

THEOLOGY, SHAPING THE SOUL OF A FAITH COMMUNITY

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In the 1970s, James McClendon of Fuller Seminary published a ground-breaking work, *Biography as Theology*,¹ which underwent several revisions and expansions. Applying this to the role of theology at Oral Roberts University, we can argue that theology shapes the community's identity and life. At the same time, the dynamic life of the community also forms and reforms its theology. Two popular sayings in the ORU theology community may express this dynamic role of theology. One is "Where the Seminary Goes, So Does the University." No one can trace its origin. This might have been a common thought among the ORU theology community, encouraging one another to remain faithful to the founding goal in theology and life. The vision, thus, is worth repeating: "Raise up your students to hear My voice to go where My light is dim, where My voice is heard small, and My healing is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased." This vision should be understood in the context of the era when Christian, particularly Evangelical, higher education experienced a steady erosion of the founding ideology. It is also possible that university leaders expressed this in private or public settings. Jimmie Buskirk, the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry's (GSTM) founding dean, regularly appeared as a theological figure in Oral Roberts' TV program. The other statement was made by Thomson Mathew, a former dean of the GSTM: "When one goes through ORU, ORU also goes through him." It emphasizes that the faith community embodies the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. Both statements illustrate the far-reaching impact of theology on community members.

A casual observation of the half-century history of the university suggests several major turning points in its theological emphases. The founder envisioned the university as a global training hub for healing evangelists, as the original name implies. The vision was quickly expanded to include "every man's [*sic!*] world," as the institution was expanded to become a liberal arts Christian university. The earlier constituents were (classical) Pentecostal churches; thus, most students were drawn from them. The

¹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974).

founder's move to the United Methodist Church in 1968 also pivoted the university to serve mainline churches in addition to the Pentecostal partners. This ecumenical expansion had significant theological implications, which the opening of the GSTM and its composition of the faculty and students showcased. Then came the explosive growth of the Charismatic renewal movement, for which the university effectively served as the institutional home. The ecumenical expansion of ORU's theology providentially opened this rare role. Then came the founder's decoupling with the Methodist Church in 1987, resulting in another theological shift. The next constituent of the university was the Word of Faith movement, which might have considered Oral Roberts the progenitor of the prosperity gospel. This extreme move of ORU's theological pendulum must have posed a formidable challenge to ORU's theological community. The various theological eras can be substantiated by analyzing the chapel speakers and titles. However, one fundamental question arises to a theological eye: "How intentional were the theological shifts, vis-à-vis the founding vision and theology of the university?" The theological evolution may have occurred with whom the university decided to associate. The motivation could be multifaceted, but the theological shift was inevitable.

Any process of theological formation has many contributors, both human figures and events. For the College of Theology and Ministry (COTM), the establishment of the GSTM in 1976 represents a significant turning point. This occurred after the founder's radical decision to close the university's theology department in 1969. Thus, the COTM community began a reflective journey toward the golden jubilee in 2026. The GSTM's Advisory Board approved in 2022 the publication of a celebration book. It would contain two parts: the past of its theological formation and impact, and the aspiration of ORU theology impacting on the university and the global Spirit-empowered Movement.

This journal issue takes the first part of the planned book: tracing various actors and milestones contributing to the theological formation of the COTM, which in turn contributed to the university's theological and spiritual identity and ethos. Collecting memories and voices was enriching but also challenging. Enriching as they deepened our understanding of ORU's "thick" spiritual deposits. I benefit greatly as an "outside" insider. Into the eighth year of my membership in the ORU family, I did not have meaningful knowledge of Oral Roberts, the university's founder, nor did I or someone close to me study at ORU. In this context, long-serving members of the university are valuable memory banks, but this generation is steadily replaced by new members (both professors, staff, and students) who "know not 'Joseph.'" Memories disappear as the memory holders are gone. A new ORU can be shaped only if the unique spiritual and theological foundation is identified and appreciated. But the project was challenging as the studies primarily depend on memories. It is encouraging to see more studies on Oral Roberts and ORU in recent years, and the university's Holy Spirit Resource Center has played a critical role in capturing them. But the bulk of the memories

remain in people's minds. And, over the years, what one remembers tends to go through a process of distortion and selectivity. Thus, a factual and contextual data presentation must go through validation or triangulation. In such an environment, published material helps the validation process. However, even published reports, either in-house or via public media, were biased as, for example, the founder was caught in public controversies. For these reasons, the editors highly commend the diligent research of each contributor, producing their valuable studies published in this issue.

