

THE FIRST ORU SEMINARY

AN EXPERIMENT OF UNITY WITHOUT UNIFORMITY

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Abstract

This article explores the history of Oral Roberts University’s first Graduate School of Theology (1965–1969), the first seminary in the Pentecostal tradition. It will explore the story of the founding faculty that pioneered the first seminary and their contributions to scholarship and the shaping of ORU. It highlights the conflicts and challenges they went through that resulted in the closing of the seminary in 1969. It concludes with a recognition of the contributions of this group of faculty that continue to bear fruit today.

Introduction

Scholarship concerning Oral Roberts’ impact has seen a resurgence since the re-launch of *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* in 2017. It was advanced further by the 2018 *Spiritus* volume dedicated to Oral Roberts at the centennial of his birth. Each new study demonstrated new areas to explore the influence that Oral Roberts had on the American religious landscape. One of those areas concerns the impact of Oral Roberts University (ORU) and its theological influence.

ORU has a rich heritage in the landscape of higher education within the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. Yet little study has been conducted on its unique contributions, such as its concept of “whole-person education” and, more importantly, the unique space that the College of Theology has occupied as a Charismatic seminary. David Harrell’s classic biography of Oral Roberts was penned in 1985,¹ and more recently, with Jonathan Root’s latest biographical work on Roberts, these works discuss Roberts’ life in detail more so than the university.² Large parts of the story of the university and its colleges have not been documented. Also, in the decades following the end of Roberts’ biographies, ORU has experienced some of its

¹ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

² Jonathan Root, *Oral Roberts and the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

most challenging years, including its near demise under Oral Roberts in the late 1980s, its transition to Richard Roberts as president in the 1990s, and the crisis and reorganization in 2007–2008. Part of the rebirth of ORU was highlighted in Neil Eskielin’s popular history *The New ORU*.³

Yet in all of these accounts, the College of Theology, its professors, and its influence played only a minor role. To fill this gap, in 2017, longtime ORU seminary professor Larry Hart, chronicled ORU’s graduate school, particularly focusing on the impact the re-launch of the seminary in 1975 under charismatic Methodist leader, James Buskirk.⁴ The contribution of this study was groundbreaking as details of the seminary had been lost due to the decades of silence after the controversies of the 1980s. More details about the Buskirk era were highlighted in a 2021 tribute article focusing on Buskirk’s importance in establishing a Charismatic seminary that was highly influential in the United Methodist Church.⁵ Still, with Hart’s focus on the re-birth of the seminary and the Buskirk tribute, there is only a skeleton account of details of the story of the first seminary that opened in 1965. In addition, there is a significant void in the story of the first faculty of this first seminary that endured its launch, controversies, and closure in 1969. This study will attempt to tell the story of the first seminary and the founding faculty that pioneered what was the first seminary in the Pentecostal tradition. It will also explore the conflicts and challenges that led to its demise and conclude with the good that came from it.

The Vision

When ORU opened its doors in September 1965, the innovative new school housed the first graduate theological school in the Pentecostal tradition. Beginning in the 1950s, Bible schools were plentiful, yet many Pentecostal denominations were recognizing that young people in the tradition were going into other fields of education beyond just ministry. They were losing students studying in other fields to secular colleges. Slowly, Bible colleges worked toward accreditation to become liberal arts colleges. But seminary education was still perceived as part of the system of “dead” religion. In 1960, no one had yet established a Pentecostal seminary.

The vision to start a university was developed in Oral Roberts’ mind in three stages. First, in May 1962, Roberts announced the construction of a new building in

³ Neil Eskelin, *The New ORU: Empowered for the 21st Century* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts University, 2018).

⁴ Larry Hart, *The Seminary: A History of Graduate Theological Education* (Tulsa: Oral Roberts University, 2016). Also featured in this issue.

⁵ Arden C. Autry, James Shelton, and Sally Jo Shelton, “In Memorium: Dr. James Buskirk (1933–2020),” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 6:1 (2021), 7–25.

south Tulsa to house simply a soul-winning program he called the “Oral Roberts University of Evangelism.” Roberts told his partners, “To further fulfill God’s call upon my life to take His healing power to my generation, I feel the time has come to undertake by faith the greatest and most far-reaching step of all for the salvation of souls and to perpetuate this ministry that God has given me and committed to my trust. That is to build the ‘ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY OF EVANGELISM.’”⁶ According to this account, Roberts planned this “university” to be a “free tuition” ministry training Bible school offered very much in the model of early Pentecostal Bible schools. He announced, “We will use the Bible, God’s Holy Word, as our textbook. Those invited to attend will already have their academic education. Our teaching will be centered on how to bring deliverance by the miracle power of God to the people.”⁷

By 1963, momentum for the new University of Evangelism increased as more than 350 ministers from eleven different denominations attended a week-long “Ministers Seminar” devoted to the topic of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Similar “Youth Seminars” for prospective high school and college students were designed to give a taste of the spiritual atmosphere that they would encounter at ORU.⁹ These seminars in the seminal years of the university sent a very clear signal that Roberts’ university was an idea whose time had come.

Roberts designed the curriculum of the university to reflect the concept of whole person education centered in properly aligning the Holy Spirit in relation to the intellect. He comments, “In this atmosphere of educational excellence and Holy Spirit guidance, a philosophy of total education will be carried on for our children.”¹⁰ In order to ensure that the ORU would maintain its Holy Spirit focus, Roberts recruited the finest Spirit-filled PhDs he could find and instituted policies that required all faculty to be baptized in the Spirit and committed to the Spirit-filled life.¹¹ Roberts knew that some mainline schools had educated faculty but had no spiritual life. Then there were Pentecostal schools that had the Spirit, but the faculty were not highly educated. Roberts set out to do what no other Christian college had managed to accomplish: assemble a faculty that consisted entirely of professors who were “Spirit filled and

⁶ Oral Roberts, “A Spiritual Revolution Throughout the Earth,” *Abundant Life*, May 1962, 6–10.

