival. When the evangelist, George W. Moncey, laid hands on him and prayed a healing prayer, he was instantly healed, although it took months for him to totally recover. Roberts soon preached his first sermon and returned to the Pentecostal Holiness Church, where he was ordained in 1936.

In 1938, he married Evelyn Lutman Fahnstock, the daughter of a Pentecostal Holiness minister, a marriage that lasted until her death in 2005. To this marriage was born two sons and two daughters: Ronald, Richard, Rebecca, and Roberta. The Roberts' suffered great tragedy at the early death of Rebecca in an airplane crash and of Ronald, who fell into drug addiction and later committed suicide.

A young man with limitless drive and ambition, from 1941 to 1947, Roberts pastored local Pentecostal Holiness Churches in Enid and Shawnee, Oklahoma, Toccoa, Georgia, and one independent church in Fuqua Springs, North Carolina. In Toccoa, he experienced his first striking miracle of healing when a deacon in his church, Clyde Lawson, was instantly healed after a falling motor had crushed his foot. When Roberts laid hands on his foot and prayed, the man was instantly healed. At this time, he also was becoming one of the most important young ministers in the Pentecostal Holiness Church. With his rising influence, he was elected as a delegate from East Oklahoma to the General Conferences of 1941 and 1945, the highest governing body of the church. He was looked on as a very loyal son of the church with a bright future in the denomination.
After returning to Oklahoma in 1942, Roberts attended Oklahoma Baptist University and Phillips University, studying for two years in each school. He never earned a degree, however, since he soon became a traveling evangelist holding revivals in many parts of the nation. In 1947, while pastoring Enid Pentecostal Holiness Church, he felt the call to become a full-time healing evangelist after visiting the meetings of William Branham, whom he admired. His first city-wide crusade was also in 1947, a healing service held in the civic auditorium of his hometown of Enid, attended by 1,200 people. From there, he purchased a tent seating 3,000 persons and began his meteoric rise to prominence in American religious life. The same year he published his first book on healing, If You Need Healing Do These Things. He then went to the radio airwaves with a national radio broadcast. He also soon started his own monthly magazine Healing Waters.13

In one of his earliest tent meetings in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in June 1947, a sniper fired a shot at Roberts that whizzed by just above his head. When the Tulsa press found out about it, stories were written about the incident that appeared in newspapers all over the United States. Overnight, Oral Roberts became a nationally recognized figure. Because of his increasing fame, Roberts was invited by J. A. Culbreth to preach in the famous Falcon camp meeting in 1948. The
other invitation was from Joseph A. Synan, who later served as the presiding bishop of the Pentecostal Holiness Church. His healing crusades became so successful that he soon bought another much larger tent seating 12,500 people, which he filled to overflowing. He called it his “tent Cathedral.” As the crowds continued to grow, he soon was attracting crowds that rivaled those of Billy Graham, the famous Baptist evangelist. Like Graham, Roberts refused to segregate his crowds on the basis of race. Blacks could sit anywhere in his tent, a striking exception to the Jim Crow segregation practiced in the South at the time.

Most of his followers were fellow Pentecostals who packed his tents and sent huge offerings to support his ministry. Several Pentecostal Holiness members helped Roberts in his early ministry. They were O. E. Sproull, who served as his first Master of Ceremonies for the tent crusades; Collins Steele, who oversaw the moving and setup of the huge tent; Lee Braxton, who helped him organize his radio and television ministries; and Oscar Moore, who helped run the huge Tulsa office. Other prominent Pentecostals from many churches helped in Roberts’ tent ministry. Two of them were Bob DeWeese from the Open Bible Church, who assisted him in the healing lines, and Vep Ellis, from the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), who led music and wrote many songs for the Roberts ministry.

In 1951, Roberts helped Demos Shakarian found the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGBMFI), which, in time, attracted millions of men to their monthly meetings, held mostly in hotels. Roberts’ ministry skyrocketed in 1955 when he went on national television, attracting a huge audience across the nation. Americans saw Roberts lay hands on thousands of the sick who stood in lines waiting for his healing touch. Many claimed to be healed. Part of Robert’s attraction was his dynamic preaching and positive message which emphasized salvation, sanctification, baptism in the Holy Spirit with tongues as initial evidence, the second coming, divine healing, prosperity, and “seed faith” for finances. During his healing ministry, Roberts conducted some 300 crusades in America and around the world. He claimed to have personally laid hands on over two million people. Many historians credit Roberts with playing a major role in
the beginning of the charismatic movement in the mainline churches because of his riveting television specials. Many of his critics called Roberts a “faith healer,” a term which he hotly denied. He said that Jesus did the healing and not Roberts himself.\textsuperscript{16}

