

THE RISE OF THE PHOENIX

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY IN 1975

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Spiritus 8.2 (2023) 199–213
<https://doi.org/10.31380/2573-6345.1326>
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Keywords *Oral Roberts, Oral Roberts University, Graduate School of Theology and Ministry, Methodism, Charismatic, ecumenism*

Abstract

The re-emergence of the Graduate School of Theology after its closure in 1969 provides testimony to the bold vision of Oral Roberts of ecumenical higher education in the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit. Undeterred by the closure of the first Graduate School of Theology, Roberts' launch of the second seminary in 1976 under James Buskirk showed a continued emphasis on educating and empowering the whole body of Christ.

Introduction

One Monday morning in the spring of 1975, Howard M. Ervin, then chair of the Undergraduate Department of Theology at Oral Roberts University (ORU), called a special faculty meeting. He related that while watching Oral Roberts' Sunday morning television program the previous day, prior to attending church, he heard Oral Roberts announce that he was opening a new Graduate School of Theology and that he, Howard Ervin, would be the interim dean. The venerable chairman exclaimed, "That was the first time I heard of my appointment!"¹

This new seminary was not Oral Roberts' first attempt at graduate theological education. Back in 1965 when the fledgling university first began offering classes, it had

¹ This account of the beginning of the School of Theology is based on personal interviews and reminiscences as well as printed accounts. For a broad overview of the history of the school, see Larry Hart's *The Seminary: A History of Graduate Theological Education at Oral Roberts University, A Golden Jubilee Celebration* (Tulsa: ORU, 2016), <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/theo-history/>. Hart's work has been most helpful in the timeline and content of this article.

both a graduate theology school and an undergraduate theology program as well as a wide range of other undergraduate programs. However, that first seminary did not last long.

Roberts' Vision

The vision for a university with a seminary had first come to Oral Roberts when God miraculously healed him of tuberculosis in 1935, along with a divine commission to “build Me a university, build it on My authority, and on the Holy Spirit.”² The young Roberts was also called to “take God’s healing power to your generation.”³

Shortly after Roberts’ healing, he began preaching and was soon granted a ministerial license from the Pentecostal Holiness Church. After over a decade of pastoring congregations in Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Georgia, Roberts would launch a healing ministry that would shake the world. This resurgence of the supernatural would confront the hubris of modernity that had reduced reality to mere materialism with ever-changing absolutes and frequent denial of the possibility of supernatural healing and miracles. Roberts’ healing tent crusades throughout the United States and beyond helped challenge the modern assumption that miracles did not occur.

As one of the pioneers in religious television broadcasting, Roberts presented films of his healing services on television networks in the 1950s and the 1960s. This provided a rallying point for the Christian belief in miracles and healing for the present age. From this widely publicized platform, Roberts soon felt ready to obey the divine mandate to build a school. Between 1958 and 1960, he shared with his growing cadre of supporters the idea of a Bible school or “boot camp” for training preachers, evangelists, and missionaries.⁴ Roberts believed that by opening this school he was obeying God, who had spoken to him in 1960 with further clarification:

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.⁵

This small beginning was Roberts’ first effort to respond to God’s greater call, to build a university where faith and reason were partners, not enemies. The initial call had been to build a *university*, not just a seminary, as the call to take God’s healing to his

² Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 32.

³ Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 32.

⁴ Hart, *The Seminary*, 4.

⁵ Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 162.

generation was to involve every aspect of human existence, not just healing from physical disease. It was at this point that Roberts began to experience resistance among some of his Pentecostal followers, who tended to view higher education with suspicion since so many established universities had no room for God or for the supernatural, viewing both as superstitions standing in the way of modern progress.⁶ Consequently, up to that time, few Pentecostals had pursued higher education.

