

## ABSTRACT

God's Faith-Healing Entrepreneur:

Oral Roberts, Charismatic Christianity, and the Rise of the Sunbelt South, 1945–1990

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This thesis tracks the development of Oral Roberts's ministry into an evangelical empire, beginning with his move from rural Oklahoma to Tulsa in 1947 and concluding with the collapse of his City of Faith Medical and Research Center in 1989. It will explore how Roberts burst on to the American religious scene in 1947 boasting a businesslike acumen and a distinctive brand of Pentecostal spirituality. It will chronicle the rise of Roberts's faith-healing ministry during the 1950s and his theological debt to classical, primitivist Pentecostalism. This thesis will also examine the connections between Roberts's theology and preexisting traditions of New Thought. With the founding of Oral Roberts University in 1962, Roberts pivoted from barnstorming revivalist to suave televangelist and embraced the affluent Sunbelt ethos of the 1960s and 1970s, a shift in style that fueled his rise to the heights of religious celebrity in the United States. Finally, Roberts's efforts to build and sustain the City of Faith Medical and Research Center will be related with an attentiveness to how his increasingly erratic series of visions undermined his public credibility and triggered the collapse of his ministry. Ultimately, this thesis argues that Oral Roberts entrepreneurially built one of the most influential evangelical ministries of the twentieth century by presenting an evangelical message heavily indebted to his primitivist Pentecostal roots, adapted to wider audiences through the prism of New Thought, and primed for the *nouveau riche* lifestyle of the emerging suburban South.

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GOD'S FAITH-HEALING ENTREPRENEUR:  
ORAL ROBERTS, CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY, AND THE RISE OF THE  
SUNBELT SOUTH, 1945–1990

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## PREFACE

Historians who seek to hew to the analytical standards of their academic discipline encounter challenges when writing about the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. One of the hallmarks of Oral Roberts's spirituality was his insistence that God continuously intervened within the physical order (and indeed, through Roberts's very hands) to enact miracles of bodily healing. Without hesitation, Roberts promoted ideas and practices that subverted the predominant metaphysics of modernity. He disregarded the premises that the universe was a closed system and that spiritual forces, if they existed, were externalities of the observable "natural" order and thus unprovable by any rational analysis. On the one hand, I feel an obligation to write according to the accepted, empirical standards of the historical discipline. Yet on the other hand, writing in the spirit of fairness about a figure like Roberts, and of the ideas that animated his actions, necessitates stepping outside of this Enlightenment framework and its demands for empirical proof.

Many who visited Oral Roberts's healing revivals walked away convinced that their own preconceived mental maps of God's relation with the physical world required revision. Many others walked away convinced that Roberts was a charlatan whose "miracles" were either clever ruses or psychosomatic phenomena. What was clear to Roberts, his audiences, and contemporary observers was that *something* occurred inside the canvas walls of his revival tent. The aim of this thesis project is neither to ascertain the sincerity of Roberts's beliefs, nor "prove" or "disprove" his miracles, nor pinpoint their origins as either divinely orchestrated or psychosomatic. Roberts's actions generated

a range of explanatory construals, including Roberts's own, and I leave it to readers to weigh these construals themselves and reach their own conclusions. Thus, although I will not pepper my manuscript with adjectival caveats like "alleged" or "apparent" when describing the unusual occurrences that typified Roberts's life, this should not be taken as my own blanket acceptance of their spiritual derivation.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, I use three religious labels throughout my thesis: "evangelical," "Pentecostal," and "Charismatic." I recognize that "evangelical" is a contested term in contemporary historiography. For the purposes of this thesis, I use it to describe Protestants in modernity who have centered their religious identity around twin beliefs in the centrality of Christ's crucifixion to secure salvation for the world and in the necessity of being "born again" by the Holy Spirit through faith in order to receive this salvation personally. I treat Pentecostalism as a subset of sects and denominations within evangelicalism, arising in the twentieth century, that privilege the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" as a religious experience that equips the believer to practice spiritual gifts like faith healing, prophecy, exorcism, and speaking in tongues. In the 1960s, this Pentecostal spirituality began to seep into other Christian traditions, including other evangelical churches and Roman Catholicism. Unhitched from Pentecostal denominations but practicing a Pentecostal spirituality, proponents of this cross-denominational religious movement came to refer to themselves as Charismatics. Oral Roberts spent his early life as a Pentecostal, became a Charismatic in the 1960s, and was always an evangelical.

