

# ORAL ROBERTS AND THE SPIRITUAL DNA OF ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Recently, my wife Lisa and I decided to use Ancestry.com to check on the roots and origin of our DNA. Though we knew the test is not always absolutely accurate we were intrigued to discover more about who we are today by seeing where our DNA came from in the past. It was a fun exercise and I even discovered that I have some Jewish ancestors. DNA tracking is a growing science around the world as people seek to understand themselves by looking at their past. As I look at the history of Oral Roberts University (ORU), I see that much of the spiritual DNA of this institution came out of the ministry and life of Oral Roberts, to which this issue of *Spiritus* is dedicated. Although it is not uncommon to name a university after its founder, it is perhaps more rare for the founder to serve as the president, particularly with the longevity that Oral Roberts enjoyed in his thirty years leading ORU. Because of this, we continue to see the influence of Oral Roberts' spiritual DNA throughout ORU today. As President, on this centennial of Roberts' birthday, I want to look back on ORU's history and identify six aspects of Roberts' legacy that have influenced the DNA of ORU.

## Think Big

At ORU, it is in our DNA to think big. Oral Roberts was a man who was ambitious for God. While riding in a car to Ada, Oklahoma, God spoke to a teenager suffering from tuberculosis named Granville Oral Roberts and said, “Son, I am going to heal you, and you are going to take my healing power to your generation. You are to build me a university, build it on my authority and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Not only was Roberts one of the most impactful ministers of the twentieth century, his story is one the great stories of modern Christianity.<sup>3</sup> In his lifetime, Roberts went from a sick and stuttering kid living in an impoverished small-town Oklahoma family to a visionary leader with a calling to build a university that touched a whole generation through the power of God. He sought to dream God-sized dreams. He believed God for big things. You only need to walk around the campus of ORU and look at the buildings, or look across the street to the City of Faith that is now called Cityplex, to know that this man did not settle for small thinking or small things. He dreamed big dreams, faced big challenges, dealt with big opposition, and witnessed some big victories in his lifetime.

The idea that a healing evangelist would build a Spirit-empowered university was certainly a big idea in its day. It was unheard of for a Spirit-filled university be accredited at the highest levels and to play in Division I athletics. Yet today, a whole generation of students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni are being blessed because Roberts was not afraid to dream big. He allowed the Holy Spirit to lift him out of the small thinking that surrounded him into thinking God-sized thoughts. From tents to TV studios, from housing facilities to a mega-hospital, Roberts did not think or act insignificantly. On his desk throughout the years, he had a little plaque that read, “Make No Little Plans Here.” It was a constant reminder to everyone who entered his office not to bring him little thoughts or ideas, but only those things big enough for the God of the universe. In fact, I have it on my desk even now to remind me of the legacy of this university. ORU is committed to helping our students dream big because, like our founder, we believe God “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph 3:20, NKJV).

Through our cutting edge globalization initiatives and award-winning technological innovations like the Global Learning Center, ORU is racing ahead to the future and dreaming about how we can expand Spirit-empowered education to reach every inhabited continent.<sup>4</sup> We are “Making No Little Plans Here” because it is in our DNA.

## **God Is Good**

At ORU, we believe that God is a good God. Roberts’ famous saying, “Something good is going to happen to you,” was not just a television slogan; he believed it. It was a truth that he discovered while digging deep into the Scripture. As Roberts studied God’s word, he discovered 3 John 2, which reads, “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (NKJV). This discovery revolutionized his concept of who God is. As Roberts said, “Third John became a battering ram that began to tear down the walls for a new theology!”<sup>5</sup> He realized that God was not standing around trying to beat everyone up with a club, but God cared for people and wanted to do good to everyone. The teaching that God was good and wanted to bless his people was revolutionary in the 1940s and 1950s. But Roberts was able to convince his generation that God is a good God and he loves us.

At ORU, we still believe in a good God who wants to do good for his people. We have certainly seen his goodness in the progress made in the university over the past few years. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first graduating class of ORU in 1968. We have seen nine straight years of growth in our student population. We have built new facilities. We have new degree programs, including a greatly expanded offering of online degrees, a doctorate in Nursing, and a new Ph.D. in Theology with an emphasis in Global Christianity. In the past ten years, over 4,000 students have received tuition help through the Whole Person Scholarship. The campus is spiritually alive and we are raising up a new generation of Spirit-empowered leaders. Even with the progress we have experienced, our continued sense is that our best days are ahead of us and not behind us. The work of our future graduates will exceed not only our founder’s, but also every previous generation of ORU staff and students. At ORU, the future is

bright and filled with amazing promise because God is a good God!

