

WHERE MY VOICE IS HEARD SMALL

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL ROBERTS' TELEVISION MINISTRY¹

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Abstract

Oral Roberts was a pioneer in the development of Christian television. This study traces the development of Oral Roberts' television ministry from the early days of 1950s televised healing crusades, through the 1970s prime-time variety shows, and his later broadcasts that supported the various ministry endeavors, such as Oral Roberts University and the City of Faith.

Introduction

According to his biographer, David Harrell, Oral Roberts “has influenced the course of modern Christianity as profoundly as any American religious leader.”² A major factor contributing to Roberts' stature in the American religious community was his pioneering effort in the field of television revivalism. Oral Roberts moved to Tulsa from Enid, Oklahoma, in 1947 and began his evangelistic healing ministry. By the mid-1950s he was “the most advertised and ‘successful’ evangelist and spiritual healer” of the era.³ But it was Roberts' use of the medium of television that made him a household name and “prepared the way

for the modern electronic church.”⁴ Bill Leonard describes Roberts as “the theological and technological chameleon of the electric church.”⁵ Over his forty-year television career, Roberts frequently reshaped his television ministry in an effort to appeal to a wider audience. His ability to adapt to changing trends, times, and tastes assured him a place of national religious prominence for nearly forty years. Roberts’ television enterprise was highly influential upon other religious broadcasters, particularly Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and Paul Crouch, the heads of the three major Christian television networks.

This study will trace the historical development of Oral Roberts’ television enterprise through three stages. First, it will explore the Crusade Broadcast Era (1952–1967), in which Roberts used television to expand the reach of his crusade ministry through televising his tent crusades. Next, it will explore the Prime-Time Era (1969–1977), in which Roberts revolutionized religious broadcasting by creating a religious variety show featuring celebrity guest stars. Finally, it will explore the Roberts Family Broadcast Era (1977–1985), in which Roberts shifted to programing centered on highlighting ministry projects as well as deeper revelations concerning the lives of Roberts and his family.

Crusade Broadcast Era (1952–1967)

Oral Roberts moved to Tulsa from Enid, Oklahoma, in 1947 and began his evangelistic healing ministry. During this era, television was becoming more and more common in American homes. Roberts saw television as a potential new medium he could leverage on behalf of his ministry much in the same way he had success with his radio ministry, which was heard on over one hundred American radio stations. Roberts’ move toward television was in large part through the efforts of Lee Braxton, a North Carolina businessman who had become a close associate of Roberts in 1949.⁶ Their goal was to have his television program on fifty television stations, knowing full well that the costs could be upwards of one million dollars per year.

Oral Roberts first disclosed to his ministry partners the possibility of going on television in January 1952.⁷ His first attempt at television

was a short film titled *Venture into Faith*, intended primarily for viewing in local churches to promote his crusade ministry. The film was first shown in Portland, Oregon, in September 1952 and was distributed throughout the United States and many foreign countries. Roberts promoted the film as the “World’s First Bible Deliverance Picture.”⁸ By 1954, Roberts claimed “thousands have been converted while watching it.”⁹ The success of *Venture into Faith* only increased Roberts’ desire to develop a more extensive television ministry.

In December 1953, Roberts announced boldly to his partners, “God wants me on TV,” and that he was launching a new television broadcast called *Your Faith Is Power*, which he believed would “win a minimum of 7,150 souls each program.” Roberts had known for at least three years that his “gospel of deliverance must be preached on television” and believed that it could be “the greatest single means of preaching the gospel to the unsaved of this generation.”¹¹ He had promised his partners that his television broadcasts would resemble as nearly as possible his ministry in the tent crusades.¹² On January 10, 1954, the *Your Faith Is Power* program premiered on sixteen television stations. The program included a segment of testimonies, a twenty-minute sermon, an invitation for salvation, and a time of prayer for the sick where he asked the sick to place their hands on their bodies for receiving deliverance.¹³ It was here where Roberts first implemented his signature method of having viewers touch their TV screens as a “point of contact” to release their faith to God.¹⁴ Roberts was pleased with the initial result, reporting that the program “greatly increased the number being saved.”¹⁵ He believed that his supporters were “actors in the drama of the end-time” who “must not fail the unsaved of our generation.”¹⁶ The tremendous success of the program was a major factor in the million-soul campaign.¹⁷

