

# ORAL ROBERTS AND BILLY GRAHAM

A FRIENDSHIP THAT INFLUENCED THE CHRISTIAN WORLD

JOHN PAUL THOMPSON

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## Abstract

The study explores the relationship between Oral Roberts and Billy Graham. Their personal admiration for each other and their public display of friendship influenced their own ministries, the attitudes of the broader evangelical community, and even the development of holistic mission and a broader understanding of gospel in the evangelical world. Two catalytic public moments together are considered: Roberts speaking and praying at Graham's World Congress on Evangelization in Berlin and Graham speaking at the dedication of Oral Roberts University.

## Introduction

Two world-renowned evangelists of the twentieth century, Oral Roberts and Billy Graham, stood side by side on the new campus of Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on April 2, 1967. The crowds on the lawn swelled to nearly 20,000 that day to personally witness these two spiritual giants bless the establishment of a Christian university forged from the fires of healing evangelism. In the post-World War II era, these two evangelists had become the premiere leaders in their particular streams of Evangelicalism. Billy Graham was at the helm of the populous Evangelical movement, and Oral Roberts represented the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement of the mid-twentieth century, considered by many to be a subset of Evangelicalism. These two Christian communities shared the same roots of American fundamentalism and Protestant pietism, but suspicion lingered between them. This public display of solidarity between Billy Graham and Oral Roberts surprised many Christians and contributed credibility to this new fledgling university. On that day, the Christian world in America witnessed the friendship and shared passion for education between these two icons of American Christianity. Billy Graham's declaration over Oral Roberts University became part of the lore passed down to subsequent generations of students. The friendship between Oral Roberts and Billy Graham not only impacted the

university but also contributed to Roberts' journey into mainstream American Christianity and to the evolution of evangelical thought regarding the nature of the gospel, evangelism, and mission in subsequent years.

## A Friendship as Fellow Evangelists

This friendship had begun seventeen years earlier, in the summer of 1950 in Portland, Oregon. Graham and Roberts had each been leading crusades across the country for three years. Roberts intentionally traveled to Portland to hear Graham preach and to hopefully meet him. They first met by chance in the hotel before the evening crusade. Billy and Ruth Graham spotted Roberts in the café and hollered at him to come join them. Graham spontaneously asked Roberts to pray at his crusade that evening. He tried to decline, saying, "That might not be the thing to do because I'm very controversial [due to] my healing ministry." To which Graham responded, "You are not controversial in my services." Though many Evangelicals did not accept Roberts and his ministry at the time, Graham had already secretly visited one of Roberts' crusades the year before in Florida for several nights. Several of his family members had been prayed for as well by Roberts.<sup>1</sup>

## Mutual Respect and Interaction

The two deeply respected each other, valued each other's ministry, and had a long-standing friendship. Roberts publicly expressed his belief that Graham was "the greatest of our century. He has the greatest crowds; he has the widest influence on government leaders."<sup>2</sup> He affirmed that Graham had "a great soul-winning call," while Graham recognized Roberts had the gift of healing.<sup>3</sup> He even confided with Roberts that the reason he did not pray for the sick in his crusades was simply that he did not have the healing gift that Roberts had. Graham affirmed that their objective was the same even though their method and approach were different.<sup>4</sup> Almost sixty years after their first face-to-face meeting in 1950, in 2009, each of them reflected on their personal friendship. Roberts stated, "Billy was the most generous man in the ministry I've ever met. He accepted me as a brother. He said he fell in love with my ministry. I counted

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<sup>1</sup> Oral Roberts, "Oral Roberts: Legendary Oklahoma Evangelist, Founder of ORU," interview by John Erling, *Voices of Oklahoma*, August 11, 2009, audio chapter 9, 5:57, <https://www.voicesofoklahoma.com/interviews/roberts-oral>.

<sup>2</sup> Hiley H. Ward, "Roberts Says Graham Is the Greatest" (Newspaper clipping from 1966 Berlin Congress) in ORU Archives, Oral Roberts University.

<sup>3</sup> Roberts, "Meeting Billy Graham."