## **Healing Comes From God**

At ORU, healing is in our DNA. This university was founded under the belief that all healing comes from God. Roberts' own healing from tuberculosis uniquely authorized him to tell others about the healing power of God. Roberts knew what it was like to be sick and what it felt like to have God's power flow through his body, healing him from tuberculosis and stuttering while raising him up to serve the Lord. Roberts began his healing ministry in 1947 while he was pastoring a small church in Enid, Oklahoma. In a time of searching, Roberts began to remember the promise God had made in the back of the car that he would take his healing power to his generation. He began to study over and over again the healing ministry of Jesus and the ministry of healing in the early church. Over a period of a few weeks, Roberts devoted himself to reading all of the Gospels and Acts on his knees three consecutive times. It was out of this season of study and seeking God that Roberts began to understand that God wanted to heal people. Whether it was through a point of contact or building a hospital, Roberts was passionate about the fact that God was the healer.

That legacy of healing is still in our DNA today. Standing at the front of our campus are two giant hands. Most people call them the "praying hands," but in Oral Roberts' mind they were healing hands. One hand represents prayer and the power of God to heal supernaturally and the other hand represents science and the surgeon's hand healing through medicine as one of God's healing gifts. They are combined to symbolize healing for the totality of human beings. As president, I can confidently say that at ORU we still believe that God is a healing God and he is using us to bring healing to the world.

## **The Holy Spirit Is Foundational**

At ORU, it is in our DNA that the Holy Spirit is foundational to our university. Belief in the Holy Spirit was integral to the life and ministry of Oral Roberts. Roberts was a son of the Pentecostal movement and in

his lifetime he became a bridge between the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements.<sup>10</sup> Roberts helped to create a new vocabulary helping new people embrace the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Roberts was deeply committed to the Spirit-filled life and various manifestations of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> What is now a beautiful 263-acre campus with over twenty buildings was once a vacant pasture where Oral Roberts would walk the grounds praying in tongues and interpreting back to himself.<sup>12</sup> It is this legacy of dependence on the Holy Spirit in Roberts' life that built this university. All of the buildings, from the student dorms to the chapel, were designed and created through our founder praying in the Spirit.<sup>13</sup> God told Roberts to build a university on his authority and on the Holy Spirit. This idea was new, different, and unique. There were many early battles and struggles around this philosophy as he sought to build a university that would do things differently.<sup>14</sup> His concept of "whole person" education became a key to keeping the Spirit above the mind in ascendancy within this university. Roberts said,

I was told to build God a university, build it on His authority and on the Holy Spirit. That is why every leader and professor must know Christ as personal Savior and be filled with the Holy Spirit in the charismatic dimension of speaking in tongues. The Holy Spirit is to be the common denominator of all of ORU's founding, operation and future. The reason is that God created man in His own image and not a mere mind or physical being.<sup>15</sup>

We still believe this today at ORU. The Holy Spirit is under this university, around this university, and through this university. The presence of the Holy Spirit permeates our chapel services, empowers our faculty, and drives our mission. Just as the founder taught his "Holy Spirit in the Now" class to all his students, every year I teach a "Spirit-empowered Living" class for all our students in which I emphasize hearing God's voice. ORU was founded on the Holy Spirit. Every day we welcome the Holy Spirit amongst us. This is also the key factor that will ensure an awesome future at ORU. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life, the Spirit of truth, and the Spirit of prophecy. He will empower us to grow into the future with supernatural discernment and effectiveness.

## Hearing and Obeying God

At ORU, hearing and obeying God's voice is in our DNA. Roberts believed in and practiced hearing God's voice no matter the personal cost. He believed that his assignment in this life was simply to obey what God had spoken to him. Nothing demonstrated his willingness to obey God's voice more than the building of ORU. The shift from healing evangelist to university president was not an easy one for people to understand. By the late 1950s, Roberts had become America's healing evangelist and people streamed to his crusades from everywhere. He personally laid his hands on and prayed for over one million people. His ministry was by all accounts a success and there were more than 700 employees at one time serving at his headquarters here in Tulsa. Therefore, when Roberts began to share his plan to build a university with the members of his team, not everyone was on board and some doubted that this was a good idea. A critical moment came when his twelve top associates asked for a meeting with Roberts to question him about his plans and what building a university might do to his healing ministry.<sup>16</sup> After some discussion, one of the leaders plucked up the courage to tell Roberts why they had asked for the meeting. He said, "If you persist in building the university, all of us have decided to leave."<sup>17</sup> This was a crisis moment. But Roberts did not flinch. He responded,