The new television program was an early success, but Roberts was not entirely satisfied with the format and announced in June 1954 that he would begin televising his actual tent crusades.¹⁸ His longtime friend, Rex Humbard, encouraged him to take on the hard task of moving toward filming inside the tent. To fund this new and expensive ministry outreach, Roberts developed a fundraising technique that was to become an enduring feature of the Oral Roberts ministry called “The

Blessing Pact.” Roberts challenged 420 persons to give one hundred dollars each and promised he would pray that God would return the gift to each person “from a totally unexpected source.” Roberts vowed further to return the money after a year “if God has not blessed.”¹⁹ With the necessary funds and equipment secured, Roberts began filming and airing his crusades February 6, 1955, on sixty-one television stations.²⁰ For the first time, many Americans experienced the “the excitement and spiritual anticipation of a Pentecostal healing revival.”²¹ Roberts recalled that his broadcasts “hit the nation like a bombshell.”²²

The new broadcasts immediately generated an increased amount of national publicity for Roberts’ ministry, but not all of it was favorable. W. E. Mann applauded the “Supersalesman of Faith Healing” for his “skill in using television” to increase his following.²³ An editorial in *The Christian Century* referred to Roberts’ television success as “sensational” and expressed the opinion that Roberts’ broadcasts “can do the cause of vital religion far more harm” than any previous religious broadcasts.²⁴ The editorial regretted that there was “nothing on the air or on television to offset this travesty on Christian teaching.”²⁵ Harland Lewis critically noted that Roberts’ evangelistic work could be “easily seen to be superficial.”²⁶ Not only were Roberts’ message and method the objects of criticism, but his right to broadcast was called into question. Jack Gould, television and radio critic of the *New York Times*, insisted that television programs that involved religious healing were “a matter of fundamental policy for the broadcasting industry.”²⁷ Gould questioned the wisdom of a television station’s religious programming standard being determined by one’s ability to purchase broadcast time.²⁸ Despite the public criticism and the inherent difficulties of filming in the tent, Roberts’ television broadcasts were an enormous success.²⁹

Roberts’ ministry avoided the financial difficulties many other evangelists experienced because of his innovative sponsorship plan whereby individuals could sponsor Roberts’ broadcasts in their own cities.³⁰ The response to the programs “quickly turned television into a financial asset rather than a liability.”³¹ Roberts interpreted the success of his television ministry as God’s affirmation of his broadcasting enterprise. In the nine months following his February 1955 debut, the number of conversions resulting from his ministry had more than

doubled. Roberts became even more convinced that television was “the greatest and most effective instrument ever devised for reaching the masses.”³² Because of television’s inherent power to “communicate to the human being,” Roberts was certain that Jesus would include radio and television “if Jesus were on the earth today.”³³

The broadcasts of his tent crusades became a regular feature on American television stations throughout the late 1950s. Even though some Americans considered the experiences of the tent crusade to be excessive, Roberts’ meetings generally were models of decorum. Hysteria and emotionalism were not characteristics of Roberts’ services, though certainly his programs benefitted from certain editing capabilities.³⁴ Nevertheless, the “drama of the services is so great,” wrote G. H. Montgomery in 1956, that “in some beer gardens and taverns, where the service is viewed regularly, all sales are suspended during the Oral Roberts telecast.”³⁵

Television served another purpose for Oral Roberts in the 1950s besides the ability to proclaim his message to the greatest possible audience. The television programs provided Roberts’ followers with a continuing documentary of his ministry. Ministry supporters, or partners, were able to judge the validity both of Roberts’ ministry and of their continued support for that ministry.³⁶ Continued support was a major issue both for Roberts’ partners and for the Roberts organization. In February 1958, Roberts’ radio and television director Lee Braxton explained to ministry supporters that the broadcasts “are made by faith in God and confidence in our listeners, viewers, and readers.”³⁷ Braxton listed numerous radio and television stations that would be canceled if renewed financial support was not forthcoming. Support was crucial because Braxton was “convinced of the effect of the message of deliverance and prayers for the sick over radio and television.”³⁸ Braxton’s conviction and loyalty to Roberts’ ministry was such that he initiated his own version of the “Blessing Pact”; Braxton offered to repay from his personal finances any gift if the giver became dissatisfied with “the investment . . . made to help win souls.”³⁹