<sup>4</sup> "Billy Graham to Oral Roberts, July 1950," Correspondence File, ORU Archives, Oral Roberts University.

him as the number one evangelist in the world. We became very close friends.” Similarly, Graham said, “Oral Roberts was a man of God and a great friend in ministry. I loved him as a brother. We had many quiet conversations over the years.”<sup>5</sup> Those conversations included periodic personal correspondence and times together.<sup>6</sup> They occasionally spent time together in each other’s world over the decades. At least three times (1950, 1965, and 1974), Roberts traveled to a Billy Graham crusade or meeting, which typically included Roberts addressing the crowd and personal conversations together.<sup>7</sup> At least twice, Graham visited Roberts on the campus of ORU. Graham spoke at the dedication of the university in 1967, and again at the dedication of the massive Mabee Center on the campus five years later in 1972. When Roberts ministered in North Carolina, Graham invited Roberts and his wife to brunch in their home. When Graham was near Tulsa, Roberts drove to Oklahoma City to be with him. They had extended time together as well at the Berlin Congress on World Evangelization in 1966. Their long and personal friendship is reflected in the gift Roberts sent Graham late in their lives. It was the identical walker he was using, to which Graham replied, “Oral, you’ve sent me the Cadillac!”<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, this friendship made sense as they both shared several similarities. They were the same age, born in the same year of 1918. Both launched into crusade ministry in the same year of 1947. Both quickly became renowned evangelists holding crusades throughout the United States and internationally as well. Both grew up and were shaped by the American fundamentalism of the first half of the twentieth century, which held a deep conviction on the authority of Scripture and holiness.

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<sup>5</sup> “Statement from Oral Roberts University on the Passing of Reverend Billy Graham,” ORU News Page, February 21, 2018, [https://oru.edu/news/oru\\_news/20180221-billy-graham-statement.php?locale=en](https://oru.edu/news/oru_news/20180221-billy-graham-statement.php?locale=en).

<sup>6</sup> “Oral Roberts to Billy Graham,” Correspondence File, ORU Archives, Oral Roberts University.

<sup>7</sup> The first time was in 1950 in Portland, Oregon. The second time was in 1965 at Graham’s crusade in Denver. This second visit came shortly after Graham had sent Roberts a personal congratulatory note on the founding of the university. During Roberts’ visit at Graham’s Denver crusade, they discussed the university among other things. “Billy Graham Interview Oral Roberts Specials – Playlist,” OR-116H Oral Roberts On Campus, 1972, <https://video.lemoin.com/VIDEOplaylistORUSPECIALS.htm>. In 1974, Roberts drove to Oklahoma City where Graham was speaking. After the meeting, Graham asked Roberts to give him a ride to Tulsa so he could catch an early morning flight out of Tulsa. This time the conversation included praise from Graham regarding the latest primetime television show Roberts had just aired. He said, “Oral, that’s the best Christian program I have ever seen on television. I admire your willingness to change your methods when it will get your message across better.” Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 371.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, “Meets Billy Graham.”

## Representatives of a New Evangelicalism

After the Second World War, a new Evangelicalism emerged out of fundamentalism, and both played significant roles in this emerging stream. New Evangelicals sought to leave behind the strong separatism from that had developed in fundamentalism, and they desired to have cultural influence. Graham was at the populist center for the new Evangelicalism. Both he and Roberts called all Americans to a life-transforming faith and preached their versions of that message beyond the walls of the local church to all in the surrounding society. They proclaimed the gospel in the largest tents money could buy, in stadiums, and on television to speak to all Americans. Seeking to influence culture, Graham met with every American president, from Truman to Obama, and was seen as pastor to presidents. Likewise, Roberts also met with presidents from Kennedy to Bush, and he hosted many cultural icons, including actors, singers, and political figures on his prime-time television specials between 1969 and 1975.<sup>9</sup>

The new Evangelicalism also included a renewal of scholarship and regaining a foothold in academia. Both men carried this desire and passion. In the American academic story, the Protestant religious establishment lost its central role in the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the United States over the course of a century between 1870 and 1970. University life was dominated by a Protestant establishment in the late nineteenth century in America. In less than a century, however, religion had lost its influence in the academy. Secularism in the public university had taken hold. In the fifty years from 1870 to 1920, evangelical Protestantism lost its foothold in the university academy. In the next fifty years, from 1920 to 1970, the remaining liberal Protestantism lost its foothold as well.<sup>10</sup> According to Marsden, “The period from about 1920 to 1950 became a sort of academic dark age for conservative evangelical scholarship. Biblical considerations had been ruled out of bounds in the sciences.”<sup>11</sup> In response, conservative Evangelicals (fundamentalists) established Bible institutes to train people for ministry with the Bible as the center of the curriculum. However, this “almost thoroughly isolated and alienated [them] from the dominant American scientific culture.”<sup>12</sup> As a contributor to this new Evangelicalism’s renewal of scholarship, Roberts founded ORU to reestablish the bond of science and faith. The ten-meter-high bronze hands at the entrance of the university, displaying the hand of

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<sup>9</sup> David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 270.

<sup>10</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 148.

<sup>12</sup> Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 149.

prayer and the hand of medicine touching each other, depicts the symbiotic relationship of faith and science.