R. O. Corvin and the First Seminary

One of Roberts' oldest friends and fellow Pentecostal, R. O. Corvin, however, had done graduate studies and would soon complete his doctorate. From their youth, both Roberts and Corvin had shared the dream of a bona fide graduate education for Pentecostals. As president of the new university, Roberts asked Corvin to be the dean of the seminary, who quickly accepted. According to the first prospectus for the seminary, this partnership was cemented in friendship and prayer thirty years earlier:

Under an oak, near Ada, Oklahoma, one starlit night, stood two young men. They were on a quest of the best way to make their greatest contribution to God and society. Searching deeper each other's purposes, they joined hands and prayed. After prayer, one said, "I can make my greatest contribution by being an evangelist." The other said, "I can render my greatest service as a teacher of Christian education." These two men were Oral Roberts and R. O. Corvin.⁷

Previously (in 1943), Oral Roberts had assisted Corvin in establishing a Pentecostal Holiness college in Oklahoma, now Southwestern Christian University (Bethany, Oklahoma).⁸ But then, in June 1962, Corvin came to Tulsa to help Oral Roberts build a new non-denominational university and its proposed seminary. Corvin's doctoral dissertation at the University of Oklahoma would serve as a blueprint for the vision of using state-of-the-art electronic media, an excellent library, and highly academically qualified professors. The vision was one of the best of scholarship and the best of faith.⁹

During the 1950s and 1960s, the message of healing and other thaumaturgic gifts of the Holy Spirit (signs and wonders) had been making inroads into historic mainline

⁶ Vinson H. Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 209.

⁷ ORU Library, "Holy Spirit Research Center, Graduate School of Theology Brochure (1965)" 1965, ORU Archival Collection, <https://digitalshowcaseoru.edu/oruarchives/6>.

⁸ David Edwin Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 60.

⁹ Raymond Othel Corvin, "The Religious and Educational Backgrounds in the Founding of Oral Roberts University" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1967). Available in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Protestant churches through the Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship International,¹⁰ as well as through Oral Roberts’s crusades and television programs.¹¹ In his healing crusades, Roberts would ask people coming for prayer to state which church they attended. Many were from non-Pentecostal groups. Two years after Oral Roberts University opened its doors, God graced many Catholics with the charisms of his Holy Spirit through the Catholic Charismatic Movement. This movement was believed to be an answer to Pope John XXIII’s prayer when he convened the Second Vatican Council in 1962: “Renew your wonders in this our day, as though by a new Pentecost.”¹² Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and other mainline Christians were also experiencing this “New Pentecost,” which would subsequently be called the Charismatic Movement. Many of these churches would not know what to do with these neo-Pentecostals, as they were called in the movement’s early days, although later they came to be called Charismatics.

Oral Roberts’ broad vision of Spirit-empowered renewal exceeded the bounds of classical Pentecostalism, which he began incorporating into the new university and seminary. From this arose contention in the newly minted seminary. Corvin, in contrast, envisioned a seminary that would fit into the confines of classical Pentecostal thought and ethos, while Roberts saw the recent advent of the Spirit as renewing the older pre-Pentecostal mainline churches. He did not see the need for Charismatics to leave the older churches to join classical Pentecostal denominations. Furthermore, Roberts was willing to look at the works of those who disagreed with his views on the supernatural as well as the worldview of those who were not Pentecostal. This caused some of Roberts’ constituents to be afraid of him adopting some ideas taught by existentialists and even those of the quest for the historical Jesus school of Bultmann and company. However, Roberts maintained that studying different points of view was crucial for a genuine university where all positions should be given a fair hearing, even if other universities did not do the same. ORU, as a true university, looks at all positions, although it certainly does not espouse all positions. Oral Roberts believed the Holy Spirit makes the academy strong enough to do so while maintaining a vibrant faith and

¹⁰ FGBMFI played a significant supporting role in the founding of the university. Demos Shakarian, its founder, was a member of the ORU Board of Regents. Elizabeth and John Sherrill, *The Happiest People on Earth: The Long-Awaited Personal Story of Demos Shakarian* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen Books, 1975), republished by Create Space, 2016.

¹¹ Kathryn Kuhlman’s ministry had a similar effect.