Because of his burgeoning ministry, in 1950 Roberts built a modern multistoried headquarters building in Tulsa that became his center of operations. From here, millions of books, tracts, articles, and magazines flowed out to his dedicated followers. He also inaugurated a weekly Sunday morning television program that for thirty years was the number one rated religious program in the nation. In 1956, he began publishing \textit{Abundant Life Magazine}, which, at its height, went to some two million subscribers. In a 1980 Gallup Poll, Roberts’ name was known to 84\% of the America public. He became the most prominent Pentecostal in the world. In the decade of the 1980s, he published a daily devotional magazine called \textit{Daily Blessing} that went to a quarter of a million subscribers. In addition to this, the 88 books that he wrote sold some fifteen million copies.\textsuperscript{17}
With this notoriety, Roberts embarked on one of his most ambitious projects, the founding of a liberal arts university. Beginning in 1962, he financed and built one of the most futuristic campuses in the world, naming it Oral Roberts University. In 1960, Roberts had penned a vision for the new university: “Raise up your students to hear my voice, to go where my light is dim, where my voice is heard small, and my healing power is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased.”

When classes began in 1965, the university was an undergraduate school with one graduate component, the School of Theology. After a few years, the student body grew to over 5,000 in several undergraduate and graduate schools. These included schools of Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry, Law, Business, Education, and Theology. Although teachers and administrators came from diverse church backgrounds, many of the core leaders were from the Pentecostal Holiness Church. Some of these scholars who helped in the early years of ORU were Dr. Raymond O. Corvin, who served as the Chancellor in the beginning and also the first dean of the School of Theology; Dr. Carl Hamilton, who led the university to full accreditation; Dr. Harold Paul, a history professor; and Dr. Paul Chappell, who later led the School of Theology for many years. Other important scholars came from the Assemblies of God, the Church of God, and other Pentecostal denominations.

As time went on and the university began to grow, Roberts became uncomfortable with his identity as a Pentecostal. Of necessity, he was forced to hire professors for his university who came from mainline churches, because there were few Pentecostals with Ph.D. degrees and with administrative experience on the graduate level. Also, records showed that his donor base showed growing income from mainline donors. In fact the largest donor base was from Methodists. Among the mainline administrators and professors Roberts hired were Dr. Howard Ervin, an American Baptist, along with Dr. John D. Messick, Tommy Tyson, and Bob Stamps, Methodists all. Although Messick came to ORU as a Methodist who had once headed East Carolina University, he was raised in the Pentecostal Holiness Church. In time, Roberts’ vision began to broaden far beyond his humble Pentecostal origins as he
became friends with many non-Pentecostal Christian leaders, including the most famous one of all, Billy Graham.\textsuperscript{21}

During these years, the charismatic movement broke out in the mainline denominations, beginning in 1960, under the leadership of Father Dennis Bennett, pastor of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California. Soon thousands of ministers and lay people from all the Protestant churches spoke in tongues and created charismatic movements in their churches. In 1967, a similar but unexpected charismatic movement broke out among Roman Catholics at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In explaining the beginnings of this renewal, Father Kilian McDonnell explained that behind every new charismatic stood a classical Pentecostal.\textsuperscript{22}

The most important of these was Oral Roberts, whose televised healing crusades came into the living rooms of every American. It was reported that Roman Catholic bishops in New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago were becoming concerned by the rising tide of Catholics who loved to watch Oral Roberts on TV, and, to their alarm, also sent him large donations, rather than putting them in church offerings. Clearly something was happening in American religious life. This has led some historians to see Roberts as a father of the charismatic movement.\textsuperscript{23}

**Oral Roberts: A Father of the Charismatic Movement**

Roberts reached an early pinnacle of acceptance when he attended Billy Graham’s Berlin Congress on World Evangelism in 1966. For years, Roberts and Graham had been close personal friends, but in planning the Berlin Congress, Graham was reluctant at first to invite Roberts, fearing a backlash from his supporters. Graham later wrote about this in his book, *Just as I Am*:

\begin{quote}
Whom should we invite as participants to the Congress? We carefully formulated general guidelines, but they did not automatically resolve every issue. For example, the growing charismatic movement, much of it associated with Pentecostal denominations, was somewhat outside of mainstream evangelicalism. We did not bar these denominations from our crusades, but we
\end{quote}
did not particularly encourage their participation either; some of their ecstatic manifestations were controversial and disruptive within the broader Christian community. I felt that my longtime friend Oral Roberts, world renowned for his preaching and healing ministry as well as for the university bearing his name in Tulsa, Oklahoma, should be included among the delegates. I was not ready to assign him a place on the program, but I was convinced that his presence would mark the beginning of a new era in evangelical cooperation.24