⁷ Roberts, “A Spiritual Revolution,” 6–10.

⁸ William P. Sterne, William C. Armstrong, Billye Jean Morris, and Alice Duncombe, “ORU School of Evangelism Opens,” *Abundant Life*, April 1963, 1–12.

⁹ Yvonne Nance, “Youth Set on Fire by the Holy Spirit,” *Abundant Life*, September 1963, 2–7.

¹⁰ Oral Roberts, “Eight Major Goals of the University,” *ORU Witness*, July 1964, 3.

¹¹ Roberts, “Eight Major Goals of the University,” 3. R. O. Corvin, “Religious and Educational Backgrounds in the Founding of Oral Roberts University” (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1967), 155–56, 168. This policy, while fitting for the founding of the university, became an issue later as maintaining an exclusively Spirit-filled faculty became more of a challenge as the university grew. Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 222, 248.

holding a doctorate or masters.”¹² This was especially true for faculty who would occupy the seminary, as accreditors required faculty to hold one degree above the one being offered.

Seminary History

The Graduate School of Theology opened September 9, 1965, with twenty-nine students. They offered the Bachelor of Divinity degree, which is known today as the Master of Divinity degree. This degree was considered the highest professional ministers degree one could earn and consisted of a three-year course of ninety-six hours in Bible, theology, and practical ministry. The Graduate School was designed as a separate entity from the rest of the university that offered undergraduate degrees. It occupied the Timko-Barton Building, which held the seminars and had its own designated faculty, library, and support staff. The seminary sought to train ministers through theological education. The seminary was designed to “teach students about God and His Word in an atmosphere permeated by the Holy Spirit and structured to magnify Jesus Christ in all aspects of His divine-human prerogatives.”¹³ But as a key strategy to funnel students into the seminary, they would also continue to host the seminars on campus including seminars on evangelism, the Holy Spirit, and for youth or international partners.

Critical to the support of the seminary was the university library that was proposed to number 60,000 by opening day and had a goal of 500,000 volumes. The Learning Resources Center (LRC) also included the state of the art Dial Access Retrieval System where faculty could record lectures and have them on demand for students. Paul McClendon, the first Director of Learning Resources, describes the system:

At the touch of a button, you will be able to retrieve previously stored information in the privacy of your own study carrel. You may summon for individual study on your own private video screen, a technical scientific film, portions of documents, a detailed explanation, pictures, charts, and at times even entire lectures for your own study outside of class. A touch of the button will bring you music, languages, laboratory demonstrations in sight and sound that you may go over again and again as needed for your personal growth and academic progress.¹⁴

¹² Oral Roberts, “We Are Releasing a New Force,” *ORU Witness*, April 1964, 2–3. Roberts admits that at first the board of regents thought this to be an impossible goal. Yet, many of the finest Spirit-filled academics were moved to come to ORU to be able to thrive in an academic environment that was also Spirit-filled.

¹³ “Graduate School of Theology, Oral Roberts University,” 1965, ORU Archives, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/oruarchives/6/>, accessed June 19, 2023.

¹⁴ Paul I. McClendon, “Why ORU?,” *Outreach*, Winter 1965, 9.

The learning resources continued to expand when William Jernigan, the head librarian, took over the role of Dean of Learning Resources in 1965, a position he held for over fifty years.

The crown of the library was a special library on the Holy Spirit called the Pentecostal Research Center, later named the Holy Spirit Research Center. It began in 1962 with donations of the personal library of Oral Roberts and R. O. Corvin. Librarians Dorothy Poteat and Juanita Walker solicited books, magazines, and minutes from Pentecostal and Charismatic bodies around the world. At the time, there was no other organized archive of Pentecostal materials in the world. In the first five years, the Pentecostal Collection reached nearly 5,000 volumes. Some of the first researchers to visit the Center were Walter Hollenweger and Vinson Synan in 1966. The next few years saw Catholic Charismatics Killian McDonnell and William Faupel, as well as ecumenical Methodist Donald Dayton, and Pentecostal Edith Blumhoffer. Many of the seminal academic works in Pentecostal history and theology were made possible because of this collection.

Many of the early university administrators were recruited from Pentecostal Holiness circles. Particularly targeted were Roberts' inner circle, including childhood friend, R. O. Corvin, ministry supporter Lee Braxton, and his most educated friend John D. Messick. Roberts also recruited some key Pentecostal Holiness faculty from its various Bible schools. However, because of the few Pentecostals with terminal degrees in higher education in this era, Roberts looked to the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship for Spirit-filled educators with advanced degrees from many other denominations and theological traditions.

The diversity of Spirit-filled faculty allowed the new university to have a broader world view than strictly denominational Pentecostalism. It was this value that was reflected in the Seminary Statement of Faith, which affirmed the core tenets of Trinitarian evangelical theology, including plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, fall of humanity, salvation by grace, but were also highlighted by the Pentecostal phraseology for Spirit baptism:

Pentecostal Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a gift of God, obtainable by appropriating faith out of a pure heart, and an initial evidence of the reception of this experience is speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance.¹⁵

The strength of the seminary was that it was rooted in the Charismatic emphasis of the Holy Spirit, rather than rooting itself in a specific Pentecostal denomination. This allowed for unity on the central emphasis of the Spirit while allowing theological differences to exist. Corvin mentions in 1965:

¹⁵ "Graduate School of Theology."