Despite what anyone may think or believe, God Himself called me to build Him a university, build it on His authority and the Holy Spirit. I am not leaving the healing ministry; it is my life. However, God does not operate in a vacuum. He is constantly moving forward and I have learned we must move with God. I have to obey God and start building Him a university, permeating every part of it with the divine principle that God is a healing God. I may fall on my face. I may fail. It may never fly, but I have to do it. If you leave me, it will break my heart. However, if I obey God as I intend to do, I know He will raise up another team to serve with me.<sup>19</sup>

After Roberts gave his speech, he left the room. A few hours later, all twelve senior leaders asked for another meeting. When Roberts came

into the room, they cried and hugged him. They said, “Oral, we had to know that it was God’s call on you to build the university. The only way we could know for sure that it was God was to bring things to a head. We’re not leaving. You lead and we’ll follow.”<sup>19</sup>

Oral Roberts committed himself not only to hearing God’s voice, but also to obeying his voice without compromise. He famously said, “If God tells me to jump through the wall, I jump. That’s my business. It’s His business to make the hole in the wall for me to jump through.” Deep in our DNA at ORU, we believe that our students must find their path and develop the sensitivity needed to hear God’s voice. We want our students to be so confident that they have heard God’s voice that, like Roberts said, they will “jump toward the wall believing that God will make a hole in it.”

## Live with Generous Expectation

The final aspect of Roberts’ DNA that is seen in ORU is that of generosity. This principle is exemplified in his concept of Seed Faith.<sup>20</sup> The concept of Seed Faith was birthed out of an experience early in his ministry when he was trying to raise money for a new parsonage in Enid, Oklahoma. To excite the congregation, Roberts gave his entire week’s earnings into the offering without telling his wife, Evelyn. This act of faith was a huge sacrifice since they were living week to week, so much so that he did not know how he was going to feed his family that week. Nevertheless, about four in the morning a farmer knocked on his door and gave him a bag of money. The farmer explained that he could not sleep, so he went out and dug up the “seed money” he had stored away for the spring planting. When Roberts counted it, it was seven times more than his entire week’s earnings, which he had given at church that night.<sup>21</sup> This early experience developed in Roberts a principle that would mark his entire ministry: “If you will sow, you will reap.” Roberts leaned heavily on this principle from Luke’s gospel: “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38 NKJV). Alternatively, in the *Message Bible*, the verse reads, “Give

away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

While his concept of Seed Faith was applied to more than just finances, he keenly recognized that God's work required people to be generous. Oral Roberts once said to me that this principle was the thing that built everything: the ministry, the university, and the City of Faith. Roberts taught people that you can never out give God by giving generously. He preached that the more you sow, the more God brings your way. And if he can get it through you, he can bring it to you. Roberts truly believed that God will bless you if you are generous.

## Conclusion

A half century ago, Oral Roberts dreamed a big dream to build a university. He accomplished that dream by hearing God's voice and obeying him no matter what. Today, ORU still embodies that vision. It is my desire that ORU continue as a vehicle in God's hands to spread the DNA of this university around the world so that in the days to come people will say, “That's a university that thinks big. They believe God is a good God. They believe all healing comes from God. They believe that the Holy Spirit is the foundation for all of life. They believe you need to hear God's voice, and when you hear him obey without compromise. And they believe that when you live generously and when you open your hands, God will open his hands.” Yes, we can learn a lot from the history of our DNA!



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## Notes

- 1 This study is an adaptation of a sermon originally delivered in chapel at Oral Roberts University on January 24, 2018, to mark Oral Roberts' 100th birthday. Minor editorial revisions to the original text were made for written publication.
- 2 Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 32.
- 3 David Edwin Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), vii.
- 4 Neil Eskelin, *The New ORU: Empowered for the 21st Century* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts University, 2018), 126–59.
- 5 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 73.
- 6 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 33–34.
- 7 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 67–68.
- 8 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 76.
- 9 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 177–79.
- 10 Vinson Synan, “Oral Roberts: Son of Pentecostalism, Father of the Charismatic Movement,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 2:1–2 (2017), 18–19.
- 11 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 464–68.
- 12 Oral Roberts, *The Ultimate Voice: God's Still Small Voice, the Clearest and Loudest Voice You'll Ever Hear* (Tulsa, OK: Pengold Garrett & Assoc., 2008), 136.
- 13 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 210.
- 14 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 218–20.
- 15 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 177–78.
- 16 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 210.
- 17 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 165.
- 18 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 166.
- 19 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 166.
- 20 Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 460–63.
- 21 Oral Roberts, *Seed-Faith 2000* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1999), 13–17.

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