When Roberts accepted Graham’s invitation, he went to Berlin with many fears and trepidations. He was a delegate with a seminar on healing as part of the program. At first, he hung out with his church friends, including R. O. Corvin and Bishop Synan. But soon other non-Pentecostals began to befriend him. In the end, Graham invited him to greet a plenary session and lead in prayer. The results were explosive. Roberts’ greeting “was an electric moment. When the applause began, pandemonium broke out. They jumped up from every angle and applauded and applauded.” But his prayer moved the delegates more and “moved the entire congress.”25 This broke the ice as hundreds of world leaders clamored to meet and thank him for his ministry. It was indeed “the beginning of a new era of cooperation” as Graham had said. Roberts then returned to America with a wider view of the body of Christ and a new sense of mission.26

The next year was a momentous one for Oral Roberts, as he planned to dedicate his new and growing university. In the afterglow of the Berlin Congress, Roberts invited Billy Graham as the main speaker at the dedication ceremony. Graham gladly accepted. It was a windy day, as some 18,000 people showed up for the service, which was held outdoors. In honor of his denomination, Roberts invited his bishop of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, J. A. Synan, to read the scriptures. But the star of the day was Billy Graham, who lauded Roberts on his accomplishments and warned the president and faculty that a curse from God might fall on the university if it ever left its biblical moorings.27

From that point on, Roberts began a move to remake Oral Roberts University (ORU) from a more narrow Pentecostal school to a university
that would reflect the entire body of Christ. In 1968, Roberts ended his healing crusades. The *New York Times* stated that Roberts’ “tent was folded and replaced by a television studio.” A hint of things to come was a growing conflict between Oral and his childhood friend R. O. Corvin, dean of the ORU School of Theology since 1963. As the seminary grew, it soon became apparent to Roberts that Corvin’s vision was for the seminary to serve as a training center for the Pentecostal churches and more particularly the Pentecostal Holiness Church, to which both Roberts and Corvin belonged. But after the Berlin Congress, Roberts’ view had expanded to include all the mainline churches and not just the Pentecostal movement. In 1968, the two men collided several times over the future of the seminary. In the end, Roberts fired Corvin and closed the seminary in 1969. A drastic step indeed.

In the meantime, the Oklahoma Methodist bishop, Angie Smith, a friend of Roberts, invited him to join the Methodist Church. At first,
Roberts did not take him seriously, since there was a wide theological chasm between the more liberal United Methodist Church and the much more conservative Pentecostal denominations. However, eventually Roberts joined the influential Boston Avenue United Methodist Church in Tulsa, which was pastored by Finis Crutchfield. This move was made with the added influence of Tommy Tyson, the Methodist chaplain of the university, and Wayne Robinson, who had already left Roberts’ Pentecostal Holiness Church for Methodism. He then shocked the religious world on May 28, 1968, when he was recognized as an elder in the Oklahoma Conference of the Methodist Church. Pentecostals around the world as well as many mainline church leaders were equally mystified by Roberts’ unexpected move. He was not re-ordained, however. Until the end of his life, Roberts’ ordination remained with the Pentecostal Holiness Church. For a time, Roberts was a favorite preacher at Methodist events in the United States and overseas.³⁰

At first, Roberts led a fast-growing charismatic movement among Methodists and was invited to preach in many leading churches.
and Annual Conferences. In time, the number of Methodist charis-
matics grew to number some one million in the United States. Oral
Roberts, now a professed charismatic, became their hero. To cement
his Methodist connection, Roberts re-opened his seminary in 1976,
with Jimmy Buskirk as dean of the seminary. Buskirk was a Spirit-
filled professor of evangelism at Emory University in Atlanta. Shortly
after his coming, the new school was fully accredited, not only by
the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) but also by the United
Methodist Church as an approved seminary for Methodist workers. In
a short time, most of the faculty were Methodists. Moving in another
direction, in 1969, after abandoning his healing crusades, Roberts
began a series of prime-time television programs that made him a
national TV celebrity.

Roberts’ most ambitious project was the founding of a hospital in
1981, which he called “the City of Faith.” At a cost of $250 million,
the hospital consisted of three buildings of 20, 30, and 60 stories that
would house a hospital and a research facility that Roberts claimed
would “merge prayer and medicine.” In raising money for the hospital,
Roberts was roundly criticized by the press for claiming to see a “nine
hundred foot Jesus” and for saying that Jesus would “take him home”
if he did not raise $8,000,000 to finish the project. The money came
in, but Roberts’ reputation suffered irreparable harm. In spite of heroic
fund raising efforts, the City of Faith was forced to close in 1989.