As ministers of different denominations, we respect each other, and courteously regard each other's point of view. We believe that when one is mature in Christ he will recognize Christ in other Christians, and Christian groups. We believe that Christians who purpose to be like Christ and who desire to do His works, seek to rise above bigotry or racial prejudice. Our love is for all men and the entire Body of Christ.¹⁶

When the school opened in September 1965, the Graduate School of Theology secured six primary graduate faculty while the Undergraduate Religion Department slowly acquired others to teach religion classes at the undergrad level. But all of the attention was on the new seminary that was poised to be the elite academic institution in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement. The curriculum followed accrediting standards for the Association for Theological Schools (ATS). Courses taught included Systematic Theology, History of Christianity, Pauline Epistles, Church Polity, Greek and Hebrew, History of Missions, Pastoral Counseling, Preaching, Worship, Hospital Ministry, and Comparative Religions.



Consultants, Graduate School of Theology: Dr. R. O. Corvin, Rev. Tommy Tyson, Dr. J. D. Messick, Dr. John Rea, Dr. J. H. Greenlee, Rev. R. S. Rice, Dr. I. J. Harrison, Dr. H. M. Ervin.

Oral Roberts University Outreach, Winter 1965

Founding Faculty Members

Key to the success of the seminary was finding Spirit-filled faculty who had both the credentials to offer legitimacy to ORU as an educational institution and the sincere commitment to Christian ministry that would assuage those within Pentecostal circles who doubted the value of higher education upon spirituality. If that task were not challenging enough, these faculty would have to be willing to join the university before

¹⁶ "The Philosophy of the Graduate School of Theology," *Outreach*, Winter 1965, 19.

it had reached accreditation. A brief sketch will follow of each of these highly qualified and devoted faculty who risked their careers and reputations to come to a university built by a Pentecostal healing evangelist with a dream of educating the whole person in the power of the Spirit.

Raymond O. Corvin

The story of the first seminary is essentially the story about the friendship and fallout between Oral Roberts and his childhood friend, R. O. Corvin. Corvin was saved in one of Oral Roberts' father, E. M. Roberts', tent meetings at age 17. In 1936, at a Pentecostal Holiness camp meeting in Sulphur, Oklahoma, Corvin and Roberts made a pact that they would one day collaborate together to impact the kingdom through Corvin's call to education and Roberts' call to evangelism.¹⁷ Just a year earlier, God had spoken to him: "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 and built it upon My authority and upon the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ While Roberts did not fully understand the calling, he knew that path would require Corvin's future partnership to accomplish this dream.

In 1946, part of that early dream came true as the Pentecostal Holiness Church established Southwestern Bible College in Bethany, Oklahoma. Corvin and Roberts collaborated with International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) officials to garner support for the idea.¹⁹ When the school was approved by the IPHC Conference, Corvin was asked to be the president, and Roberts served as the board secretary where he raised funds to build the campus. It was a year later that Roberts' attention was diverted as he felt called to full-time healing ministry. Corvin continued with the dream and built a strong school for Pentecostal holiness students. In the 1950s, Corvin started the Crusader's Bible Course, a home Bible study course for Pentecostals.

In 1962, when Roberts created the university, he was fully aware that his lack of education was a barrier to his dream of a university. Corvin was the first one he called. Corvin's academic credentials and reputation among his Pentecostal base were sure to give the university the legitimacy he desired. Corvin and Roberts discussed their boyhood pact and by May 1962, Corvin moved to Tulsa, and planning began. By August, Corvin asked Roberts to make a new pact: "Within the next twenty-five years, in addition to your work of evangelism, we will give ourselves to building Oral Roberts University, with the goal of 3,000 students including graduate and seminary students, and by the time twenty-five

¹⁷ Oral Roberts, "The R. O. Corvin Story," *Abundant Life*, January 1963, 7–9.

¹⁸ Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 158.

¹⁹ "We Present Our Board," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, 11 April 1946, 11.

years have passed our graduates will be preaching or following their careers through the world and winning a minimum of 2,000,000 souls to Christ every year.”²⁰

Corvin brought many skills to the position of chancellor (a position that is usually the president of the university). At Newberry College, he earned a BA in education and psychology in 1940. At the University of South Carolina, he earned a master’s degree in philosophy and secondary education in 1942. He then went to Holmes Bible College (Pentecostal Holiness), where he did a ThB. He also earned a BD from Lutheran Theological Seminary. In 1956, he earned his Doctor of Religious Education from Southwestern Baptist Seminary.²¹ He later earned his PhD from the University of Oklahoma in 1967.²²

With Corvin now involved, the idea quickly morphed in 1963 from a short-term evangelism school to a full liberal arts university with a graduate seminary. However, it became clear that Roberts needed more educational expertise than Corvin to do this. Board chair, Lee Braxton, convinced Roberts to recruit John. D. Messick, a seasoned college administrator, to serve as academic dean to allow Corvin to focus more on design the curriculum and administration of the seminary.²³ This was the beginning of the tension that would develop between Roberts and Corvin over the consistent marginalization of his role, as we shall see later. Yet, Corvin gracefully accepted the re-defined role by the time the school opened in 1965. Corvin continued to recruit faculty and by the end of the 1965–1966, Corvin had a team of five outstanding, Spirit-filled, full-time faculty in the seminary.

Howard M. Ervin

In the history of ORU theology faculty, few cast a larger shadow than Howard M. Ervin.²⁴ Ervin’s impact on ORU’s theology is felt both in his groundbreaking works about Pentecostal pneumatology and his over forty years of teaching and administration at ORU. Howard Ervin’s relationship with Oral Roberts stretched back to 1964 when Roberts heard Ervin’s testimony of being filled with the Spirit as an American Baptist at the Full Gospel Businessmen’s meetings in Los Angeles. With a ThD from Princeton and an unashamed testimony of the Spirit-filled life as a Baptist minister, Roberts knew Ervin was exactly what the new university needed. At Ervin’s retirement party in 2006 (at the age of 91!), Roberts commented, “God knew I had to have Howard Ervin.”