The studies may be in three categories: on Oral Roberts as the founder; the historical development of the COTM; and selected programs that reflected, and contributed to, ORU theology. For the first category, John Thompson begins with an unusual friendship between Roberts and Billy Graham, which predated the university's opening in 1965. This encounter and ensuing relationship must have profoundly impacted Roberts' theology. Coming from a burgeoning Pentecostal denomination, the audience and supporters for his massive tent gatherings and TV programs were predominantly Pentecostal believers. His new openness to the broader church world impacted ORU's theological school. This historical exploration compels the readers to ask many questions of implication. Daniel Isgrigg's review article engages with a recently published book portraying Roberts as a prosperity preacher. This claim is rather widespread, particularly in the global South. This critical review is timely as a careful and nuanced response is needed. Finally, a study by Sameh Barsoum and Paul King is on the Oral Roberts Bible Institute program, which is little known to many ORU members. This global program has spread ORU theology among thousands as an "outreach" service to pre-college youth. Although the program may not have impacted the theological formation of the university, the program remains a significant mechanism for sharing ORU's theology.

There are three studies on the Graduate Theology department for the second category. Larry Hart produced the history of Graduate Theology in 2013 to celebrate the university's fiftieth anniversary. Bill Buker revised and updated the study to its current form. Daniel Isgrigg chronicles the period between the opening of the theological school and its closing. His access to various archival materials allows him to bring insight into drastic changes and theological stakeholders during the period. James Shelton, a long-serving faculty member, takes up the period when Buskirk served as the dean of the re-opened graduate school of theology (1976–1984). As a clergy training institution recognized by the United Methodist Church, the seminary had a radically different outlook from the earlier school. Combining his first-hand experience and written records, the current study is a revision of an earlier published work. At least one more study is warranted to cover the following decades, and we hope to add one when the book is published.

The third category consists of studies on two theology programs. The first is a study on the Doctor of Ministry program by Celine Butler. Until the introduction of the theology PhD program, the DMin program in several concentrations enjoyed the flagship status. With more than 200 graduates, the research produced by its students is a profound part of Spirit-empowered scholarship. The second is on the Jewish Study program by Pamela Idriss, a product of the program, now serving as an advisory board member of the GSTM. This program in a Charismatic school drew attention among seminarians for its scholarship and unique nature. Now discontinued, the study provides a rare window into the particular circumstances leading to the program.

As an appendix, Robert McBain updates the initial bibliography on Oral Roberts published in 2018, now expanded to include academic publications on Oral Roberts University. Six book reviews close this special issue of *Spiritus*.

This collection is a meaningful first step toward the historical and theological construction of the COTM. We recognize that there are overlaps between the studies, especially for the second part, and welcome the different perspectives such overlap brings forth. The closing point is the fiftieth anniversary of the university (2013). The editors invite additional information and reflections on the formation of ORU theology. We already identified missing components of history for follow-up. The COTM is also shaping the contents of the book’s second part: the future shaping of ORU theology and its global role. Through all these efforts, we want to lift Christ’s name, who reigns over his kingdom in which the university actively participates.

The editorial ends with a timeline of the College of Theology and Ministry, prepared by Rebekah Bled.

Timeline of the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry

1965	Opening of the University
1965	Opening of the Graduate School of Theology with R. O. Corvin as the founding dean
1969	Closure of the Graduate School of Theology
1976	Reopening of the Graduate School of Theology with James “Jimmy” Buskirk as the dean
1980	Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada
Late 1970–early 80s	Name change to Graduate School of Theology and Missions
Early 1990s	Name change to Graduate School of Theology and Ministry

2009	Formation of the College of Theology and Ministry with the Undergraduate Department of Theology and the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry
2022	Formation of the School of Counseling

Deans

1965–1968	R. O. Corvin
1975–1984	James Buskirk
1984–1988	Larry Lea
1988–1996	Paul G. Chappell
1996–2000	Jerry Horner
2000–2016	Thomson Mathew
2016–2017	Vinson Synan (interim)
2017–2018	Samuel Thorpe (interim)
2018–2023	Wonsuk Ma
2023–Present	Adrian Hinkle

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