Braxton’s appeal for support perhaps was an early indication that Roberts’ television popularity was in decline.⁴⁰ The appeal also marked the beginning of an extended period of reevaluation and redefinition

of Roberts' television methodology and goals. While the format of Roberts' broadcasts essentially remained the same between 1958 and 1963, the ministry sought new audiences for its television message. In 1961 Roberts appealed for increased funding for his Japanese television outreach; his program, he claimed, was one of the three most watched in Japan.⁴¹

In many respects, television became a burden to Roberts early in the 1960s, particularly as he became more involved in the planning and development of Oral Roberts University. In the April 1964 issue of *Abundant Life*, Roberts wrote to his supporters to try to gage the impact of the television broadcast on their lives.⁴² Three months later the ministry announced a "departure" from the regular television format in order to broadcast programs that featured Roberts and his wife Evelyn discussing healing and interviewing persons who had been healed in previous Roberts crusades.⁴³ Although Roberts was dissatisfied with the new program, he reiterated that "television is one of the greatest instruments in projecting the gospel."⁴⁴ In April 1965 the Roberts ministry once again promoted a new television format that it called "a refreshing and dynamic documentary program of healing." The new broadcasts were to be taped before a live audience and include group discussions concerning healing.⁴⁵ The response to the programs was less than satisfactory. All along, he had "felt disenchanted" with the quality of his programs and by 1965 he had decided to terminate his television ministry no later than 1967.⁴⁶ Roberts' last appearance in a tent crusade occurred in 1967 in Anaheim, California. The tent "was ceasing to be an asset," Roberts maintained, because persons "had become used to cushioned chairs and air-conditioning and to watching television."⁴⁷

Roberts gradually removed his program from stations until May 1967. At the time, he offered little explanation to his partners for his action.⁴⁸ Only later did Roberts identify three factors in his decision to leave television in 1967. First, he insisted that he "refused to marry any method" and believed his television ministry was "outdated." Second, he was now fully committed to Oral Roberts University, which "was in its birth stages," and simply did not have time to get "involved in a totally new television ministry."⁵⁰ Finally, Roberts was interested in using ORU and his World Action program to focus more on global

evangelism efforts.⁵¹ By 1967, Roberts had abandoned both his television and his crusade evangelism. This shift marked the end of an era in the identity of Oral Roberts and his ministry.

The Prime-Time Era (1969–1977)

The two years following his departure from television Roberts spent time reevaluating his life and career. One significant event in Roberts' life that led to his return to television was his controversial decision to join the United Methodist Church on April 7, 1968. Roberts had deliberated the merits of becoming a United Methodist since his attendance at the 1966 Berlin World Congress on Evangelism, where he “could see the openness in the historic denominations to this ministry.”⁵² But his decision had devastating consequences on his partners and his financial base. Oral Roberts Evangelistic Ministries lost one-third of its partners and one-third of its financial support.⁵³ Roberts admits the reaction to his decision was “far and above anything I had imagined.”⁵⁴ The need to return to television suddenly became acute and Roberts recognized how important his television ministry was as a means of publicity and renewed financial support.

For several months, Roberts wrestled with how to design and implement a new format for his return to television broadcasting. He believed that the greatest way to reach “unchurched” persons was to reach out to the 190,000,000 Americans who watched television.⁵⁵ Roberts informed his partners of a new television venture in February 1969, explaining his willingness “to use new forms and new methods to reach the people.”⁵⁶ He turned to his friend Ralph Carmichael to help him make his “vision” a reality.⁵⁷ Carmichael was a brilliant artist who assembled a top notch artistic team to produce a new weekly television series and quarterly prime-time entertainment specials.⁵⁸ The first special, Roberts noted, featured musical presentations by guest star Mahalia Jackson, his son Richard, and an Oral Roberts University student group called the World Action Singers.⁵⁹ Roberts' sermon dealt with America's racial conflict and was entitled “Touching People.”⁶⁰ Roberts agreed with observers who believed the special was “the first religious program of its kind.”⁶¹