²⁰ Oral Roberts, “The R. O. Corvin Story,” 11.

²¹ Margert Muse Oden, “Faith and Work Make a Dream Come True,” *The Crusader*, July 1956, 3–5.

²² Raymond R. Corvin, “Religious Educational Backgrounds in the Founding of Oral Roberts University” (PhD thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1967).

²³ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 213.

²⁴ Daniel D. Isgrigg, *Pilgrimage into Pentecost: The Pneumatological Legacy of Howard M. Ervin* (Tulsa, OK: Word & Spirit Press, 2008).

Ervin joined the faculty in early 1966 and became an essential pillar of the founding faculty. He taught Old Testament courses but was known for his pneumatological scholarship. Roberts and Ervin were not just partners in higher education, they were close friends who ministered together on many occasions. Both believed deeply in the importance of the baptism in the Spirit, and they shared the pulpit many times with people who attended the many partners seminars and Holy Spirit seminars in the 1960s and 1970s. Ervin also served in leadership as interim dean of the seminary in 1968–1969 and later as chair of the Undergraduate Theology Department that he was largely responsible for creating.

Ervin was by far the most published scholar among the ORU faculty on Pentecostal topics of the first two decades. Each of his books contributed to the development of an academic Pentecostal pneumatology. In 1968, Ervin produced his first work on the Pentecostal experience under the title, *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose*.²⁵ Considered one of the first scholarly works from a Pentecostal position, Ervin makes a strong exegetical argument for the purpose of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, tongues as evidence, one baptism-one filling, and an evaluation of spiritual gifts. It was this work that paved the way for Luke-Acts centered Pentecostal biblical scholarship by scholars like Max Turner, James Shelton, and Roger Stronstad.

It was this work that caught the attention of James D. G. Dunn in 1970 in his book, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*. Dunn's work, considered one of the most important works on Lukan pneumatology, engages Ervin's Pentecostal exegesis of Spirit baptism. This engagement signaled an important shift in the legitimacy of Pentecostal theology as a whole. Dunn's engagement eventually led Ervin to write a rebuttal in 1980 called *Conversion-Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit*.²⁶ As an apologetic of Ervin's Pentecostal reading of Acts, this work would eventually become a rallying point for Pentecostals responding to Dunn and other Evangelicals. Following Ervin's pioneering scholarship, Pentecostal scholars are now able to engage Evangelical and other Christian theological scholarship effectively in critique and appreciation and contributing to new ecumenical scholarship of Luke-Acts.

Irvine J. Harrison

Irvine J. Harrison was an Assemblies of God (AG) educator and one of the first to write an academic history of the AG as his ThD thesis from Berkeley Baptist Divinity School

²⁵ Howard M. Ervin, *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos Publishing, 1968).

²⁶ Howard M. Ervin, *Conversion-initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Critique of James D. G. Dunn, Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1982).

in 1956.²⁷ Harrison began his academic carrier at Southern California Bible College (SCBC, today Vanguard University) in 1943 where he also served as president 1945–1958.²⁸ In 1947, as head of the Education Committee of the General Council, he led the denominational effort to begin converting the AG’s Bible colleges into liberal arts colleges to meet the educational needs of Pentecostal youth, not just ministers.²⁹

In 1965, Harrison joined ORU as an advisor in the development of the seminary and director of student recruitment traveling across his home state of California to recruit students to the new university. Oral Roberts met Harrison at a California Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship meeting where Roberts was impressed by his testimony and credentials. Harrison’s administrative accomplishments of converting SCBC into a full liberal arts university in 1950 made him a perfect fit for the new university.³⁰ The excitement of helping to start the new university reminded him of his days when he was “just out of college, pioneering as a young evangelist.”³¹ Despite having been a successful Bible college president, Harrison reflected, “I felt like my whole life had been a preparation for my faculty appointment at ORU.”³² While on his trip, he experienced heart issues that threatened this vision. During his struggle, he felt the devil say to him “You will see the glory of Oral Roberts University, but you will never enter therein.”³³ While in the hospital, Roberts prayed for him over the phone, and he was instantly healed and released a short time later.

Harrison’s excitement over the university was rooted in its ecumenical appeal and commitment to excellence while at the same time developing the whole person. He writes:

It is dedicated to the task of preparing men of all denominations for their chosen vocation, academically, culturally, and spiritually. It is nonsectarian in structure and governed by a Board of Regents consisting of 41 committed Christian men representing a broad spectrum of the historic churches and the newer bodies of believers working harmoniously and with equal dedication to prepare this institution for all the Christian youth of our world. It is committed to academic excellence in the glow of the Spirit-filled life.³⁴

Harrison served as the professor of theology and taught church history. His 1954 ThD dissertation on the history of the Assemblies of God did not have a wide impact

²⁷ Irvine John Harrison, “A History of the Assemblies of God” (ThD thesis, Berkley Baptist Divinity School, 1954).

²⁸ “With Christ,” *Pentecostal Evangel*, 22 October 1971, 28.

²⁹ Assemblies of God, *General Council Minutes*, September 4–9, 1947, 16–21.

³⁰ “Educational Program at Southern California Bible College to be Expanded,” *Pentecostal Evangel*, 6 May 1950, 7.

³¹ Irvine J. Harrison, “Then Life Flowed In,” *Abundant Life*, May 1966, 14.

³² Harrison, “Then Life Flowed In,” 14.

³³ Harrison, “Then Life Flowed In,” 17.