## Mutual Passion for Christian Education

For Roberts, his initial calling into ministry included building a university. He heard the voice of God in the car being transported to the revival meeting where he would be prayed for and subsequently healed from tuberculosis. God said, “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 on the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> During the years of his healing crusades, as he traveled to various cities, he would intentionally visit universities to gain ideas. He had conversations with professors, students, and architects.<sup>14</sup> He told audiences in his crusades that he would one day build a university. In the 1950s, he and his family often prayed over a piece of farmland on the south side of Tulsa, Oklahoma, that he had his eye on for a future campus. Over a meal in Virginia in 1960 with Pat Robertson, who founded the Christian Broadcasting Network that year, Roberts wrote down the ideas percolating in his mind over the course of his conversation with Robertson. The words would later be etched on the university chapel wall for generations of students: “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.”

While he knew he would one day build a university, Roberts initially envisioned a university of evangelism. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he desired to establish a Bible school for foreign students. In the summer of 1961, he initiated plans and purchased the farm he had prayed over many times from a wealthy owner who had previously been unwilling to sell. In February 1962, construction began on three initial buildings for his university of evangelism to train foreign and domestic ministers and workers. However, later that year, his own son Ronnie enrolled at Stanford to earn a degree in foreign languages. Roberts was deeply concerned by the *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s, and the effect being at a secular university might have on his own son. He reflected in his autobiography, “It seemed to me, man was coming apart: the 1960s youth rebellion against authority . . . the burning of university buildings; the rise of rock ‘n’ roll music; . . . the ‘God is dead’ theory coming out of Emory University in Atlanta; . . . and seeing a lost second generation of Pentecostals.”<sup>15</sup> Roberts and his wife Evelyn worried

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 159.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 179–80.

about the impact Stanford might have on their own son's spiritual health, but they knew Ronnie needed a liberal arts university, not a Bible school. Furthermore, Roberts felt deeply that a generation of Pentecostal kids was being swept away by higher learning institutions where God was not central. "The only answer he concluded was to 'build a major, Class A,' academic university in addition to the University of Evangelism."<sup>16</sup> In the short course of time, Roberts determined to build a liberal arts university with the Bible at the center.

Roberts founded the university in 1963, with the first class enrolled in 1965, and Graham came to dedicate the new university in 1967. Graham shared with Roberts that he, too, had seriously thought about establishing a Christian university for several years but felt he did not have the bandwidth to do so. He was thrilled that Roberts had built a magnificent university.<sup>17</sup> In his dedication speech, he highlighted that "during the past three hundred years, many of America's great universities were founded by evangelists."<sup>18</sup> He believed it was deeply significant that Oral Roberts University was founded by an evangelist. He declared to the crowd of 18,000 gathered that day, "The first objective of Christian education is a quest for truth," and that quest is "linked also to evangelism." He articulated how Christian education was critical to the future success of Christianity in the modern world, stating, "Christian education is at the center and must be at the center of an awakened, revived Christianity. The future of the entire missionary program, the future of informed witnessing Christians, the future of an enlarged Christian concern and influence are all at stake in higher Christian education today."<sup>19</sup> Graham had asked Roberts in Berlin the year before, "When are you going to invite me to your university?" Roberts immediately responded, asking him to come to dedicate the university. Their shared belief in the necessity of Christian universities with high academic excellence was an additional similarity that continued to strengthen their friendship.

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<sup>16</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> "Billy Graham to Oral Roberts," April 1965, Correspondence File, ORU Archives, Oral Roberts University.

<sup>18</sup> He mentioned Jonathan Edwards was one of the founders of Princeton, Charles Finney founded Oberlin; Dwight L. Moody founded the Norfield Schools and Moody Bible Institute. He then jumped to Oral Roberts establishing this university, but then circled back to spiritual purposes in the founding of Columbia and Dartmouth. Billy Graham, "ORU Dedication," Vimeo Video, 21:34, April 2, 1967, <https://vimeo.com/210812674>.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, "ORU Dedication."



Oral Roberts and Billy Graham, 1967 ORU Dedication  
Credit: ORU Archives

## Hurdles to Friendship

While both men shared a number of similarities, their differences could have easily prevented them from developing a friendship. Roberts attracted negative press, and he knew his association could create problems for Graham. Not only did Roberts suggest to him that it might not be a good idea for Roberts to pray at Graham's crusade in 1950, but later, when Roberts was ministering in North Carolina, Graham sent a man to invite Roberts and Evelyn to his home for brunch. Roberts turned down the invitation because he "did not want to infect" Graham with the controversial nature of his own ministry. Graham responded, "No, I want you," and sent the man back to bring the Roberts to their home. Roberts remarked that they had a conversation about the Lord following a delightful brunch.<sup>20</sup>

Graham demonstrated his genuine friendship at the Berlin Congress on World Evangelization in 1966. Even though he had been invited to chair a panel session on healing, Roberts was very hesitant to go. Afterward, he wrote to his *Abundant Life* readership:

Only the warm invitation of Billy Graham and Carl Henry had prevailed upon us to go . . . Perhaps any reluctance on our part was that our ministry of evangelism

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<sup>20</sup> Roberts, "Meeting Billy Graham."

and healing have been considered by some to be on the periphery of the great stream of evangelical Christianity. We felt a deep love and appreciation for these men for their sacrificial labors to win souls. However, since the healing ministry had not been understood to be an integral part of the mainstream of the gospel, we were not sure how our ministry would be accepted or what our contribution could be to the Congress. Billy Graham, his team and these leaders reached out to us in Christian love and we reached out to them. It was soon evident there were no real barriers between us.<sup>21</sup>

At the Congress, Graham invited Roberts to eat dinner with him and the other key leaders there. Graham decided to invite him to address all the delegates in a general session. “It was an audacious decision that would bring immediate attacks from fundamentalists and conservative critics.”<sup>22</sup> Graham leveraged his own position and influence in spite of the offense he knew other participants would take. He introduced Roberts at the evening plenary session to all the delegates with these words:

Our prayer is going to be led by a man that I have come to love and appreciate in the ministry of evangelism. He has just built, and is in the process of building a great university. He is known throughout the world through his radio and television work, and millions of people listen to him. I am speaking of Dr. Oral Roberts, and I’m going to ask him to say a word of greeting to us before he leads the prayer.<sup>23</sup>

Warren Hultgren, a Southern Baptist minister, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Tulsa, and Roberts’ friend, had strongly encouraged Roberts to go to Berlin. Being present when he then spoke and prayed at that plenary in Berlin, Hultgren observed the historic nature of the moment. He felt it was “the ‘unconscious turning point’ in that conference and in Oral’s life.”<sup>24</sup> Graham’s risky and strategic move shifted perspectives for many of the gathered leaders of the evangelical world, and it did become a catalytic moment in Roberts’ life.

## Mutual Influence

The friendship of these two world-renowned evangelists created space for and fostered mutual influence on each other and, because of their prominent roles in the body of Christ, had broader ramifications. Biographer David Harrell chronicled Roberts’ movement from the tributaries of Pentecostalism into the mainstream river of

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<sup>21</sup> Oral Roberts, “My personal Impressions of the World Congress on Evangelism,” *Abundant Life*, January 1967, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 201.

<sup>23</sup> Oral Roberts, “We have been Conquered by Love,” *Abundant Life*, February 1967, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 204.



Evangelicalism and American Christianity. His upbringing and early ministry were immersed in the classical Pentecostal world. Pentecostals of the first half of the twentieth century in America were on the periphery of society in general and in the Christian world as well. Their typical economic poverty and holiness ethics kept them out of the mainstream of American life. Emotional worship, emphasis on Spirit baptism as a second work of grace evidenced by speaking in tongues, and the exercise of other spiritual gifts from 1 Corinthians 12:1–3 relegated Pentecostals to the periphery of American Christianity. Though they were fundamentalists in their affirmation of the authority of Scripture and their eschatology, many fundamentalists were cessationists. Consequently, Pentecostals were often viewed by other fundamentalists with skepticism at best.

## Movement to Mainstream

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Roberts intentionally moved into the circles of mainstream evangelical Christianity. In the late 1960s, Roberts left his Pentecostal denomination and joined the mainline United Methodist Church. With a membership of 11,000,000, it dwarfed his Pentecostal denomination of 65,000.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he closed the chapter of two decades of crusade ministry and launched primetime television specials and a weekly Sunday morning program to capture the American viewing audience. Ten million people tuned in to his first primetime television special in 1969. In 1973, over 37,000,000 watched the spring primetime show.<sup>26</sup> Many were reading Roberts' magazines and books as well. His magazine *Abundant Life* grew to 1,000,000 in monthly circulation.<sup>27</sup> He wrote books that were distributed worldwide, and his quarterly devotional, *Daily Blessings*, had a quarterly circulation of 250,000.<sup>28</sup> He had become a household name in America, and much of the opposition had fallen by the wayside. People everywhere were reading his books and magazines and watching him regularly on television. By 1970, Roberts had been accepted by the leaders in the Evangelical world (apart from the fundamentalist cessationist contingent). *The New York Times* wrote in 1973, "In the wake of his plunge into prime-time television, Roberts commands more personal loyalty than any other clergyman of the nineteen-seventies. Graham is obviously the dominant figure of the era, but he is a more impersonal force."<sup>29</sup>

Three forces in the decade of the 1960s propelled Roberts out of those ominous Pentecostal shadows of the first half of the twentieth century into the limelight of

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<sup>25</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 299.

<sup>26</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 269.

<sup>27</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 275.