Roberts' television specials marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Oral Roberts' television ministry. Observers said Roberts' television specials resembled a religious "variety show" in which "celebrities from the 'worldly' show business industry, together with a culture-affirming interracial group of student entertainers from his own university who dance as well as sing."⁶² Ben Armstrong, the president of the National Religious Broadcasters, commented, "the new TV presentation had everything that would guarantee success for any series—bright contemporary music, attractive young people, a fast pace, superb technical quality, and a well-known personality at its center."⁶³ Even critic James Morris acknowledged Roberts' ability to "skillfully blend religion with musical entertainment."⁶⁴ The variety show format enabled Roberts to fulfill his desire to preach to "the millions who don't know Jesus," many of whom were attracted to his broadcasts by his numerous guest stars.⁶⁵

Not everyone was pleased with his new show. Some of Roberts' traditional conservative supporters complained about the "worldly" appeal of the new show. For his supporters who were uncomfortable with the concept of his television specials, Roberts developed a weekly Sunday morning series that was intended to be a more "traditional type of program." The Sunday morning broadcast, however, also included musical entertainment. Roberts made no apology for his inventive television ministry. In an interview with television talk show host Mike Douglas, Roberts defended his television broadcasts by declaring, "we have to go where the people are." William Willimon reported his conversation with a woman who disdained Roberts' past "healing routine," but appreciated the "new Roberts" as "one of the greatest religious leaders in our nation." Roberts' ability to communicate was never more apparent than in his television sermons and prayers; persons believed him when he promised, "every time I'm on that TV screen I'm speaking directly to you . . . and to your needs." Roberts even adopted a nationalistic motif as a factor in his personal motivation concerning his ministry. He was angry that Americans were "letting the devil lead them astray, and into bondage to sin and fear and evil spirits."⁶⁶

Oral Roberts' television productions were received enthusiastically by the broadcast industry. His 1971 Valentine's Day special was

honored with Emmy nominations in three categories.⁶⁷ The specials appeared on over 400 stations in 1972. In 1974, the largest audience ever to assemble at Emory University for its “Minister’s Week” did so to hear Roberts.⁶⁹ Time magazine noted “the fast-paced, free-spending ambiance of [Roberts’] television tapings, his casual, almost paternal confidence with his guest stars.”⁷⁰ Roberts had become the acknowledged leader among television revivalists and in the American Charismatic Movement. In every respect, Roberts’ 1969 decision to return to television was an enormous success. In 1973 Roberts disclosed that his organization was “four times the size that we were . . . our mail has quadrupled . . . our income has tripled, and I would say our influence is far greater.”⁷¹ Oral Roberts’ assessment that his television concept “helped draw millions of viewers who would not ordinarily watch a religious TV show” was accurate.⁷²

One change in the Roberts television enterprise was the ever-increasing control that Roberts sought and achieved. Richard served as coordinator of the World Action Singers and was a featured soloist on numerous specials and Sunday morning programs. In a rare television appearance of the four Roberts children (Ronald, Rebecca, Roberta, and Richard), Richard referred to television as “a powerful twentieth-century missionary” and praised his father’s programs as a “bold contemporary way to present the Christ of the Now.”⁷³ Roberts’ ministry purchased four RCA color cameras late in 1972, an acquisition that enabled the ministry to film specials and the weekly programs on the campus of Oral Roberts University.⁷⁴ February 9, 1975, was “a new day for us on TV,” according to Roberts; the Sunday morning program received the new title *Oral Roberts and You*. Each half-hour telecast was taped in its entirety before a live audience.⁷⁵ On-campus productions were enhanced by the 1977 construction of a television studio adjacent to the Mabree Center arena on the campus of Oral Roberts University. The studio was “considered to be among the best in the country.”⁷⁶ Even though Roberts continued to produce prime-time specials until 1979, tragedies in the Roberts family beginning in 1977 represented the beginning of a new era in his television ministry.

The Roberts Family Broadcast Era (1977–1984)

The year 1977 was yet another turning point in the television ministry. This time it came about through numerous tragedies in the Roberts family. In February 1977, Oral's and Evelyn's daughter Rebecca and their son-in-law Marshall Nash died in a plane crash in Kansas. To add to the grief, in 1979 Richard Roberts was divorced from his wife Patti. Shortly after, tragedy struck again when Roberts' oldest son Ronald committed suicide in June 1982. In January 1984, the son of Richard and his new wife Lindsay died after living thirty-six hours.⁷⁷ This series of tragedies changed the way Roberts approached his television ministry.