¹² Pope St. John XXIII, *Apostolic Constitution Humanae Salutis*, 23, which is a prayer convoking the Second Vatican Council, St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome, Dec. 25, 1961. Further, the Council’s pronouncements on the Holy Spirit and his gifts anticipated and gave credence to the Catholic Charismatic Movement that erupted in 1967, only two years after the Council’s conclusion. “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. A. Flannery, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 363–64. The Holy Spirit both evokes and answers prayer.

worldview that simultaneously dialogues with and confronts the spirits of the age. It is for this reason that ORU has more academic liberty than many state schools where the Christian faith is unwelcomed and summarily dismissed. The founding president and his successors have maintained this balance of Christian conviction and academic inquiry to this day.

The chain of command became muddled as Corvin and Roberts began to pull in different directions. Corvin took it upon himself to commit ORU to build a sister school in Chile without Roberts' consent. Roberts made it clear that such maverick actions must desist. His position was that it was challenging enough to keep one school open, let alone build and maintain others. The incident caused an international embarrassment for Roberts and the university as he was unwilling to honor Corvin's commitment.¹³ As a result, the relationship between Corvin and Roberts became increasingly strained.

Another problem arose when several seminary students from Pentecostal groups insisted that Roberts and the seminary professors conform to their denominational doctrines. Among some of the seminary students, there was resistance to the broader type of learning that Roberts considered appropriate for a true university. The reactionary response of some of the students caused one of the faculty members, Howard Ervin, to respond by saying, "You have come here only to affirm your prejudices and for us to confer a degree."¹⁴

At the same time, Roberts was disappointed with what he saw as "liberal tendencies" of some seminary faculty members. He felt his vision for the seminary was being attacked from several sides.¹⁵ Roberts, therefore, decided to close the first seminary in 1969. After Corvin was asked to resign, several other faculty members left, and the remainder began to teach in the undergraduate theology department. One benefit of the closing of the first seminary was that the undergraduate students were exposed to much of the seminary curriculum and challenged to meet the graduate-level expectations of the same. This prepared undergraduate theology students to do well in graduate work at other seminaries and universities. As a result, graduate schools from around the country and beyond were pleased with the caliber of the ORU graduates who matriculated in their graduate schools. The closing of the first seminary thus resulted in a fortified undergraduate program.

¹³ Dean Helland, interview by author, 7 July 2021.

¹⁴ Related on several occasions by Dr. Ervin to the author.

¹⁵ Roberta Roberts Potts, interview by author, 7 October 2021.

The Spirit of Time

By 1962, Roberts had greatly curtailed his tent crusades and instead begun to rely on television to communicate his message. His prime-time television specials in time took the form of a variety show with lively music, noted celebrities, and a short inspirational message. They attracted millions of viewers. Roberts' goal was to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to a much wider audience. Consequently, more of his supporters and ORU students came from mainline churches, beginning to recognize their need for spiritual renewal. In the first ten years of ORU, a large number of Catholic Charismatic students attended the university. Later the Catholic Church would embrace the movement to the point that now some 150 million of the one billion Catholics on earth self-identify as Charismatics.¹⁶ But in those early days, ORU was a singular haven for Catholic Charismatics. In addition, by 1975, more ORU students were affiliated with the United Methodist Church than any other denomination.

Roberts' ministry was one of the primary catalysts for this renewal in the greater body of Christ. To reach even more people with the message, he joined the United Methodist Church in 1968. The move was bold and alienated many of his Pentecostal supporters, causing temporary financial hardship for the university; but time proved its wisdom. Roberts explained to the university faculty that his joining the Methodists was not at the expense of his "commitment to the healing ministry or his Pentecostal faith."¹⁷ Roberts did not believe the Charismatic Renewal should be just another southern rural revivalist phenomenon but rather a healing and empowering movement of the Holy Spirit on the whole church.