³⁴ Irvine J. Harrison, “Colleges are Living Things,” *Outreach*, Winter 1965, 23.

on historical narratives of the Assemblies of God. However, it was a major source for later academic studies of Klaude Kendrick and William Menzies, who published histories in the 1960s.³⁵ After departing from ORU in 1968 when the seminary closed, he returned to California and re-affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

Harold Greenlee

In the area of biblical studies, J. Harold Greenlee stands out as perhaps ORU's most prolific scholar. Greenlee was a professor of biblical studies at Asbury Theological Seminary for seventeen years before coming to ORU. Greenlee graduated from Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary and did his PhD at Harvard University. He is also noted for his Fulbright fellowship to study manuscripts at Oxford University. In 1963, he published his *Concise Exegetical Grammar of the New Testament* by Eerdmans. This book was a core text for Greek studies and remained in print into the 2000s. He also wrote several other texts on Greek, including *Introduction to Textual Criticism* from Eerdmans and *The Greek in New Testament Preaching* from Asbury Theological Seminary. He wrote ten books in total and authored dozens of articles in many academic journals on textual interpretation and translation.³⁶

Greenlee learned of the vision and mission of ORU when he was invited to a layman's seminar in 1964. Although not a professing Pentecostal, Greenlee's heritage at Asbury Seminary and his published works in the defense of miracles caught the university's eye.³⁷ Greenlee was one of the most recognized scholars in the field of textual criticism. He also used his linguistic skills to serve in Bible translation and missionary work for Wycliffe Bible Translators in South America. With a heart for missions, his New Testament expertise made him a perfect fit for ORU's emphasis on worldwide evangelism. Attending the seminary, Greenlee wrote to Roberts, "I was deeply impressed with the university and its potential, and I am interested."³⁸ His standing in the field of the New Testament was demonstrated in recruiting noted NT scholar F. F. Bruce to speak in the chapel during revival week in 1968.³⁹

In the midst of the turmoil of 1968, Greenlee declined to sign his contract in order to return to missionary work in Colombia with the Oriental Mission Society (now One Mission Society). There, he worked in the Biblical Seminary of Colombia. Later, he returned to the United States to teach at Winona Lake School of Theology. In

³⁵ *AG Minister*, 7 April 1967, 6.

³⁶ David Alan Black, ed., *Scribes and Scripture: New Testament Essays in Honor of J. Harold Greenlee* (Winona Lake, WI: Eiesnbrauns, 1992).

³⁷ J. Harold Greenlee, "Gospel of the Third Dimension," *His* 24 (1964), 1–3, 11. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/his/dimension_greenlee.pdf, accessed July 8, 2023.

³⁸ "Harold Greenlee to Oral Roberts," December 7, 1964, Harold Greenlee File, ORU Archives.

³⁹ Edna Kilgore, "Dr. F. F. Bruce Featured as a Guest Speaker," *Oracle*, 15 March 1968, 1.

1992, a *Festschrift* was published in honor of Greenlee, which included tributes and essays by scholars such as Gordon Fee, F. F. Bruce, and Moises Silva. He passed away on March 21, 2015.

Robert F. Rice

Robert Rice began his academic career as a US Navy chaplain at Princeton Theological Seminary. After the war, Rice became a Presbyterian missionary in Korea and Japan, where he discovered the importance of literacy. While working on his master's degree at Princeton, Rice joined the faculty of Oral Roberts University in 1965 to teach church history and missions. His work with literacy led him to recruit Frank Lubach, the literacy advocate and author of several works on mysticism, to teach at ORU in 1967. Together they taught about literacy evangelism, a method that fit well into ORU's whole person approach to education. Rice stayed only two years, after which he returned to missions work by founding Literacy Evangelism International in 1967. Rice's work in missions continued for over four decades.⁴⁰

The 1967–1968 Crisis and Transition

While the Graduate School was supposed to be the crown jewel of the university, its growth was slow, and issues quickly emerged. The first issue was that of control of the leadership of the seminary. Roberts' partnership with Corvin was problematic from the beginning. Corvin was told that he would run the university while Roberts continued to do evangelism. When the two teamed up to start Southwestern Bible College, Corvin took the lead because he was far more educated and influential in the Pentecostal world than Roberts. But now, Roberts' popularity and influence upon American religious culture had long surpassed his place within the small Pentecostal world. By this point, Roberts' circle of supporters and colleagues were from mainline and independent Pentecostal circles. The denominations that had been suspicious of his success and critical of his evangelistic methods had doubled down on their rejection of his efforts to start a competing university.⁴¹ It was clear that Roberts would now expect Corvin to follow his vision. This was a reality that was difficult for Corvin to accept.

Almost immediately, tensions between Corvin's vision and Roberts' vision for the university emerged. Already, Roberts had diminished Corvin's role by recruiting John D. Messick to be the provost, supplanting Corvin as chief academic officer.⁴² But

⁴⁰ Willis Rice and Sid Rice, "Rev. Dr. Robert F. Rice," in *ORU: The Early History*, ed. Shelia Simpson (Biloxi, MS: Knights Abbey, 2021), 66–67.

⁴¹ Harrel, *Oral Roberts*, 218; Root, *Oral Roberts*, 87.

⁴² Harrel, *Oral Roberts*, 215.

Roberts also clashed with Corvin as dean of the graduate seminary. Corvin was deeply committed to a Pentecostal vision for the seminary. For Corvin, education was training Pentecostal ministers. But Roberts' vision was much broader, reaching into the Charismatic Renewal for inspiration, which required more openness to theological differences that came from different Protestant traditions who were bound together under the belief in the empowering of the Spirit. Larry Hart comments:

R. O. Corvin set about building a more narrowly conceived classical Pentecostal graduate school, in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition in which both he and Roberts had been reared. Roberts, however, conceived both the university and the seminary as established by God to serve the historic Christian church, the whole body of Christ.⁴³

Corvin was more conservative in his theological outlook, continuing the Pentecostal emphasis on Bible doctrine as a theological discipline rather than a broader investigation of theology outside Pentecostal dogma. Roberts could no longer abide such a narrow view of theology, having been rejected by the Pentecostal community and finding a home within the theological diversity of the Charismatic Renewal.