Immediately following the plane crash that killed Rebecca and Marshall, Roberts became convinced that he and his wife should appear on television to share their grief with their partners. Though reluctant at first, Evelyn eventually consented and joined her husband for "one of the most remarkable programs in the long history of Roberts' television career."⁷⁸ Just two short weeks after their child's death, the Roberts family opened their hearts about the tragedy in what was described as a "visceral and emotional response to death."⁷⁹ David Harrell noted that "few could have been unmoved by the bravery of the couple as they struggled to speak, often weeping, reaffirming their faith in God."⁸⁰ The program was and remains a unique moment in the history of religious broadcasting.

In September 1977 Oral Roberts took a huge leap of faith and announced his intention to build the City of Faith Medical and Research Center. The City of Faith opened in November 1981 after Roberts had gained approval for the facility over the objections of many in the Tulsa medical and political communities. Roberts, never a despiser of medical science or of physicians, envisioned the City of Faith to be the embodiment of the two major forces in healing: prayer and medicine. His avowed goal was to make the City of Faith, consisting of a sixty-story clinic, a thirty-story hospital, and a twenty-story research center, the "Mayo Clinic of the Southwest."

Because of this monumental undertaking, the television broadcasts became the instrument by which Roberts could report on the ministry's progress and publicize his appeals for increased financial support.

While quarterly specials continued to be produced until 1979, even those telecasts included an increased amount of “ministry news.” One 1978 special consisted of an extensive portrayal of the thirty-one-year history of Oral Roberts’ ministry.⁸¹ One 1979 television broadcast was another significant turning point in Roberts’ television enterprise. On July 15, 1979, Roberts, in his terms, “swallowed his pride” and explained the extreme financial needs of his ministry. He also expressed to his audience the personal anguish he experienced from bearing the responsibility for his ministry’s continued success.⁸² Two weeks after the July 15 broadcast, fellow Tulsa revivalist Kenneth Hagin took up a substantial financial offering for the Roberts ministry at his annual Tulsa Campmeeting. Roberts perceived Hagin’s act as the beginning of a cooperative period between the two ministries, as well as a divine confirmation of his self-disclosure on the television broadcast.⁸³ The year 1979 was further disruptive for Oral Roberts with Richard and Patti Roberts’ divorce, and former Roberts associate Jerry Sholes published a highly publicized “insider’s report” on Oral Roberts’ ministry.⁸⁴

Between 1978 and 1981 figures from the television rating service Arbitron indicated that Oral Roberts’ television audience declined by nearly fifty percent.⁸⁵ The factors that led to the decline of Roberts’ television audience were numerous: frequent alterations in the television format, negative publicity concerning Roberts’ ministry, and the controversy that accompanied the construction of the City of Faith.⁸⁶ Rice University sociologist William Martin referred to Roberts’ financial appeals for the City of Faith as an “all-out beg-a-thon”; Martin is certain that “people got tired of that.”⁸⁷ Roberts’ friend Jenkin Lloyd Jones, editor of *The Tulsa Tribune*, agreed with Martin’s assessment, adding that “desperation has a way of producing stridency, and stridency diminishes appeal.”⁸⁸

Finding “God’s best” television format was difficult for Roberts during this era. In July 1979, Roberts announced a new twelve-week Sunday morning television series entitled *Oral Roberts Teaching the Bible*. The program included Roberts’ teaching of selected biblical passages, followed by discussions of that teaching with Richard and Evelyn Roberts.⁸⁹ Neither the teaching format nor the ministry report

format were particularly successful or well received. In February 1981, the Roberts organization first broadcast *Sunday Night Live with Oral Roberts*, an hour-long program featuring conversation and musical entertainment.⁹⁰ The conversational format simply did not work with Roberts' personality. Following his short-lived *Sunday Night Live* series, Roberts announced the return of the specials, which would be entitled *Celebration*. Roberts explained, "God wants these prime-time television specials."⁹¹ One regular feature of the new specials was "a family of puppets called the Fudge Family in dialogue with the Roberts family."⁹² Response to the puppets, and to the specials, was unsatisfactory: production was discontinued after three programs.⁹³

In 1982 and 1983 Roberts' television ministry reflected Roberts' personal return to and appreciation for his Pentecostal heritage. Roberts' organization provided Jim Bakker's PTL network with a series of programs called *Classic Tent Crusades*. The series featured taped segments from Roberts' 1950s crusades, along with Roberts' comments on events, particularly healings, from the crusades.⁹⁴ The weekly *Oral Roberts and You* program also adopted a new format; "new," however, consisted of an increase in preaching and singing. Roberts promised his viewers "old-fashioned, Bible-believing, seed-faith teaching."⁹⁵ In November 1983 the Sunday morning programs, bearing the new name *Expect a Miracle*, featured Oral and Richard Roberts conducting preaching and healing services with a "Crusade atmosphere." Changes in format were not the only means by which Roberts' ministry sought to increase its television audience. Roberts purchased broadcast time on Atlanta's WTBS, the so-called "Superstation," in December 1983.