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<sup>1</sup>On these interpretive issues, I found helpful perspectives in Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), x; David Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), ix-x; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-24, 539-44.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heartiest gratitude goes to the two professors, Dr. Philip Jenkins and Dr. Barry Hankins, who encouraged my early inklings that Oral Roberts was a worthy subject of research. It was in Dr. Jenkins's class that I wrote a research essay on City of Faith. Under his continuing guidance, this essay planted the seed for much of my scholarly work during my undergraduate career. It blossomed into a conference presentation, journal article, and now, my honors thesis. Dr. Hankins assumed the role of my thesis advisor as I struggled to sketch the faintest outlines of what I hoped my thesis would become. His support, insight, and capacious knowledge of twentieth-century American religion and culture helped me hone the questions I wanted to answer. Both have been models to me of what it means to be consummate scholars and engaged teachers.

Other scholars played key advisory roles as I researched and wrote my thesis. Dr. Elizabeth Flowers kindly agreed to serve on my thesis committee. Dr. Stephen Sloan was always keen to offer his scholarly expertise and advice on research methods. Dr. Thomas Kidd and Dr. Elesha Coffman provided helpful historiographical guidance as I pondered Roberts's place on the broader landscape of American religion, as did Dr. John Wigger at the University of Missouri. Despite my thesis's chronological distance from his own research specialty, Rev. Dr. Andrew Teal at Pembroke College, Oxford took interest in my project, posing provocative questions and imparting sage wisdom.

Dr. Jonathan Root kindly shared with me his wealth of knowledge about Oral Roberts and Charismatic Christianity. My greatest debt to him was his willingness to provide digitized versions of primary sources from his own research project—sources

that, as my footnotes will bear out, provided a wealth of insight into Oral Roberts's life and ministry. My thesis would not have become what it became without his generous assistance.

My brother, Sam Young, shepherded me into the verdant pastures of history early on in my high school years. I blame him. And thank him. For several years now, Sam has shared unconditionally his scholarly sagacity and brotherly love with me. I treasure his willingness to serve as a sounding board for my ideas. Thank you, brother.

The ideas and conclusions I express in this thesis were also directly and indirectly forged in the furnace of discussions on history, religion, and culture that I have engaged in during the last four years with my brilliant classmates at Baylor and at Oxford. At Baylor, many thanks to Ben Lloyd, Drew McKenzie, Jackson McNeece, Jerry Rogers, Will Sharkey, Casey Spinks, Sam Still, Jordan Vanderpool, and TJ Watson. To the Vines library squad at Oxford—especially Daniel Anger, Hallie Becker, Miller Green, Amelia Lehosit, Sam Scott, and Eliza Sims—thank you for stretching my intellect and including me in many memorable experiences that I will treasure forever.

Finally, to my mother and father, thank you for everything. This one is for you.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

“Some of the strangest mental complexes in American religious history,” historian Donald Meyer wrote in 1980, “would evolve in the Southwest as simple holiness folk grew rich and anxious.”<sup>1</sup> Meyer’s assessment of the evangelical movements that were coalescing in the postwar South and Southwest seems rather terse, even pejorative, for the scholarly work of an academic who later occupied a distinguished professorship at Wesleyan University. Yet behind his caustic language, Meyer recognized that the seismic forces of economic modernization, urbanization, and population growth occurring in the southern United States in the decades after World War II were generating new currents in American religious history. In his assessment, no figure so exemplified this tectonic shift in American religion as Oral Roberts (1918–2009).<sup>2</sup>

Oral Roberts was born in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma in a log cabin that lacked electricity or running water. He grew up in the grinding poverty that marked much of the rural American South in the early twentieth century. Just eight years after the catalytic revival at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, evangelists from the Pentecostal Holiness Church (PHC) brought the “full gospel” of prophetic visions, miraculous healing, and speaking in tongues to Pontotoc County. Roberts’s parents, of Welsh Methodist stock, wasted little time severing their mainline denominational ties to join the upstart movement.<sup>3</sup> Born four

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Religion as Pop Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Oral Roberts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 256.

<sup>2</sup>Meyer, *Positive Thinkers*, 353–56.

years after their conversions in 1918, Oral Roberts was among the first generation of cradle Pentecostals. At age seventeen, he was stricken with a debilitating bout of tuberculosis that rendered him bedridden for several months. In an oft-recounted episode that he identified as the seminal moment of his life, Roberts was healed from his illness by a traveling faith healer. The next year he himself began full-time ministry in the PHC.