<sup>28</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 276.

<sup>29</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 303.

mainstream American life and American Christianity: the formation of a Christian liberal arts university, the groundswell of the Charismatic Renewal in the 1960s, and the friendship of Graham. At times, all or a few of these three components overlapped. Graham gave the university legitimacy when he came to dedicate it in 1967. The Charismatic Renewal gave the Pentecostal experience legitimacy in the evangelical and ecumenical wings of Protestantism as well as among Roman Catholics. Oral Roberts University became a hub for leaders in the Charismatic Renewal to pass through and to congregate with Roberts, who was positioned to be a connector and facilitator in this movement.

Integral to the story of Roberts' trek from the periphery to the center was Graham's hand of friendship. Despite their different backgrounds and methodologies, they were united in their passion for the gospel, evangelism, and influencing culture. Though Roberts experienced persistent opposition from various quarters of the Christian community, Graham appreciated, accepted, and publicly applauded him. Graham leveraged his position of influence on his behalf. Just nine months after Graham boldly showcased him at the Berlin Congress plenary, Graham again faced opposition from his own constituency by coming to the new campus of Oral Roberts University to help dedicate it. "Graham's supporters feared he would be irreparably damaged by such a close association with Oral; his office in Minneapolis was flooded with letters warning him of the risk."<sup>30</sup> Five years later, Graham again came to the university campus and joined Roberts on one of his primetime specials to dedicate the new basketball arena and auditorium, the Mabee Center. Graham repeatedly invited Roberts to stand beside him publicly: in front of his crusade crowds in Portland and Denver, then in front of the leaders of the Evangelical world gathered in Berlin, and finally in front of the world dedicating the ORU campus, not just once but twice.

The divide between Pentecostals and Evangelicals was still present, but the seeds of change had been sown through that friendship, and early fruits were appearing that today have grown into maturity. Biographer David Harrell observed,

Roberts's friendship with Billy Graham—highlighted by Oral's presence in Berlin and Graham's dedication address at ORU—did much to lessen tensions between charismatics and evangelicals . . . . While many evangelicals remained reserved about Pentecostals and Roberts—the movements still remain "half-sisters" with considerable "sibling rivalry"—Oral's embrace by Graham was sufficient to open many doors.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 291.

Harrell wrote those words in 1985. Today, almost forty years later, the Evangelical and Pentecostal worlds are nearly one and the same, no longer “half-sisters” nor with “sibling rivalry.” The seeds are now full grown. With the swell of the subsequent third wave of Pentecostalism (or neo-Pentecostals as classical Pentecostals like to refer to them) and the global growth of all three Pentecostal streams—classical Pentecostals, Charismatics, and the third wave—Pentecostalism seems to have almost thoroughly leavened the loaf of Evangelicalism across the world.

## **Expansion of Gospel Understanding**

At the heart of this merging identity of Evangelicals and Pentecostals today is the theological development of an expanded understanding of the gospel and mission over the past fifty-plus years. Much of the twentieth century was marked by a separation of gospel proclamation and social action in the Protestant world. Liberal Protestants engaged in humanitarian mission, and evangelical Protestants engaged in the spiritual mission of saving souls and planting churches. In between these two extremes, Pentecostalism grew. Theologically, they embraced the Evangelical emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the primacy of evangelism. But their praxis emphasized God’s desire to transform the whole person, not just the soul and ethics. For Pentecostals, with Roberts becoming the dominant American example, evangelism was accompanied by demonstrations of power through divine healing and miracles. He pressed this further by establishing a university that educated the whole person (mind, body, and spirit) and brought together science and spirituality.

This friendship did not just impact Roberts’ life, though. It impacted Graham’s as well. Graham watched Roberts pray for the sick in his crusades both in person in 1949, and likely on television as they were aired across the country in the 1950s. Members of his family had gone through Roberts’ prayer line. He witnessed the empathy and compassion that Roberts displayed for people’s physical suffering. Graham believed Roberts had the gift of healing. In the context of his Southern Baptist heritage that strongly leaned toward cessationism before the growing influence of the Charismatic and third wave movements, this acceptance of healing was rather remarkable and progressive. During his visit to the campus of Oral Roberts, he witnessed the philosophy of whole person education firsthand and endorsed it in his dedication speech. Humans do not just have a mind and a spirit. They have a body. The three are integrated; all three matter to God, and all three need to be developed. It was not just whole person education, but healing was at the core of the university. This was summed up in the culminating and final statement of the university’s purpose articulated in 1970, “[T]o enable students to go into every man’s world with healing for the totality

of human need.”<sup>32</sup> Healing for the totality of human needs goes beyond physical ailments and spiritual wellbeing. It includes relational, emotional, economic, organizational, and societal health. Graham’s presence on the campus and personal conversations with Roberts regarding the mission and vision of the university would have exposed him to Oral’s holistic perspective that included both theory and practice.