The tension was also acute because of Corvin's somewhat paternalistic view of Roberts' qualifications due to lack of education. In Corvin's mind, he was the academic superior to Roberts. Though Roberts had failed to finish a college degree, he was widely read, particularly on current conversations in theological scholarship. Though maintaining conservative commitments to evangelical theology and holiness norms, Roberts was not in any sense a fundamentalist who was afraid of liberal theology's ability to sway young people. He publicly affirmed ORU's stance on this openness to academic inquiry in 1967:

There are fields of knowledge in which I am not versed and have no formal training. But, I am not afraid of these. And neither does a Christian university have to be. . . . Our students are not sheltered from controversial theories. As young adults they must have the opportunity of wrestling with new ideas and provocative views. They may break away from outmoded tradition, find new terms of expression and discover new understandings. We do not fear this; we welcome it.⁴⁴

Meeting with seminary students, Roberts discussed the value of reading theologians like Rudolf Bultmann or engaging Harvey Cox's *Secular City*, where he addresses conversations about the presence of God in the secular realm. When challenged by ORU students on this, Roberts retorted:

⁴³ Hart, *The Seminary*, 5.

⁴⁴ Oral Roberts, "A Christian Understanding of Academic Freedom," *Outreach*, Fall 1967, 22–23.

I'm afraid of rigid positions we might take that would frustrate the Holy Spirit in bringing us into further light. I think that is what worries the liberals. I think the liberals have a lot to say to us. Really, I think we have to wade through how they say it in order to feel their spirit. Which in some instances is a hunger. A wanting to know God. A desire to identify with suffering of people. Now I may be considered broad at this point that I am able to say this about liberals. In the books I read and the liberals I meet, I sense there a hunger. That is why they are more open to the Charismatic. They are talking to us in the language they understand. . . . They want to identify with the race question, they want to take the gospel and make it relevant in 21st Century terms.⁴⁵

Though Roberts was comfortable with these conversations and able to consider philosophical ideas without absorbing the whole thing, Corvin was not. Still feeling intellectually and educationally superior to Roberts, Corvin felt the need to confront Roberts about the perceived dangers of reading Bultmann and succumbing to “existentialism.”⁴⁶ Corvin rebuked Roberts’ “betrayal” of his Pentecostal base with such willingness to compromise by entertaining “liberal” theology. He comments, “You’re moving from a Bible-centered position toward a Bultmannian liberalistic existentialism is a betrayal of the confidence that millions of people have placed in you.”⁴⁷ Roberts defended his position that his Bible-based faith does not prevent him from seeking truth, especially when it is found within the conversations in the larger body of Christ, including “liberal” circles.⁴⁸

If Roberts’ theological openness was not enough to make Corvin suspicious, Roberts’ vision that ORU align with the broader Charismatic Renewal, rather classical Pentecostals, became an obvious point of contention with Corvin. This was solidified in his April 7, 1968, announcement that Roberts was leaving the Pentecostal Holiness Church and joining the United Methodist Church.⁴⁹ Having maintained his Pentecostal affiliation for over thirty years, the ecumenical appeal of his ministry had reached a point that it had transcended the Pentecostal base to include a wide-range of denominations. But Corvin saw this as a further betrayal of Roberts’ Pentecostal roots and alienated his base. Corvin was not alone in this. Pentecostals were already suspicious of Roberts, but this move seemed to signal that Roberts was transitioning from his classical Pentecostal

⁴⁵ Oral Roberts, “The Shape of the Future,” School of Theology, Oral Roberts University, 1968, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/oruav/11/>, accessed 1 July 2023.

⁴⁶ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 236.

⁴⁷ R. O. Corvin to Oral Roberts, personal correspondence, March 4, 1968, ORU Archives.

⁴⁸ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 236.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *The Call*, 134–35.

views to a more Charismatic view of Spirit baptism.⁵⁰ But this was not his intention. Roberts assured the faculty, staff, and students of ORU,

I am completely committed to the Pentecostal outpouring, the baptism in the Holy Ghost, and the gifts of the Spirit in the fullest meaning of those terms. . . . I am Pentecostal and will be until the day I die.⁵¹

While the move was ultimately detrimental to Roberts' support base, his primary motivation in changing denominations was not doctrinal; it was in order to be able to expand his ministry of bringing healing and the baptism in the Spirit to the "historic church."⁵² It also signaled a crucial turning point in the life of the seminary. The university would not draw its primary identity from the Pentecostal Movement, but from a broader ecumenical perspective. It would fulfill its vision to be a seminary "for the whole body of Christ."

The Battle for the Seminary

As 1968 began, the battle over the direction of the seminary came to a head. Corvin's confrontations with Roberts over the theological openness needed to facilitate an ecumenical seminary for Spirit-filled believers in all traditions strained not only Roberts' confidence but the rest faculty as well. In March 1968, the seminary faculty met with Oral Roberts to discuss Corvin's position as dean.⁵³ In the midst of the conflicts of 1967, Roberts decided to appoint Corvin as a professor, without his nomination for dean for the upcoming 1968–1969 term. Corvin was gracious with the decision, suggesting that new leadership and new organization would be helpful for the future of the seminary. Corvin diplomatically suggested to the faculty that there be two changes to the seminary that could assist in avoiding future conflicts. First, he proposed that faculty hiring decisions be made by the theology faculty rather than the president himself. The president had the authority to ratify the decision or deny the hire. But the

⁵⁰ This claim was predominantly expressed by Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 293, who claims that Roberts "discarded" his Pentecostal view of the Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues as evidence in order to moderate his views to be more acceptable to his new Methodist colleagues and those in the Charismatic stream. But Harrell misunderstands Roberts' intentions. Roberts used this shift to communicate his Pentecostal belief to a different audience that did not understand the traditional language used in Pentecostal circles. Roberts never backed off his belief in tongues as the sign of Spirit baptism. In fact, it could be argued that he emphasized speaking in tongues more than his Pentecostal contemporaries. See Daniel D. Isgrigg, "Oral Roberts: Man of the Spirit," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 3:2 (2018), 325–50.