In 1947, after ten years of itinerant preaching tours and short-term pastorates across the South, Roberts and his wife Evelyn (whom he married in 1938) moved to Tulsa, where he set up an independent healing ministry. Roberts took America by storm in the 1950s: he crisscrossed the country holding healing revivals, took to the airwaves with vibrant radio programs and television specials, and flooded the globe with over 22 million books, magazines, and pamphlets a year espousing his message of healing and abundant life.<sup>4</sup> In the 1960s, Roberts pivoted away from his revival tent and his Pentecostal denominationalism, simultaneously chartering Oral Roberts University (ORU) and gravitating towards the ecumenism of the burgeoning Charismatic Renewal. Roberts stood at the helm of a sprawling ministry empire by the early 1970s, hosting blockbuster primetime television specials and funnelling immense amounts of capital into his project to transform ORU into a research university. The culmination of Roberts's efforts was the City of Faith Medical and Research Center, a trifold skyscraper complex in Tulsa that he promised would transpose his healing ministry from the revival tent to the hospital corridor. In many ways City of Faith was a hard-fought Pyrrhic victory, for it quickly cratered under the weight of financial mismanagement, logistical setbacks, and

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<sup>3</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 13–16.

<sup>4</sup>Hilliard Griffin, "Reaching Out to the World Through L-I-F-E," *Abundant Life* 12, no. 5 (May 1958): 13.

Roberts's own high-profile gaffes. It closed in 1989. After City of Faith's demise, Roberts receded from prominence as his ministry contracted in size. He resigned from ORU's presidency in 1993 before passing away in 2009.

Taking stock of Roberts's long life and pinpointing his place in the long saga of American religious history requires reckoning with his extensive influence and impact. The Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association had churned out 500 million pieces of ministry literature in seventy-nine languages by August 1966, at a time when *Abundant Life*, Roberts's monthly magazine, reached over six hundred thousand ardent supporters.<sup>5</sup> An estimated 37.6 million Americans—equating to nearly 18 percent of the American population at the time—tuned into a primetime television broadcast of his in 1973.<sup>6</sup> Roberts ably fundraised \$150 million to construct City of Faith in the late 1970s, making his ministry the largest religious non-profit in the United States at the time in terms of annual donations. A 1980 nationwide survey found that Roberts garnered 84.1 percent name recognition among Americans, second only to Billy Graham and forty percentage points higher than the next best religious figure.<sup>7</sup> Judging from these metrics, Roberts's prominence on the religious landscape of late twentieth-century America was comparable only to Billy Graham's in scope and magnitude.

Yet while Billy Graham's life and ministry have spawned an avalanche of scholarly commentary and critique, Oral Roberts remains shrouded in a glaringly capacious historiographical void. Currently, David Harrell Jr.'s *Oral Roberts: An*

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<sup>5</sup>William C. Armstrong, "Reaching Out to Souls in a Ministry of Total Evangelism," *Abundant Life* 20, no. 8 (August 1966): 21.

<sup>6</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 270.

<sup>7</sup>"Appeal to the Flock," *Newsweek*, September 10, 1979; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 421.

*American Life* (published in 1985, before the unceremonious collapse of Roberts's ministry) is the only book-length scholarly assessment of him available. Although a valuable and sympathetic work, it is of limited use for the present-day reader because of its constricted chronological perspective. Kate Bowler has devoted limited attention to Roberts in her recent book *Blessed*, but only as a character in the larger drama of the rise of the prosperity gospel.<sup>8</sup> Most historians have easily elided Roberts from their narratives of twentieth-century American evangelicalism. Indeed, a recent acclaimed history of evangelicalism since the 1970s consigned Roberts to two anecdotal sentences.<sup>9</sup>

Two factors have contributed to this dearth of scholarship on Roberts. First, Roberts kept his distance from the blatantly partisan machinations of the Christian Right as it burst on to the American political scene with a furor in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, he has escaped the attention of the coterie of scholars inclined to emphasize the politically salient elements of late twentieth-century evangelicalism. (I will argue in Chapter Four, however, that Roberts had subtle but substantial political significance). Second, many evangelical scholars have crafted a historiography of twentieth-century born-again religion that has privileged their own theological and educational contexts. Hence, as some critics have noted, there is a pronounced historiographical focus on the clusters of evangelical ministries and educational institutions in the Chicago suburbs and Southern California, and an emphasis on a dialectic between “fundamentalism” and “neo-evangelicalism” that proves unwieldy when applied to Pentecostals or even Southern

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<sup>8</sup>Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56, 83.