Because of Graham’s role at the center of Evangelicalism, Roberts’ impact on Graham planted a seed in his heart that influenced all of Evangelical Christianity. Not only did other Evangelical leaders shift their attitudes toward Roberts and his brand of Christianity because of the public friendship of Graham, Graham participated in laying the foundation for the fundamental shift in the Evangelical world in the understanding of mission and evangelism. Just eight years after the Berlin Congress on World Evangelization, Graham and another friend, John Stott, organized an even larger, long-lasting, and impactful congress, the Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization in 1974. The resulting Lausanne Covenant became “one of the most significant documents in modern church history, shaping evangelical thinking for the rest of the century.”<sup>33</sup> A watershed component in the Lausanne Covenant was the inclusion of “Christian Social Responsibility” as one of the fifteen affirmations of the covenant.

Graham alluded to the importance of meeting the social needs of man in his closing address at the Berlin Congress in 1966. In reflecting on the content of the previous ten days, he remarked, “I think, secondly, that we have said that *the social needs of men can be met in the Gospel and only in the Gospel*. A person’s basic need is conversion.”<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, he recognized the importance of meeting the social needs. But still, he held to the Evangelical dogma of the day represented in that gathering that the spiritual takes precedence and it is only through conversion of the individual to Christ that social needs can be met.

Eight years later at the Lausanne Congress, social responsibility was elevated and elaborated on through the editorial work of Stott in the Lausanne Covenant. The covenant called for “justice . . . and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression.”<sup>35</sup> It went on to repent for not embracing both evangelism and social action. “We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes

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<sup>32</sup> Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 183–84.

<sup>33</sup> “Billy Graham and John Stott,” Lausanne Movement Page, accessed 31 May 2023, [https://lausanne.org/billy-graham-and-john-stott?gclid=Cj0KCQjw4NujBhC5ARIsAF4Iv6fEg\\_5u\\_yVjxQTQR5JK18FzKaOFqh7PhQH13gn07ocV2VDbiYYk4aArrsEALw\\_wcB](https://lausanne.org/billy-graham-and-john-stott?gclid=Cj0KCQjw4NujBhC5ARIsAF4Iv6fEg_5u_yVjxQTQR5JK18FzKaOFqh7PhQH13gn07ocV2VDbiYYk4aArrsEALw_wcB).

<sup>34</sup> Billy Graham, “Stains on the Altar,” in *One Race, One Gospel, One Task: World Congress on Evangelism. Papers and Reports*, vol. 1, eds. Carl F. H. Henry and W. Stanley Mooneyham (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1967), 151. The emphases are in the original.

<sup>35</sup> John Stott, “The Lausanne Covenant,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice, International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne, Switzerland: Official Reference Volume: Papers and Responses*, ed. J. D. Douglas, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 4.

regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive.”<sup>36</sup> And it continued on, “[W]e affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”<sup>37</sup> Even the message of salvation is not just for individuals, but it also speaks to societal systems. It read, “The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression, and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.”<sup>38</sup> While Graham was not the architect of the document, his opening address at Lausanne made it clear he valued social action and desired that this congress would flesh out the relationship between evangelism and social action. The fifth affirmation of the covenant was the result of his intention for the conference.

Graham’s opening speech entitled “Why Lausanne?” detailed four foundation stones and four hopes for the conference. Embedded in both the foundation stones and the hopes was the issue of social responsibility. The foundation stones were “four basic presuppositions” that he believed “should undergird our labors.” He also clarified that these four “have guided our planning and should underlie everything we do at this congress.”<sup>39</sup> The fourth foundation stone was that “we reaffirm that our witness must be by both word and deed,” to which he was referring to social action. Both verbal witness and social action are essential. In fact, works or social action are the evidence of salvation that comes from grace through faith. He noted that “many today are debating the question of the proper place of social action in the overall program of the Church” and he promised that “much will be said at this Congress concerning the matter.”<sup>40</sup> While he did not know if this would all be sorted out during the congress, “both our words and our deeds must both reflect the Gospel.”<sup>41</sup> He also highlighted the great evangelical tradition of social action wherein “evangelicals have changed society, influencing men everywhere in the battle against slavery and in the quest for social justice.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to this fourth “cornerstone” of Lausanne, Graham expressed a similar hope regarding the outcome of the congress. Graham declared, “I trust we can state what the relationship is between evangelism and social responsibility. Let us rejoice in social action, and yet insist that it alone is not evangelism and cannot be substituted

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<sup>36</sup> Stott, “The Lausanne Covenant,” 4.

<sup>37</sup> Stott, “The Lausanne Covenant,” 5.