The late 1960s had seen the rise of the Jesus Movement, followed in the early 1970s by the Charismatic Renewal. Throughout Christian history, such grassroots encounters with Jesus have often brought division as well as unity. For example, beginning in Acts 15, the conversion of Gentiles necessitated the "Jerusalem Council" with its rulings on Gentile liberty and Jewish practices to which Gentile converts must adhere. Also, recall the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox schism of the eleventh century, then further change via Luther, Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, and the Protestant Reformation. The list goes on with the flow of church history through France, England, Scotland, and into the Americas. In the early 1950s, American history was moving to repeat itself. Oral Roberts was central to fueling the rise of a Holy Spirit-

¹⁶ Alessandra Nucci, "The Charismatic Renewal and the Catholic Church," *Catholic World Report*, 18 May 2013, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2013/05/18/the-charismatic-renewal-and-the-catholic-church/>.

¹⁷ Oral Roberts, "My Decision to Enter the Methodist Denomination," 1968, Historic ORU Audio/Video.7. <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/oruav7>.

infused healing ministry that could, by the 1960s and 1970s, no longer be contained within Pentecostal boundaries. This dynamic of the Spirit, in fact, prevented the university from becoming narrowly sectarian.¹⁸ Arguably, Oral Roberts was the major personality for the expansion of the Pentecostal Movement into mainstream Christianity and the primary guarantor that it became a broad, ecumenical renewal movement.

The Second Seminary

Once Roberts had adjusted the university's course to minister to all Christians and the entire world, he was ready to resurrect the idea of a seminary; this time, however, it would be more ecumenical in outreach and its faculty and student body more diverse. The spring semester of 1975 saw the theology faculty constructing graduate courses for a Master of Arts in Theology for the fall. Howard Ervin, Roy Hayden, Charles Farah, Jerry Horner, Steve Durasoff, and some adjunct faculty members built basic courses while recruitment of still more faculty began in earnest.

President Oral Roberts hired James B. Buskirk to be the new dean in April 1976. The university chaplain, Robert J. Stamps, had asked Buskirk, a United Methodist evangelist and a faculty member of the Chandler School of Theology of Emory University, to preach a revival on the ORU campus in 1974.¹⁹ Impressed with Buskirk's testimony of a miraculous healing of his eyes from chorioretinitis, as well as his winsome homiletics and commitment to theological education, Roberts persisted in inviting Buskirk to come to lead the new ORU seminary, eventually convincing him to come as the dean with a view toward developing a PhD in theology. Upon his arrival in 1976, Buskirk launched the Master of Divinity degree, which was crucial for ordination in many of the older churches.

The recruitment of graduate faculty was intentionally ecumenical with the plurality being Methodist. The first round of new faculty in 1976 included James Buskirk, James Hewett, and Kenneth Jones, United Methodists; and Theodore Williams, Antiochian Orthodox.²⁰ Also included were Howard Ervin, an American Baptist; Charles Farah, a Charismatic from a Reformed background; Jerry Horner, a Southern Baptist; and Roy Hayden, a United Methodist with a Foursquare Gospel background. All of these were from the undergraduate department who also taught graduate courses and were the initial core graduate faculty in 1975. Paul G. Chappell from the Pentecostal Holiness Church would come onboard in 1975 as well. Later there

¹⁸ James Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986," personal document, 15 February 2021, 4.

¹⁹ Hart, *The Seminary*, 7.

²⁰ Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986," 2–3.

would come more faculty such as Larry Lacour, Maurice Culver, Michael Miller, Burl Dinkins, M. Robert Mansfield, J. Steven O'Malley, and Verna Culver, all of whom were United Methodists; John Miller, a Mennonite; Larry Losoncy, a Roman Catholic; Oon Chor Kho, an Episcopalian; Harold Hunter, Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee); and Larry Hart, a Southern Baptist.²¹ This diversity reflected the shift from classical Pentecostal to a widely ecumenical and Charismatic stance voiced in the university catalog as early as 1969:

ORU exists to serve the whole body of Christ, worldwide. It is not concerned with changing the church allegiance of its students; rather, it seeks to bring each student into a more personal, vital relationship with Christ, to acquaint him more fully with the charismatic power of the Holy Spirit, to give him a clearer understanding of the principles of Christian living and to send him back to his own church.²²