Baptists.<sup>10</sup> As an eccentric Pentecostal-turned-Charismatic who eschewed partisan activism and stayed rooted to the Oklahoman soil of his birth, Roberts has eluded the notice of scholars charting the course of twentieth-century American evangelicalism.

Although Oral Roberts has thus far largely escaped the attention of historians, the dynamic socioeconomic context of the “Sunbelt” South, the region he lived and prospered in, has not. The “Sunbelt,” a term coined by political strategist Kevin Phillips in 1969, describes the constellation of rapidly expanding southern cities stretching from Charlotte, North Carolina to Los Angeles, California. Among these Sunbelt cities are Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, and Roberts’s own Tulsa. The sustained growth patterns of these southern metropolitan regions after World War II constituted one of the significant megatrends of twentieth-century American history.<sup>11</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, Byron E. Shafer, and Richard Johnston have drawn attention to the array of economic and infrastructural factors—including New Deal-era economic investment, the incipient Military-Industrial Complex, interstate highways, the GI Bill, and weak labor unions—that transformed the South from a stratified agricultural society into a region of post-industrial, suburbanized metropolises in the half-century after 1945.<sup>12</sup> Building off the work of these economic historians, scholars like Matthew Lassiter and Kevin Kruse have written of the politically conservative subcultures that developed in the cul-de-sacs of the

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<sup>10</sup>Douglas A. Sweeney, “The Essential Evangelicalism Dialectic: The Historiography of the Early Neo-Evangelical Movement and the Observer-Participant Dilemma,” *Church History* 60, no. 1 (March 1991): 70–84.

<sup>11</sup>Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), 314–18.

<sup>12</sup>Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991); Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

new suburban South.<sup>13</sup> Yet only recently have historians like Darren Dochuk begun to grapple with the implications of the Sunbelt South’s emergence for American religion.<sup>14</sup> Building upon this body of scholarship, I argue in this thesis that Roberts’s rise to prominence in American religious life stemmed from his enmeshment in the new affluent culture of the Sunbelt South. His success derived from his keen ability to fashion a gospel message that spoke to the hearts, minds, and pocketbooks of his *nouveau riche* “neighbors” in metropolitan regions like Tulsa, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and Atlanta.

This thesis, then, aims to be an account of Roberts’s life and ministry from his move to Tulsa in 1947 to the closure of City of Faith in 1989 and an attempt to locate Roberts on the landscape of American evangelicalism. In this two-pronged endeavor, I hope to place my findings in conversation with the burgeoning work of economic, political, and cultural historians writing on the history of the Sunbelt South. My thesis will draw from sources like Roberts’s long-running ministry magazine *Abundant Life*, oral histories, audiovisual materials archived at ORU’s Holy Spirit Research Center, and local and national journalistic accounts of Roberts’s exploits. Two themes will guide my narrative about Oral Roberts—his *primitivism* and his *pragmatism*.

In adopting primitivism and pragmatism as the integral qualities of Oral Roberts’s life and ministry, I am indebted to historian Grant Wacker, who has identified these two impulses as the central traits of early Pentecostalism in his groundbreaking book *Heaven*

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<sup>13</sup>Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup>One excellent treatment, albeit limited to Southern California in its geographical scope, can be found in Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011); see also Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

*Below*. Primitivism, as Wacker denotes it, is not a slighting reference to archaic crudeness. Rather, it represents “in accord with its Latin root *primus*, a determination to return to first things, original things, fundamental things.” Wacker explains that early Pentecostals pined for “direct contact with the divine” and exhibited a forceful “yearning to be guided solely by God’s Spirit in every aspect of their lives.”<sup>15</sup> Yet the primitivist quality of early Pentecostalism, Wacker writes, coexisted with a strongly pragmatic streak of nimble ingenuity and entrepreneurialism. He argues that “for all their declarations about living solely in the realm of the supernatural,” early Pentecostals “displayed a remarkably clear-eyed vision of the way things worked here on earth” and “proved remarkably willing to work within the social and cultural expectations of the age.”<sup>16</sup> Oral Roberts, it bears repeating, grew up in the second and third decades of the early Pentecostal milieu that Wacker describes. Roberts left the sectarian strictures of his youthful Pentecostalism for the autonomy of Charismatic spirituality in the 1960s. Yet I argue that even after this crossover, his message and methods continued to demonstrate and derive their potency from a playful tension between primitivist yearning for unmediated experience of God and a pragmatic, inventive, and entrepreneurial ethos.