⁵¹ Oral Roberts, "My Decision to Enter the Methodist Denomination," Faculty Meeting, Oral Roberts University, 15 March 1968, <http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/oruav/71/>, accessed 1 July 2023.

⁵² Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 297–99.

⁵³ ORU Theological Seminary Faculty Meeting, Corvin File, Oral Roberts University Archives, 6 March 1968.

process would flow from the faculty upwards rather than downwards from the president's office. Second, he argued that the dean position be a position of service, rather than status. Because of this, the dean was not to rule over the faculty, but to serve the faculty by communicating faculty concerns to the administration.

A few days later, a resolution was produced on March 13, 1968, and was signed by all faculty, including Corvin. It stipulated that the present dean (Corvin) step down "of his own free choice" and that the position be allowed to stay vacant for one year.⁵⁴ Following this, all appointments for the dean would be for two years, with nominations from the faculty and secret ballot votes. Corvin accepted his fate but not without protestation. In fact, he gave interviews to the Tulsa newspaper about his demotion and objections to Roberts' leadership, the largest of which was his theological liberalism and existentialism.⁵⁵ On March 23, the Advisory Administration Committee recommended that Corvin be dismissed for being out of alignment with Oral Roberts and the vision of the university. The Board of Regents agreed, and Corvin was let go.

Stepping into the role of dean was Howard Ervin. Ervin had been the associate dean and was already emerging as a leader in the seminary with his theological acumen and commitment to Spirit-filled academics. With Corvin now gone, Roberts found Ervin to be his new "go-to" faculty member in the seminary. Ervin was a favorite of Roberts to be a speaker at Partners and Youth Seminars. This Princeton-trained American Baptist pastor was unashamedly committed to everyone experiencing Spirit baptism. His theological training and high church demeanor were key to ministering among non-classical Pentecostals where he specialized in praying with people to be filled with the Spirit. Unlike Corvin, who could be dogmatic in his leadership, Ervin was measured and diplomatic. It would be these skills that would help ORU navigate the eventual closing of the seminary.

Accreditation and Closing

Beyond the personal conflicts with Corvin and Roberts, the seminary had a bigger issue as the university was courting accreditation with North Central Association of Colleges (NCAC). The faculty took a large risk coming to an un-accredited school, yet they believed in the vision so much that they were willing to take the risk to help the university achieve accreditation. Administrators were desperate to get the approval of NCAC. This peer evaluation process was vital for ORU in order to convince Roberts that the university needed to change the mindset from that of a "ministry" run Bible school to a legitimate institution of higher education.

⁵⁴ "Resolution," ORU Graduate School of Theology, 13 March 1968, Corvin File, ORU Archives.

⁵⁵ Root, *Oral Roberts*, 112.

The preliminary report in 1967 was favorable, but the most glaring weakness in ORU's quest for accreditation was that the discussion of the graduate program was "premature," considering that ORU had a religion department, but not a "first-rate undergraduate program."⁵⁶ Roberts committed to improving organizational elements, such as limiting the role he would play in university decisions, but the issue of the seminary was proving to be the key factor hindering the overall process of the university. It became clear that something must be done, or the whole enterprise would be jeopardized.

Now serving as dean, Howard Ervin resolved that the only path forward was to close the seminary.⁵⁷ Ervin teamed up with provost Carl Hamilton, to advocate to the Board of Regents that the cessation of the seminary was necessary and that a fully accredited undergraduate department should be the university's priority. Ervin and Hamilton made the case before the Board of Regents, much to the protestation of Roberts himself. Ervin proposed that the seminary and undergraduate faculties be merged to better serve the students.

In the end, the Board of Regents agreed with Ervin and Hamilton and announced on March 1, 1969, the decision to "fuse" the Graduate School and Department of Religion into a Department of Theology.⁵⁸ The student newspaper, *The Oracle*, published on the front page declared: "Regents Integrate Seminary" and "Roberts Stands Against Total Elimination."⁵⁹ The article asks, "Is it feasible to spend \$175,000 yearly to operate a graduate school with only forty students?" Ervin and Hamilton argued that the answer was no. Yet, Roberts insisted that ORU "save the seminary" and was the only opposing vote.⁶⁰ This decision was on the heels of the accreditation visit by the North Central Association of Colleges accrediting body just days before.

The move to close the seminary was a difficult one, as each of the seminary faculty departed for various reasons. Only Ervin would stay with the university as he assumed leadership responsibilities in the undergraduate program. Yet, the pain of the closing proved to be important to ORU's long-term success. The actions ensured that ORU would receive its North Central accreditation in 1971, which was key to ORU's legitimacy as an institute of higher education. Ervin led the faculty in creating the Undergraduate Department of Theology and recruiting the next wave of theology faculty that included Jerry Horner, Steve Durasoff, Harold Fisher, Roy Hayden, Charles

⁵⁶ Ron Smith to Oral Roberts, Accreditation File, Oral Roberts University Archives, 26 April 1967.

⁵⁷ Isgrigg, *Pilgrimage into Pentecost*, 23–24.

⁵⁸ Press Release, 1 March 1969, ORU Graduate School of Theology File, Oral Roberts University Archives.

⁵⁹ Delores Boyd, "Regents Integrate Seminary," *The Oracle*, 14 March 1969, 1.