Though diverse, the seminary faculty had two things in common: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and an openness to the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. Roberts laid special stress on reception of the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues.²³ The recollections of New Testament professor, James A. Hewett, are particularly insightful:

My first visit had been a weekend at ORU where I was a guest at a Partners Seminar in which faculty, students, and visitors shared. President Roberts preached; Dr. Howard Ervin, an American Baptist and Old Testament scholar, taught on the person and work of the Holy Spirit; and I was listening. "Souls of Fire," an almost entirely black student music ensemble, rocked the place with new contemporary worship; the presence of God was almost tangible. I had never experienced anything like it. I sought out Dr. Ervin after the meeting and asked him for some time. That night with Dr. Ervin and a visiting layman, I received the work of the Holy Spirit in a way that required personal relinquishment and was manifested by a new prayer language. I spoke in tongues. The next day I met with Dr. Hamilton in his office. He offered me a job, and noted I was academically qualified, but—he made clear—I would never be tenured if I did not fully embrace "The Baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues." For me, that issue had been settled the previous evening.²⁴

The assembled faculty knew that they had to produce a substantive curriculum resulting in well-trained students who were conversant with major issues in the fields of biblical literature and theology. The rigor had to be maintained, and various schools of

²¹ Hart, *The Seminary*, 10–11.

²² *Oral Roberts University Bulletin*, June 1969, 109.

²³ *School of Theology Brochure*, 10.

²⁴ Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986," 5.

thought had to be fairly addressed. Hewett relates that the professors were an academically well-equipped faculty and the students were excellent. Many had left high-paying jobs to follow God's call. Some came on the proverbial shoestring and a prayer. All came, faculty and students alike, having accepted a call. Larry Hart's above-mentioned *The Seminary* gives a very readable account, largely statistical, of the efforts by Roberts and those whom he tapped to carry out the commission he had received as a young man: "Build me a university. . . ." ²⁵

Professors risked much to cast their hat in the ring with a fledgling seminary with Pentecostal moorings. Some Pentecostal professors risked losing their ministerial credentials by associating with Roberts after his move into Methodism. Those from older denominations were ostracized and treated with suspicion and contempt by their peers. Hewett relates, "When I returned to Asbury and word got out that I had not only interviewed, but accepted the job ORU offered, some faculty at Asbury actually shifted to the other side of the hall, ducked their heads, and refused conversation." ²⁶

Hewett gives an anecdote that was typical of the new seminary's high academic standards:

Somewhere in my second semester of teaching elementary Greek, I overheard a bit of student advice: "Be careful of Dr. Hewett's courses. He's a new Ph.D. and doesn't understand much about students' capabilities or personal realities." They were right. We, the faculty, had our aspirations. We had come to ORU to fashion a graduate school. After all, Oral Roberts had set the bar: Build Me a university, not a college. Crucial to building that university were two fundamentals: the Bible and the Holy Spirit. The Bible was, is, and always will be God's written Word given through humans in tangible form on materials we can access, save, and pass along for others to consult. Still, those earthly materials were marked by human touch, preservation, and transmission in diverse contexts of human history. (See, for example, 2 Tim 3:16,17; 2 Pet 1:21.) We of the faculty believed and sought to live and to pass along to our students our academically informed understanding of the Bible as it applied to and colored all aspects of our personal and professional life. ²⁷

The outside world did not quite know what to make of ORU folk. When the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature met for their annual conference in November 1976 in St. Louis, Hewett took a sizeable group of graduate students including James Shelton. They stayed in the house of Father Francis McNutt who was involved in the Charismatic healing movement in the Catholic Church. From there they descended on the conference with ORU printed on their conference badges ready to learn from prominent scholars. Other attendees were

²⁵ Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976-1986," 3.

²⁶ Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976-1986," 5.

²⁷ Hewett, "ORU School of Theology, 1976-1986," 3-4.

astounded that ORU students would be attending the most learned conference on the planet. Even to the present, ORU professors and students both attend groups and present academic papers.