<sup>38</sup> Stott, “The Lausanne Covenant,” 5.

<sup>39</sup> Billy Graham, “Why Lausanne?,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice, International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne, Switzerland: Official Reference Volume: Papers and Responses*, ed. J. D. Douglas, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, “Why Lausanne?,” 29.

<sup>41</sup> Graham, “Why Lausanne?,” 29.

<sup>42</sup> Graham, “Why Lausanne?,” 29.

for evangelism. This relationship disturbs many believers. Perhaps Lausanne can help clarify it.”<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, Graham had been thinking deeply about meeting the needs of humanity along with sharing the gospel. While there was mention of social action in Berlin eight years earlier, it was completely subjected to the primacy of evangelism. There appears to have been an evolution of thought for him eight years later as he articulated the issue and sought to make it one of the key topics for the Lausanne Congress to hammer out. The fifth article in the Lausanne Covenant was the result of that work. During the eight years between Berlin and Lausanne, he visited the campus of ORU twice. He affirmed Roberts’ philosophy of whole person education, and he valued his healing gift. Although Roberts was not present at Lausanne, his praxis and perspectives aligned with those Graham expressed in his opening speech and agenda for the congress.

## After Lausanne

Lausanne was a watershed moment. The Lausanne Covenant established the legitimacy of social action once again for Evangelicals, and its neglect was even repented of. However, the covenant did not clearly explain the relationship between evangelism and social action. Is evangelism still the primary mission of the church, or is social justice and compassion ministry equal to verbal witness? Evangelicals debated and wrestled with these questions for the rest of the century. Graham and Roberts believed verbal witness held the highest place. But their inclusion of social action opened the door for an eventual new understanding of mission, gospel, and evangelism that Evangelicals of the twenty-first century now embrace.

Roberts’ and Graham’s gospel centered on individual spiritual salvation appropriated by faith in the atonement of Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Graham’s gospel message was “God loves you, God will forgive you, God can change you, if you repent of your sins and receive Jesus Christ as your savior.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Roberts’ salvation prayer for people in his crusades displayed his understanding of the gospel as the saving of souls. He asked people to raise their hand and then stand if they wanted him to pray for them “that Jesus will come into your heart, that Jesus will forgive your sins, give you peace in your heart and save your soul.”<sup>45</sup>

Like Graham, Roberts too emphasized the love of God. But he went much further with his revelation and core message that “God is a good God.” Not only did God want

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<sup>43</sup> Graham, “Why Lausanne?,” 34.

<sup>44</sup> Billy Graham Interview, “Oral Roberts Specials – Playlist, OR-116H.”

<sup>45</sup> Oral Roberts, “Everything God Has Is Yours,” YouTube Video, 26:28, accessed 31 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LAOxyXOfPA>.

to save souls, but he also wanted to heal people. Consequently, salvation prayer was followed by prayer lines for healing in his crusades. “This conviction that ‘Something Good Is Going to Happen to You’ led him to proclaim that believers could expect miracles, good things, prosperity, healing, and overall blessings because God intends for his children to live that way in their journeys through life.”<sup>46</sup> Roberts also emphatically emphasized the present reality of God in our lives through the Holy Spirit. In his course called “The Holy Spirit in the Now,” Roberts began his last teaching lesson with this intention, “I want to try to help you understand more fully the part the Holy Spirit (the divine Paraclete) plays in bringing Christ into the NOW of your great needs.”<sup>47</sup> Roberts’ good news message included both the present and the future. Even his magazine title, *Abundant Life*, reflected his emphasis on the present. He agreed with many of his Evangelical contemporaries that saving souls was primary. However, his emphasis on present daily life needs and his practice of praying for both salvation and for healing in every crusade, made evangelism and social concern co-equals in his ministry practice.

While Lausanne marked a new beginning for the Evangelical acceptance of social action, radical Evangelicals believed the Lausanne statement did not go far enough. They wrote a statement signed by 500 delegates that declared, “The *evangel* is God’s Good News in Jesus Christ; it is Good News of the reign he proclaimed and embodies.”<sup>48</sup> This focus on the gospel of the kingdom would be fleshed out in the subsequent years and reorient the understanding of the mission of the church and the relationship between evangelism and social action. The statement further declared, “It is Good News of liberation, of restoration, of wholeness, and of salvation that is personal, social, global and cosmic. Jesus is Lord! Alleluia! Let the earth hear his voice!”<sup>49</sup> The voice of the Lord Jesus is not just given through verbal proclamation, but also through bringing liberation, restoration, wholeness, and salvation. And it is not just for individuals but also society, the world, and for all creation. In many ways, Roberts was a radical Evangelical. Perhaps he would have signed this statement, too, if he had been at Lausanne.