As a result of this and other negative publicity, the leaders of the
United Methodist Church became uncomfortable having Oral Roberts
as a member of the church. A blow to Roberts came when Buskirk
resigned to become pastor of Tulsa’s First Methodist Church. Another
bitter blow came in 1987 when the United Methodist Church with-
drew its accreditation of ORU for the training of Methodist ministers.
After this decision, nineteen Methodist faculty members resigned and
left the university. A short time later, the Oklahoma Methodists uncer-
emoniously excommunicated Roberts from the United Methodist
Church. He was not even notified by the church officials but learned
about his ouster in the Tulsa World newspaper while eating breakfast at
home. After this, Roberts returned to fellowship with his Pentecostal
and charismatic friends.
Soon after, Roberts brought Larry Lea, a leading Southern Baptist charismatic pastor, to Tulsa to serve as the new dean of what he now called “the Signs and Wonders Seminary.” Later in 1986, Roberts organized a “new fellowship” of charismatic leaders which he called the International Charismatic Bible Ministries (ICBM). Roberts and ORU were henceforth identified with the burgeoning charismatic movement that was sweeping the world. Clearly his Methodist days were over.35

As a charismatic school, the university and its School of Theology experienced a boom in enrollment. Seminary Academic Dean Paul Chappell reported in 1987 that “with its clear identity as a Charismatic Bible believing/teaching institution and with a Charismatic faculty, we have grown to be the 34th largest seminary in North America. We are the fastest growing seminary in North America.”36

In 1993, Roberts turned ORU over to his son Richard, who was not able to attract enough students and money to maintain the quality envisioned by the founder. Despite his best efforts, Richard Roberts was not able to raise funds on the level that his father had done. More and more the university lived on borrowed money, so much so that the debt soared to over $50,000,000. In 2007, Richard was asked to resign and a new president, Dr. Mark Rutland, was installed. Soon afterward, the David Green and Mart Green families of Oklahoma City gave the university over $100 million dollars to save the school. Under the leadership of Mart Green, the campus was renovated, and the board adopted realistic policies that are helping the university become self-supporting.37

In Closing . . .

Oral Roberts died on December 15, 2009, at 91 years of age. He was one of the most prominent American religious leaders of his time, second only to Billy Graham. His emphasis on healing and prosperity still inspires millions of Pentecostals and charismatics around the world. In the end, Roberts was the most famous and influential leader ever produced by the Pentecostal Holiness Church. At the same time, he was the one man above all others who brought Pentecostalism to the attention of the world. In his lifetime, Roberts spent his first fifty years as a
Pentecostal, nineteen years as a Methodist charismatic, and twenty-two years as an independent charismatic.

But in a broader sense, Roberts was not only the leading Pentecostal in the world but also one of the most important fathers of the worldwide charismatic movement that swept into all the mainline churches after 1960. By the year 2017, the Pentecostals and charismatics globally numbered some 669,000,000, according to Todd Johnson of Gordon-Conwell Seminary. As one of the foremost historic figures in both movements, Oral Roberts must now be recognized as one of the major Christian leaders of world Christianity in the past century.38

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Notes


3 Among all Oral Roberts’ books, two were autobiographies. The first was The Call: An Autobiography (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972). The more important one was Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry, an Autobiography (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995). A warm book of memories was written by his daughter, Roberta Roberts Potts, My Dad, Oral Roberts (Noble, OK: ICON Publishing, 2011).


9 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 32.


12 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 35.

13 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 78–82.

14 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 81–82. Roberts always felt that the publicity from this sniping incident was the breakthrough that brought him to the attention of the American public.


18 Larry Hart, “The Seminary: A History of Graduate Theological Education at Oral Roberts University” (np, 2016) 3; http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/theo_history/

19 See the first catalogue titled, *Information for Prospective Students and Other Interested People* (1965) 1–11. The second catalogue titled *Oral Roberts University Bulletin 1966–1967* contained a full list of the Board of Regents, the administration and faculty, and the curriculum for the new university.


23 Personal conversation by the author with Bishop Synan in Franklin Springs, Georgia, circa 1965.


26 Harrell, Oral Roberts, 204–205.


28 Harrell, Oral Roberts, 303.


30 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 315–20. The United Methodist “Certificate of Recognition of Orders” for Oral Roberts is in the Oral Roberts University archives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Roberts was not re-ordained but accepted as an “elder” but not in “full connection.” Roberts was a Methodist minister for 19 years. In 1987 he was excommunicated from the United Methodist Church due to rising opposition to his ministry.

31 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 320–23.


33 Harrell, Oral Roberts, 423–35.

34 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 326–27. The Tulsa World stated that Roberts had been “cast out of the Methodist Church by a special committee of leaders.” See 328.

35 Roberts, Expect a Miracle, 327–30.


37 See David Green, Giving It All Away . . . And Getting It All Back (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 2017). Also see NBCNews.com, Businessman Rescues Oral Roberts University, February 5, 2006.