⁶⁰ Roberts, *The Call*, 134, mentions that he did not believe ORU needed a seminary but was persuaded by early leaders, presumably Corvin. Yet, this testimony does not align with his reluctance in this vote.

Farrah, and a young and upcoming biblical scholar, James B. Shelton. By focusing on the undergraduate program, it better prepared ORU for re-establishing the Graduate School in 1975. Today, the Undergraduate Department is one of the jewels of ORU's academic programs and has become essential to the training of Spirit-empowered ministers from around the globe.

Conclusion

The first ORU seminary was only open four short years. Like many other of Roberts' ventures, the idea was innovative, even if the execution was ultimately difficult to sustain. In 1976, the seminary was reborn and ORU has been a leader in Pentecostal and Charismatic theological education that has impacted the world. But it was the seeds of that first seminary that are continued in ORU today. I close with a couple of those seeds that have produced fruit over the past fifty years.

First, the seminary was to be the first of the graduate schools at ORU. Though perhaps it was premature to open a seminary without an undergraduate department, it was a bold innovation in Pentecostal education. ORU was the first Pentecostal-Charismatic university with a graduate school offering theological degrees. It was a courageous dream in an era when Pentecostals were still suspicious of education, which opened the door for new other Spirit-empowered universities that have followed suit. The dream of establishing graduate schools was realized when in 1976, the seminary was re-established as the first among many graduate schools that were to follow, including medicine, dentistry, law, and others. While these other schools closed in the lean years of the 1980s, ORU's Graduate School of Theology is still one of the largest schools in the university.

Second, the academic leadership models instituted during that era are still bearing fruit, particularly the process of selecting faculty and deans. The controversy allowed the Theology School to develop a faculty-based system for hiring deans and faculty members that is from the bottom-up. Faculty hiring committees bring up candidates for these positions to the administration, rather than the other way around. This keeps decisions at the ground level among those who know the needs of the college firsthand. There has also continued to be an emphasis on deans, associate deans, and chairs as servants among peers rather than authorities over the faculty. Servant leadership is modeled by administrative staff in ways that exemplify what Spirit-empowered leadership should be. Faculty are empowered to determine curriculum and utilize their expertise to guide the decision of the colleges, rather than deans determining the direction. ORU's long, distinguished line of theology deans is proof of that legacy, even to the present day.

Finally, ORU proved that productive and diverse theological inquiry in an atmosphere of the Holy Spirit is possible. As Church of God in Christ Presiding Bishop J. O. Patterson once said, ORU is a place where you can “get your learning and keep your burning.”⁶¹ ORU is a university “built on the Holy Spirit” rather than Pentecostal or Charismatic dogma. It is rooted in biblical Christianity but is not beholden to any specific doctrinal creed. Even today, ORU does not have a comprehensive statement of faith, but it has a mission of whole person education in the power of the Spirit. This was encapsulated in 1965, where the leaders declared that the seminary “cherishes Christian unity without exacting church uniformity.”⁶²

The seminary has not only welcomed Spirit-empowered theological diversity, but that openness has also allowed for the seminary to reshape its theological identity over the past half century. Whether it was a home for the Charismatic Renewal in the 1960s, or aligned with the United Methodist Church in the 1970–1980s, or a home for Black Pentecostals and Church of God in Christ in the late 1980s and early 1990s,⁶³ or independent Charismatic and Word of Faith groups in the late 1990s and 2000s, or the global Spirit-empowered Movement today, ORU has been a place where theological diversity could unify around the Holy Spirit. That legacy was a seed planted in the soil of the first seminary. In many ways, the seminary’s closing was vital to protect that legacy against denominational Pentecostalism, and later Methodism, that would have limited its ability to appeal to a broader constituency.

As a closing thought, one may wonder what the “theology” of ORU has been in light of this history. The reality is that ORU may not have a distinctive theology that is promoted or articulated by this college. I contend this is the legacy of ORU’s theological founding. There certainly have been many published biblical and theological works by faculty over the past sixty years. Yet, that theology has been as varied as the faculty themselves. ORU welcomed classical Pentecostals like Corvin, Harrison, Vinson Synan, Wonsuk Ma, Trevor Grizzle, and Leonard Lovett. But it also had scholars like Ervin whose Baptist theology reflected classical Pentecostal views of Spirit baptism. Similarly, Larry Hart’s and Jerry Horner’s theology was Baptist and Evangelical, yet full of the Holy Spirit but different than classical Pentecostal. There have been Methodists and Wesleyans like Harold Greenlee, Robert Tuttle, Jr., and Robert Mansfield. There have been Reformed theologians like Charles Farrah and Daniel Thimell. There have been Catholics like Larry Lonsency and James and Sally Shelton. There have been faculty members from independent theological circles like John Rea, James Barber, and

⁶¹ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 220.

⁶² “The Philosophy of the Graduate School of Theology,” 19.

⁶³ Daniel D. Isgrigg, “Healing for All Races,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 4:2 (2019), 244.

Larry Lea, a former dean. There have also been Orthodox faculty like Theodore Williams and Jeff Lamp.

This theological diversity of the seminary faculty is undoubtedly the fruit of the first seminary, whose mission was to serve the whole body of Christ in the power of the Spirit. I would suggest that ORU's distinctive theology is a "Spirit-empowered" theology that recognizes that all theological traditions can flourish and be nourished by a vibrant engagement with the Holy Spirit. ORU College of Theology and Ministry trains ministers not to leave their theological traditions at the door when they come to seminary, but to bring them in and baptize them in the Spirit of God. As Howard Ervin used to say, "The number one priority of the Spirit is the healing of the Church." This may very well be ORU's ultimate theological legacy. That legacy was sown through the seeds of an idea by Oral Roberts and the courageous faculty of that first seminary.



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