After Lausanne, scholars gathered, debated, and theologized on the relationship between evangelism and social action. Practitioners were found at both ends of the spectrum. The burgeoning church growth and church planting movements among

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<sup>46</sup> R. Samuel Thorpe, “An Overview of the Theology of Oral Roberts,” *Spiritus* 3:2 (2018), 272–73, <https://doi.org/10.31380/2573-6345.1089>.

<sup>47</sup> Oral Roberts, *The Holy Spirit in the Now -1*, (1974), 71, <http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/holyspiritnow/10>.

<sup>48</sup> Al Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 239.

<sup>49</sup> Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne*, 239.

Evangelicals championed evangelism measured in numerical growth. Conversely, liberation theology outside Evangelical circles pushed radical social action to liberate the poor through revolution against corrupt systems. Almost ten years after Lausanne, scholars gathered at Wheaton and produced the *Wheaton '83 Statement on Transformation*. C. Rene Padilla believes, "Wheaton '83 completed the process of shaping an evangelical social conscience. . . . It made it evident to evangelicals that evangelism cannot be divorced from meaningful involvement with people with all their needs."<sup>50</sup> The Wheaton '83 statement emphasized "the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God" and the goal of personal and social transformation in this biblical vision. Padilla points out that "by emphasizing that the Kingdom of God is 'both present and future, both societal and individual, both physical and spiritual,' it laid a sound theological basis for the mission of the church with no dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility."<sup>51</sup> The kingdom of God came in the incarnation of Christ and the ascension of Christ. It is coming presently on the earth through the people of Christ empowered by the Spirit. And it will come in fullness in the return of Christ. Al Tizon remarks, "In light of the assured future, the Spirit filled Church perseveres and hopes as it engages the world in bold holistic mission according to love, justice, righteousness and peace of the coming kingdom. In light of the End, the Church participates with God to accomplish the *missio Dei*, God's mission."<sup>52</sup> Today, forty years after Wheaton '83, Evangelicals have fully embraced holistic mission. The church is a sent church, it is a "missional church." That mission includes verbal witness, lived example, social justice, signs and wonders, proclamation (evangelism), peacemaking, leaven in every domain of society, creation care, etc.

Rollin Grams rightly observes that Pentecostalism played a contributing role to the rise of a holistic gospel. He suggests that the Pentecostal emphasis on divine power contributed to the theology of transformation. Transformation is possible because it comes from God, who has the power to do it. Twentieth-century Pentecostalism "was a movement that had a more holistic theology in the area of miracles."<sup>53</sup> They did not just believe it was possible for God to heal, they pursued it. Signs and wonders performed by "Jesus of the Gospels and the church of Acts presented the paradigm for the Church and missions today. . . . The gradual inclusion of Pentecostals into Evangelical circles meant that more holistic theology was on offer within

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<sup>50</sup> C. Rene Padilla, "Evangelism and Social Responsibility: From Wheaton '66 to Wheaton '83," *Transformation* 2:3 (1985), 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43052119>.

<sup>51</sup> Padilla, "Evangelism and Social Responsibility," 31.

<sup>52</sup> Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne*, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Rollin G. Grams, "Transformation Mission Theology: Its History, Theology and Hermeneutics," *Transformation* 24/3-4, (July & October 2007), 204, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43052710>.



Fundamentalist Evangelicalism in the West.”<sup>54</sup> The friendship between Roberts and Graham sped up that process.

## Conclusion

Today, we are benefactors of the friendship between Roberts and Graham. In recent years, however, new fault lines are appearing in the evangelical world. The relationship between Oral Roberts and Billy Graham illustrates the potential long-term impact of forging friendships across divides of difference. Roberts and Graham were immersed in separate and distinct Evangelical communities. Yet their intentional friendship carved channels for the waters of their two streams to flow toward each other. For Roberts, his friendship with Graham had a personal benefit of encouragement and comradeship, but it also opened a door into new Christian circles and into new methods of evangelism. For Graham, his friendship with Roberts was more than a connection with a fellow evangelist, but it also provided a window to peer into God’s heart to heal in the present time more than just the human soul. Their friendship was intentionally pursued despite lines of demarcation and separation within the Evangelical world at the time. Their public display of friendship and solidarity transformed the attitudes of other Christian leaders and strengthened their witness for Christ in the broader culture. Their fellowship reverberated beyond their lifetime into subsequent generations. Their influence on each other’s thinking sparked an evolution in how we now conceptualize the gospel, evangelism, and mission. Cultivating friendship over decades of time can shape people, influence their work, and even leaven their communities.



**John P. Thompson** (jthompson@oru.edu) is Professor of Global Leadership in the College of Theology and Ministry at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.

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<sup>54</sup> Grams, “Transformation Mission Theology,” 205.