In 1984, Oral Roberts' television ministry made its final transition from the past to the future in the person of Richard Roberts. The younger Roberts had played an active role in his father's television ministry since 1968, but in 1984 Richard Roberts was given equal "billing" with his father on the Sunday morning series.⁹⁷ A more significant event was the September 17, 1984, debut of the *Richard Roberts* show, a daily Christian talk show hosted by Richard Roberts and his wife, Lindsay. Richard Roberts described his broadcasts as an "hour-long program of music, ministry, and personal prayer"; he adopted the theme "God can turn it around in your life" for his program.⁹⁸ With the

success of the *Richard Roberts* show, the mantle passed from father to son in the Roberts family television enterprise.

Conclusion

The decline in Oral Roberts' television audience was due, in some respects, to the success of his own television ministry. Television revivalism had become an increasingly competitive field since Roberts' ascendancy in the 1970s; the Arbitron ratings service surveyed ninety national religious television programs in 1985.⁹⁹ A measure of Roberts' influence on television revivalism has been expressed in the television ministries of various Roberts "imitators." The analysis of a former Roberts associate is accurate, "In a way, Oral was too successful . . . he showed other people what a TV ministry can do."¹⁰⁰ This observation is a fitting portrayal of Oral Roberts' influence as a television revivalist. In 1955 an editorial in *The Christian Century* lamented the fact that Oral Roberts' television success would surely "sprout imitators." Not even Roberts could have estimated how many "imitators" would arise, all with the hope that they could match Roberts' television success. By 1985, there were ninety national religious television programs whose audiences were measured by the Arbitron ratings service, an increase of nearly fifty percent since 1977.

Roberts' own analysis of his television success was often summed up simply this way: "I have obeyed Jesus."¹⁰¹ Roberts was wildly successful at harnessing the power of television to create a following and to support the various ventures in faith he undertook. He was a master at adapting his methods and his message in order for his ministry to realize its full potential. His ability to adapt to changing trends, times, and tastes assured him a place of national religious prominence for nearly forty years. That ability manifested itself most often in Roberts' distinctive television ministry.

One of Roberts' most courageous steps toward implementing the "potential power of television" was his return to the medium in 1969 with his prime-time entertainment-oriented specials. Indeed, his return to television was perhaps the single most significant decision Roberts made since his ministry began in 1947. Roberts' return to television in

1969 also revolutionized television revivalism in general. Through his prime-time specials Roberts “took his healing message to Hollywood” and experienced freedom from what David Harrell calls “the Sunday morning religious ghetto.” Harrell is correct when he declares that “in many ways, the modern electronic church was born with the airing of Oral’s first special in March 1969.”¹⁰³

Roberts’ long television ministry earned him the distinction as a pioneer in television revivalism, but his television specials brought him recognition as an innovator in the field. The success of Roberts’ television specials served as an affirmation of Roberts’ more mature ministry and enhanced the respect he had earned at the 1966 Berlin Congress on Evangelism. The specials were also the reflection of Roberts’ desire to broaden his ministry, in a fashion similar to his 1968 decision to affiliate with the United Methodist Church. Roberts’ television ministry in the early 1970s was an ideal accompaniment to the growth and development of Oral Roberts University. Television attracted students and financial support for the university, while Roberts appeared before his television audience not just as a preacher, but as the founder and president of an accredited university. As noted previously, Roberts’ ministry experienced enormous growth in the years following the return to television. That growth made possible Roberts’ dreams of graduate schools and the construction of the City of Faith. Simply put, without the medium of television, there would be no Oral Roberts.



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Notes

1 This study was originally part of the third chapter of my dissertation, “Gathering of Sects: Revivalistic Pluralism in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1945–1985,” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986).