One of the strengths of the School of Theology was and continues to this day, is a strong offering of biblical languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and even earlier ancient Near-Eastern languages. Both the undergraduate and graduate programs have encouraged students to read the Bible in the original tongues rather than depend on secondary translations. Truly the theological training at ORU takes seriously the mantra of the founder, “The Bible is the number one textbook at Oral Roberts University.”

In 1977, the first graduating class of the School of Theology consisted of eight Master of Arts students: Thomas Albin, Robert Braman, Sunday Fefegha, Frank Gorman, Clark Hay, Mark Hudson, James Shelton, and Burt Voorhees. Nearly all pursued further studies and/or served in ministerial capacities. As one of them, I took every course Hewett offered and even asked him to oversee my master’s thesis. Because of the rigor and quality of education offered by faculty, such as Ervin, Farah, Horner, Hewett, among others, I was able to pursue a PhD at the University of Stirling in Scotland, defending my dissertation before F. F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, and John W. Drane, subsequently publishing my dissertation as *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*.²⁸

By the 1977–78 academic year, the graduate faculty had expanded considerably:

James B. Buskirk, Vice Provost of Theology and Spiritual Affairs and Dean of the School of Theology;

Ken Jones, Associate Dean, Associate Professor of Church and Society, and Director of Field Education;

James A. Hewett, Assistant Professor in New Testament Literature and Languages;

Theodore M. Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology;

Burrell O. Dinkins, Associate Professor of Pastoral Care;

J. Steven O’Malley, Assistant Professor of Church History;

John M. Miller, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Missions;

Lawrence Lacour, Adjunct Professor of Preaching;

Howard M. Ervin, Professor of Old Testament Literature and Languages;

²⁸ James B. Shelton, *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1991).

M. Robert Mansfield, Associate Professor of New Testament and Languages;

J. Michael Miller, Jr., Associate Professor of Old Testament Literature and Languages; and

Lawrence J. Losoncy, Adjunct Associate Professor of Christian Education.

The following year, Oon Chor Khoo, an Episcopalian Charismatic priest, was hired as theological librarian. He began an intensive development of the library collection as part of the seminary's quest to add American Theological Schools (ATS) accreditation to the accreditation the university had attained earlier from the Higher Learning Commission.

The ORU seminary's credibility and reputation for quality had grown quickly. In the spring of 1971, the North Central region of the Higher Learning Commission had granted the university full accreditation. Then, on July 1, 1980, nearly five years after its reopening, the Graduate School of Theology received ATS accreditation. In the 1981–82 academic year, the United Methodists declared the seminary to be approved to train their ministerial candidates. The Doctor of Ministry professional degree began to be offered that same year.²⁹ Hart notes that in that same year enrollment included 202 MA students and twenty-seven DMin students.³⁰

Challenging Dynamics

However, not all was peace and harmony in the new seminary. Increasing resistance from factions within the United Methodist leadership was directed toward ORU as an approved Methodist seminary as well as some contesting Roberts' eldership as constituting full ordination. At this time the Word-Faith Movement was on the rise, and Roberts had liaisons with many of their leadership including Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin. A crisis arose when Roberts invited one of the more radical Word-Faith teachers to speak in the ORU chapel in September 1980. In that chapel the speaker presented what Hewett characterizes as a "strange teaching" which culminated in "a pivotal chapel experience":

In the course of his message, [the chapel speaker] depicted Jesus, the Son of God, in His miracle-working power, as a pattern wholly attainable to us human beings, therefore, similar to the snake's invitation to Eve, "Do you want to be like God?" (Gen 3:4). Then he followed this invitation with, "Do you understand that?" Involuntarily, with a deep, guttural cry, I [Hewett] responded, "NO!" To this, [the minister] replied, "Well, that's your problem," and sought to resume his message.

²⁹ Hart, *The Seminary*, 11–12.

³⁰ Hart, *The Seminary*, 12.

