

Remembering Oral Roberts on His 100th Birthday

Born 100 years ago today on Jan. 24, 1918, in impoverished circumstances north of Ada, Oklahoma, Oral Roberts' miraculous healing as a teen would serve as a precursor to the ministry that made him one of the premier evangelists of the 20th century.

It happened en route to a meeting where the 17-year-old Roberts was healed of both stuttering and tuberculosis through the ministry of unknown evangelist George W. Moncey. "Son, I am going to heal you, and you are to take My healing power to your generation," said a voice young Oral recognized as God's. "You are to build Me a university and build it on My authority and the Holy Spirit."

It was my privilege to know Oral Roberts and publish one of his books. He honored us when he spoke at Charisma Media's 20th anniversary banquet in 1995. I visited him at his retirement home in Southern California three times, thinking each might be the last time I'd see him. When he died in December, 2009, I not only attended his funeral, but we rushed a special issue of *Charisma* to press honoring his long and productive life. He encouraged me many times and prayed over me once, saying, "Never doubt the gift within you."

I've met some great Christian leaders and even secular politicians and celebrities. Oral was a spiritual giant of our generation and the greatest man I ever knew personally.

During his life, he preached to millions and laid hands on 1.5 million people for healing. He wrote more than 120 books, pioneered television evangelism and spread the doctrine of seed faith—an integral part of Pentecostal and charismatic circles.

We wrote about Oral Roberts many times in *Charisma*. He was on the cover three times, including our memorial issue. And he wrote for us on numerous occasions.

When our 40th anniversary rolled around in 2015, he was one of the Charisma 40—the 40 leaders we felt had impacted the church the most in the past 40 years. Ken Walker, one of our best freelance writers, wrote a brilliant article you can read here and from which I have excerpted a great deal of this newsletter.

I recently recorded a podcast with Ossie Mills, Vice President of Global Communications and Marketing at Oral Roberts University, that tells the story and vision of Oral Roberts. You can listen to it here.

A larger-than-life figure whose slicked-back dark hair and flamboyant preaching inspired many evangelists, Oral lives on through televised and recorded messages that continue to impact the world. He also left a mark through his family, which included four children and a marriage of 66 years to his wife, Evelyn, who died four years before he did.

His legacy extends far beyond the pulpit, especially through the educational institution he established in 1965 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He served as president of Oral Roberts University for 28 years and remained as chancellor and lifetime trustee after retiring in 1993.

Today, the school spans 263 acres and, last year, enrolled more than 4,000 students from more than 100 nations. More than 40,000 alumni of Oral Roberts University are implementing his vision of touching every corner of the world with the gospel.

“He’s one of the most significant figures in American religious history,” said Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan. “I think he planted the seeds publicly of what became the charismatic renewal after 1960 because the American public first saw Pentecostalism in their living rooms through his

televised tent crusades.”

Jack Hayford, founding pastor of Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, said of Oral: “If God had not, in His sovereign will, raised up the ministry of Oral Roberts, the entire charismatic movement might not have occurred. Oral shook the landscape with the inescapable reality and practicality of Jesus’ whole ministry. His teaching and concepts were foundational to the renewal that swept through the whole church. He taught concepts that spread throughout the world and simplified and focused a spiritual lifestyle that is embraced by huge sectors of today’s church.”

Darren Rodgers, director of the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, calls Oral one of the most influential American healing evangelists of the 1950s and 1960s—one who bore a mark of integrity at a time when many others fell into scandal. Oral reached beyond his Pentecostal roots to expand a then-budding charismatic movement by bringing independent evangelists, churches and schools together.

“Unlike other evangelists, he was able to unite people around a common vision,” Rodgers says. “Many shared his vision for healing, evangelization and education. Before Oral Roberts and people like him, there was not a large platform for independent charismatics nor Pentecostals.”