- 2 David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), vii.
- 3 W. E. Mann, "What About Oral Roberts? Supersalesman of Faith Healing," *The Christian Century*, 5 September 1956, 1018.
- 4 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, vii–viii.
- 5 Bill J. Leonard, "The Electric Church: An Interpretive Essay," *Review and Expositor* 81 (Winter 1984), 50.
- 6 Lee Braxton, "I Followed Oral Roberts Across America," *Healing Waters*, December 1949, 4.
- 7 G. H. Montgomery, "Looking Forward with Oral Roberts," *Healing Waters*, January 1952, 13.
- 8 "Venture into Faith," *Healing Waters*, August 1952, 9. The film was based on the story of a child stricken by tuberculosis whose at first reluctant parents out of desperation attend an Oral Roberts campaign and the boy is healed. The parents are also saved in the process. Like Roberts, the boy experiences healing but does not immediately recover his strength, which causes him to question his healing. Roberts makes a surprise visit to the boy's home to reassure him that his healing is real and that he can stand in faith.
- 9 Oral Roberts, "My Plans for Television," *America's Healing Magazine*, January 1954, 12.
- 10 Oral Roberts, "Your Faith Is Power," *America's Healing Magazine*, December 1953, 17.
- 11 Roberts, "Your Faith Is Power," 17.
- 12 Roberts, "My Plans," 12; cf. Oral Roberts, "A Call to Action," *America's Healing Magazine*, June 1954, 12.
- 13 G. H. Montgomery, "The March of Deliverance: Previewing the Oral Roberts TV Programs," *America's Healing Magazine*, January 1954, 4.
- 14 Roberts, "Your Faith Is Power," 17.
- 15 Oral Roberts, "Report on the Million Soul Crusade," *America's Healing Magazine*, March 1954, 9.
- 16 Roberts, "My Plans," 14.
- 17 Montgomery, "Previewing the Oral Roberts TV Programs," 4.
- 18 Roberts, "Call to Action," 12; Roberts recalled later that the early programs "had a woodenness about them that was stifling." See Oral Roberts, *The Call: An Autobiography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 178.
- 19 Roberts, *The Call*, 178–79. Only two persons later asked that their money be returned.
- 20 Lee Braxton, "Millions See the First Oral Roberts Telecast," *America's Healing Magazine*, March 1955, 22.
- 21 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 127.
- 22 "Oral Roberts Shares His Heart," *Charisma*, June 1985, 60.

- 23 Mann, "What About Oral Roberts? Supersalesman of Faith Healing," 1018.
- 24 "Oklahoma Faith-Healer Draws a Following," *The Christian Century*, 29 June 1955, 750. The editorial recalled that Liston Pope, dean of the Yale Divinity School, had previously criticized various religious television programs. The editorial insisted, "Oral Roberts . . . can do the cause of vital religion far more harm than can the insipid programs which drew his [Pope's] fire."
- 25 "Oklahoma Faith-Healer," 750.
- 26 Harland G. Lewis, "What About Oral Roberts? Implications for the Churches," *The Christian Century*, 5 September 1956, 1019.
- 27 James Morris, *The Preachers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 94.
- 28 Morris, *The Preachers*, 94.
- 29 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 96–97. One problem in particular was the slower pace of Roberts' healing line, where persons passed by for his touch and prayer.
- 30 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 129; cf. Roberts' detailed explanations of differing costs in various cities in "My Plans," 12–14, and "Call to Action," 12–13.
- 31 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 129.
- 32 Oral Roberts, "A Special Word about Television in the U.S.," *America's Healing Magazine*, October 1955, 17.
- 33 Roberts, "A Special Word," 17.
- 34 Opinion formed from viewing numerous videotapes of 1950s broadcasts, including Detroit, Michigan, and Pensacola, Florida, crusades.
- 35 G. H. Montgomery, "Television Follows Him Around the World," *Abundant Life*, July 1956, 10.
- 36 Montgomery, "Television Follows Him," 10.
- 37 Lee Braxton, "Radio and Television," *Abundant Life*, February 1958, 26.
- 38 Braxton, "Radio and Television," 26.
- 39 Braxton, "Radio and Television," 26.
- 40 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 172–73. Further, Roberts was criticized much less frequently when, in Harrell's terms, "the novelty of Oral's programs wore off."
- 41 "The Healing Power of Christ in the Orient," *Abundant Life*, March 1961, 5.
- 42 *Abundant Life*, April 1964, 23.
- 43 "A Look at Healing," *Abundant Life*, July 1964, 2.
- 44 *Abundant Life*, March 1965, 23.
- 45 "New TV Program," *Abundant Life*, April 1965, 22.
- 46 Roberts, *The Call*, 185–86.
- 47 Roberts, *The Call*, 174–75.
- 48 This opinion is based on the analysis of *Abundant Life* magazine from 1965 to 1967.
- 49 Roberts, *The Call*, 186.