Within a few moments, President Roberts interrupted the service. Taking the microphone, he lectured for some thirty minutes during which he demanded that the theology faculty member (yes, he identified from which school the voice had come) to “be man enough to stand and apologize,” or “must I come back there and drag you out!” I stood to say, “President Roberts, no sooner was the word uttered than I wished to retrieve it. I am truly sorry to have embarrassed you and your invited guest before this entire body. I most sincerely ask your forgiveness. Please accept my apology.” What else was the man going to do? Roberts said, “I accept your apology,” lectured us for another fifteen minutes, and chapel was dismissed.³¹

After that chapel, the Graduate School of Theology faculty all assembled in associate dean Mike Miller’s office and waited an hour for Buskirk. When he arrived, he instructed those having classes to attend to them. He then invited Hewett into his office “where he assured me I had almost single handedly, with one word, nearly closed the seminary.”³² Yes, mistakes were made, but life as a seminary continued.

“In the best and worst times, God uses circumstances for our personal growth.” Hewett recounts that “two weeks later, I received a personal note from our University Chaplain, Reverend Bob Stamps. His letter was a consoling validation of my part in a horrible fiasco.”³³

Hewett continues his account of the aftermath of the debacle thus:

During University Faculty Orientation at the beginning of the following fall semester, President Roberts was addressing the returning and new faculty members from the stage in the Holy Spirit room. In the course of his comments, he came and, standing nearby, looked straight at me, and said, “Sometimes I mess up, and I don’t get things right. I’m sorry.” He turned and continued his talk. His comments fit in the context of what he was saying, but during lunch I received a call from Dr. Carl Hamilton, University Provost, who said, “Jim, I hope you know you came as close to getting an apology from Oral Roberts as you ever will.” My response was, “I know, Dr. Hamilton, and I mouthed to President Roberts at the time, ‘I accept your apology.’” Later, in another context, President Roberts communicated to me that he had to learn that the controversial chapel speaker was not teachable, and would not be invited back again.³⁴

Hewett further relates:

... the following fall, I received a request from President Roberts’s secretary asking I join him in his executive suite for consultation. He asked that I bring my Greek

³¹ Hewett, “ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986,” 7.

³² Hewett, “ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986,” 8.

³³ Hewett, “ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986,” 7–8.

³⁴ Hewett, “ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986,” 9.

New Testament so that we could discuss scriptures he planned to use in a soon-to-be-taped “Holy Spirit in the Now” teaching session. I was there most of the day including lunch while other faculty colleagues covered my classes. As we concluded the study session, he invited me to join him again that evening as he taught that subject matter before the live audience. He interviewed me again referencing our earlier study time. Yes, for me, it was an exhilarating evening of vindication after the previous debacle.³⁵

This event revealed a shift in the university’s clientele to non-denominational Charismatics that would increase in the future.

Post-Buskirk Seminary

This was a period of great growth and expansion for ORU. President Roberts had started several ambitious projects, including not only the seminary—formally named the Graduate School of Theology—but also the Schools of Business, Nursing, Medicine, and Dentistry, as well as a graduate center building immediately adjacent to the Learning Resources Center and the entire City of Faith Hospital complex (now called CityPlex). The President expected the growth to match the “speed of his imagination,” as Thomas Albin, ORU seminary alumnus, put it. Such is the nature of visionaries.³⁶

However, such explosive and unbridled growth did cause a depletion of resources to the point that Roberts told Buskirk that they would not pursue a PhD program in theology. For Buskirk, this was a “deal breaker.” He had left a respectable position at Emory University to help Roberts build a seminary with the PhD as the capstone.³⁷ As a result, he resigned as Dean and Vice-Provost of Spiritual Affairs and took the Senior Pastorate of First United Methodist Church of Tulsa when it was vacated by L. D. Thomas, an ally and friend of Roberts and the university. (In the 1960s and 1970s, Thomas welcomed a large cadre of ORU professors and students to First Methodist who helped Thomas turn a floundering downtown church into a center for renewal in the denomination accompanied by phenomenal growth.)

With Buskirk’s departure, eleven of the Methodist professors at ORU followed suit and left. This precipitated the revocation of the seminary’s status as an approved United Methodist seminary even though a good number of Methodist professors continued to serve at ORU. This was followed by a United Methodist statement that the status of elder (that had been granted to Roberts when he joined the United

³⁵ Hewett, “ORU School of Theology, 1976–1986,” 7–9.