While some criticized Oral for naming a university after himself, Rodgers says that, as an expert marketer, Oral recognized that many people supported him. Thus, Oral wanted to parlay that personal goodwill into development of larger institutions. Rodgers says he succeeded, as ORU became one of the premier Christian universities in the nation because of its founder’s vision.

ORU president William Wilson got a firsthand look at Oral’s influence during a stint as executive officer for the Azusa Street Centennial. The historic 2006 event brought 50,000

people to Los Angeles from across the globe.

"I discovered quickly in that journey all the people in this movement—and there were a lot, from William Seymour on—that if there was a person who embodied the movement more than any one individual, it was Oral Roberts," Wilson says.

ORU has big plans for today; you can read more [here](#). You can watch a Noon ET chapel service honoring Oral on live streaming [here](#).

"Oral was always a global man, a global leader," Wilson says. "His ministry went around the world. In this season, where ORU has gotten strong again and emerged from crisis, we are positioned to dream again. We're capturing the initial impulse of what Oral heard—that God would use this educational institution to the uttermost bounds of the earth."

In reflecting on Oral's legacy during ORU's 50th anniversary year, the institution's president says several points emerged. One in particular recounts how he shaped a fresh view of God as a loving God who wants to bless and heal people instead of a then-common view of a harsh, retributive Lord. In addition to pioneering the concept of seed faith and serving as a bridge between the charismatic and Pentecostal communities, Wilson sees Oral's most enduring contribution as bringing education to the forefront of Christian life.

"He said you could not only be anointed to be a preacher, but you could be anointed to be a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, a nurse or an engineer," Wilson says. "He taught that in every discipline you could be anointed by God's Spirit, hear God and do God's work in whatever sphere God sent you into."

"Oral's founding vision ended with something like: 'Their work will exceed yours, and I will be well-pleased.' That is true. In raising this institution, Oral also helped educate the Spirit-filled movement that education was good and God could use it for kingdom purposes."

An Enduring Legacy

When he died in 2009, we published these statements from prominent leaders about his legacy that are worth repeating today:

Evangelist Billy Graham, founder of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association—"Oral Roberts was a man of God and a great friend in ministry. I loved him as a brother. We had many quiet conversations over the years. I invited Oral to speak at one of our early international conferences on evangelism held in Berlin in the 1960s. ... Just three weeks ago, I was privileged to talk to Oral over the telephone. During the short conversation, he said to me that he was near the end of his life's journey. I look forward to the day that I will see Oral and Evelyn Roberts again in heaven—our eternal home."

Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston—"For more than 50 years, Oral Roberts was a dear family friend. He was a great hero of faith whose legacy will live on in the hearts of millions of believers worldwide. He profoundly affected all of us through his strong faith in Jesus Christ and his deep compassion and love for his fellow man."

Healing evangelist Benny Hinn—"What an amazing life! He was a giant in so many ways, and I was privileged to have him as a dear, dear friend for many years. Every time I was with him, I saw firsthand a heart consumed with the love of Jesus Christ. Only heaven will reveal how many hearts he has pointed toward heaven, how many homes have been revolutionized through his seed-faith teaching and how many ears have heard his faith-filled phrase, "Expect a miracle!" God has used him to open doors that were once considered closed to the miracle-working power of the gospel, and wherever I travel, I have been ever thankful for the trail he blazed."

Bishop T.D. Jakes, pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas—"Dr.

Oral Roberts was a friend of mine and an inspiration. More importantly, he was a forerunner of Christian ministry whose message of total healing transcended the generations. He was a pioneer in the concept of holistic medicine combining the science of medicine with deep spirituality to attain wellness of the body, soul and spirit."

Apostle Frederick K. C. Price, founder of Crenshaw Christian Center—"Brother Roberts was very special to the entire Price family, and when he and Evelyn, his late wife, relocated to California some years ago, we visited them several times a year. He was a very special man of God and a blessing to the entire body of Christ. He, Evelyn, Betty and I were dear friends and enjoyed a very warm and close relationship, which we shall forever cherish. We will miss him."

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