- 50 Roberts, *The Call*, 186.
- 51 Oral Roberts, “We Are Returning to Television!” *Abundant Life*, February 1969, 3. World Action was an outreach ministry with substantial student involvement.
- 52 Roberts, *The Call*, 131; for an extensive account of Roberts’ experiences in Berlin, see Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 199–206.
- 53 Bob Goodwin, “Inside the Mind of Oral Roberts,” *Oklahoma Eagle*, October 25, 1973, n.p.
- 54 Roberts, *The Call*, 136.
- 55 Oral Roberts, “Yes, We’re Back on Television,” *Abundant Life*, March 1969, 3, comments, “A whole new generation has come up not knowing God, spitting on the church, and the government, and even on one another. They are truly sick, out of harmony with God and their real selves—which is often what sickness really is.”
- 56 Roberts, “Returning,” 6.
- 57 Oral Roberts, *Twelve Greatest Miracles of My Ministry* (Tulsa: Pinoak Publications, 1971), 91. Roberts described Carmichael as “a godly producer and . . . a Christian who was a great music arranger and orchestra [sic] leader.”
- 58 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 267.
- 59 Roberts, “Returning,” 4–5.
- 60 Roberts, *The Call*, 194.
- 61 Roberts, “Returning,” 3.
- 62 Richard Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983), 109; cf. Leonard, “The Electric Church,” 51.
- 63 Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 86.
- 64 Morris, *The Preachers*, 59.
- 65 Roberts, “Yes, We’re Back,” 2; Roberts’ guest stars included Mahalia Jackson, Pat Boone, Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Anita Bryant, Agnes Moorehead, Shari Lewis, Lou Rawls, Jerry Lewis, Sarah Vaughan, Jimmie Rodgers, Jimmy Durante, Bobby Goldsboro, Andrae Crouch, Burl Ives, Della Reese, Johnny Mathis, Roy Clark, Skeeter Davis, Pearl Bailey, Johnny Cash, William Daniels, The Lennon Sisters, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Charley Pride, Florence Henderson, Lynn Anderson, Robert Goulet, Natalie Cole, Vikki Carr, Mel Tillis, and Minnie Pearl. Specials were filmed on location at Japan’s Expo 70, as well as in Alaska, London, and Grandfather Mountain, and North Carolina.
- 66 Roberts, “Yes, We’re Back,” 2–3.
- 67 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 269–70.
- 68 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 210.
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- 71 Bob Goodwin, "Inside the Mind of Oral Roberts," *Oklahoma Eagle*, 25 October 1973, n.p.
- 72 "Going Back on National Television," *Abundant Life*, May 1974, 8.
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- 79 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 331.
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- 89 Jenkin Lloyd Jones, "Oral Roberts' Troubles (Editorial)," *The Tulsa Tribune*, 10 July 1984, n.p.
- 90 "Oral Roberts Teaching the Bible," *Abundant Life*, August 1979, 5, 7, 23.
- 91 "Sunday Night Live with Oral Roberts," *Abundant Life*, February 1981, 14. The program was shown live throughout the United States through satellite capabilities.
- 92 Oral Roberts, "Why Prime Time," *Abundant Life*, December 1981, 16.
- 93 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 399.
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- 95 "Why the New TV Format," *Abundant Life*, July 1982, 11.

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- 98 “‘Expect A Miracle’ with Oral and Richard Roberts,” *Abundant Life*, January 1984, 20.
- 99 Richard Roberts, “I’m Committed to Doing a Daily TV Show That Shows You Can Turn It around in Your Life,” *Abundant Life*, January 1985, 13; cf. “A Candid Look Behind the Scenes of the Richard Roberts Television Program,” *Abundant Life*, June–July 1985, 11; Richard Roberts, *Second Chance*, 83.
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