³⁶ Thomas Albin, interview by author, 16 March 2022.

³⁷ James Shelton, Arden Autry, and Sally Jo Shelton, “In Memoriam: Dr. James B. Buskirk (1933–2020),” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 6:1 (2021), <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/spiritus/vol6/iss1/4>.

Methodist Church) was not the equivalent of full ordination.³⁸ For Roberts, this was a renegeing on the agreement when he first joined the United Methodist Church, and many considered it insulting. When one extends the hand in friendship, one's guard is down. Nevertheless, Roberts continued to encourage the university to undertake ministerial cooperation with Methodist churches and continued to send students and faculty alike to serve the denomination. A lesser person would not have done so. This explains why from that period, Roberts began looking to the Pentecostals and independent Charismatic groups for opportunities to train ministers.

With the exit of Buskirk, Robert Stamps was asked to serve as the dean of the seminary and was sent to Sheffield, England, to complete a PhD. During this period, Paul Chappell acted as his assistant back in Tulsa. In the middle of Stamps' studies in England, however, he received a message from the university informing him that his services would no longer be required. For Stamps, the news was devastating.³⁹ He had invested much of his life in ORU as a beloved chaplain and mentor for thousands of students. He, like Roberts, had a vision of an ecumenical, worldwide Charismatic renewal with ORU as an intellectual locus for the movement. Stamps finished his doctorate and pastored United Methodist churches and later served as a visiting professor at Asbury Theological Seminary. Around this time, the contracts of two other theology faculty were not renewed, and the professors were not informed in time to enable them to get faculty appointments at other schools for the impending academic year. Suits followed, and the university settled out of court. Many considered their treatment unprofessional; sadly, the professors had been great instructors who were in harmony with the superordinate goals of the university.

In Stamps' place, in 1984, Oral Roberts asked independent Charismatic Larry Lea to take the reins of the Graduate School of Theology. Lea was pastor of the Church on the Rock, a 7,000-member church in Rockwall, Texas. A former Southern Baptist, Lea oversaw a Charismatic renewal in Texas, which he coupled with a powerful prayer program. This started a new outreach to the burgeoning independent Charismatic churches. Oral Roberts invited many independent Charismatics and even some Word-Faith proponents to speak at ORU. In 1986, he established the Charismatic Bible Ministries to provide fellowship and oversight of the new, independent Charismatic churches. Their focus was on the "advancement of the unity of the Body of Christ, through love and mighty signs and wonders."⁴⁰ Despite this focus on these new groups, both the graduate school and the university maintained a variegated, ecumenical faculty

³⁸ Roberts, *Expect a Miracle*, 328.

³⁹ Robert Stamps, interview by author, 6 July 2021.

⁴⁰ Peter D. Hocken, "Charismatic Movement," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. S. Burgess and E. van der Maas, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 488.

and student body. This diversity, united around a commitment to a Christian worldview, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and a docile receptivity to the power of the Holy Spirit, has enabled ORU graduates to serve the greater body of Christ. Unity in essentials and diversity in nonessentials has been the recurring theme.

The Graduate School of Theology and Ministry at ORU arose from the ashes of Oral Roberts' first attempt at graduate theological education. It shed its narrowly defined Pentecostal identity to reach out to the greater body of Christ. Nevertheless, the new graduate school tenaciously held to the distinctive aspects of Pentecostalism, melding them with the essentials of the Christian faith of the older churches. "The wise scribe brings out of his treasure store, treasure old and new" (Matt 13:52). Oral Roberts recognized that the message of miracles and healing was not a bizarre or heterodox experience but an essential component of the Church from the day of Pentecost 2,000 years ago. The miraculous work of the Holy Spirit is ever old and ever new. Through adversity and controversy, with the mandate to take God's healing power into every person's world, the Graduate School of Theology at ORU began to fulfill the call that would perdure into the twenty-first century.



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