This thesis will examine how Roberts manifested these twin traits of early Pentecostal spirituality while deftly modifying them to meet the exigencies of a postwar South experiencing rising living standards, advancing telecommunication technologies, and increasing economic and cultural convergence with the rest of America. Chapter Two chronicles the rapid growth of Roberts’s ministry empire under his pragmatic,

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<sup>15</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 12.

<sup>16</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 12–13.

businesslike leadership from his move to Tulsa in 1947 until the founding of ORU in 1962. Chapter Three covers how, during this same timeframe, Roberts drew from his Pentecostal roots and the eclectic tradition of New Thought to fashion a primitivist message that emphasized radical healing, positive thinking, and unmediated contact with God by means of the revival tent, radio, and television. Chapter Four carries the narrative to 1975. Here I examine how Roberts blended his primitivist spirituality with a driving entrepreneurial ambition in order to transform ORU from a small, unaccredited bible college into a graduate research university. Chapter Five begins in 1977 with Roberts's audacious announcement to build the \$150-million City of Faith hospital. It concludes with the facility's undignified collapse in the late 1980s, which I argue demonstrates that Roberts's primitivist predilection for prophetic revelations and ecstatic healing proved an unstable foundation for the corporatized ministry empire he had worked so hard to create. A short conclusion draws this thesis to a close by considering Roberts's place in the history of evangelicalism and his relevance to current trends in American religious life.

Ultimately, this thesis contends that Roberts's spiritual odyssey paralleled the lives of millions of evangelical southerners in the twentieth century. They, like him, exchanged their hardscrabble upbringings for the comfortable quarters of the emerging suburban middle class and reimagined their plain-folk religious beliefs to fit their new environs. This thesis also intends to demonstrate that Oral Roberts was one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century American religion. As a religious entrepreneur who hitched himself to the Sunbelt South's economic, demographic, and cultural rise, Roberts created a distinctive spirituality that continues to shape the trajectory of Christianity in America and around the world.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Here At the Office Things are Humming”: Roberts as Businessman, 1947–1960

One morning in 1946, when Oral Roberts was residing with his family in Enid, Oklahoma, a neighbor strolled over to talk with him. The neighbor, who operated a Buick dealership in Enid, had noticed Roberts’s jalopy in the driveway, a revealing measure of the Pentecostal minister’s low salary. Although not particularly religious himself, the neighbor admired Roberts’s winsome ministry and wanted to do him a favor. He helped Oral and Evelyn Roberts sell off their old car at the highest possible price, personally finagled the purchase of a new Buick at dealer’s cost, and even drove the young couple up to Detroit to pick it up. On the drive back to Enid, Evelyn suddenly asked Oral to pull over. “We have just got to hold hands and praise the Lord for this car,” she pleaded. Oral heartily complied, and later reflected that the “new car became a symbol of what a man could do if he would believe in God.”<sup>1</sup> A few months later in July 1947, Oral, Evelyn, and their young children Rebecca and Ronnie packed up their belongings in the new Buick. With just twenty-five dollars in hand, they left dusty Enid for the bright lights of Tulsa, following what they perceived to be divine prompting to begin an independent healing ministry.<sup>2</sup>

In Roberts’s self-styled hagiography, which he recounted often throughout his years of ministry, the defining moment in his journey of faith was his healing from

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<sup>1</sup>Oral Roberts, *My Story* (Tulsa, OK: Summit Book Company, 1961), 66.

<sup>2</sup>Oral Roberts, *The Call: An Autobiography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 147.

tuberculosis as a sickly teenager in 1935. Yet upon further examination, one could argue that his move to Tulsa proved to be equally instrumental in propelling him to the head of a sprawling ministry empire and transforming him into one of America's most famous religious figures. Roberts thrived in the climate of boosterism and opportunity that pervaded southern cities like Tulsa in the decade and a half after World War II. As his white-collar neighbors in Tulsa set out to pursue their economic dreams, Roberts emulated them by reconfiguring himself into an inventive entrepreneur with a message of healing that struck a chord with the very class of upwardly mobile southern suburbanites that he had joined.

Roberts's move to Tulsa in a certain sense was an attempt to liberate his family from the financial strictures that had characterized both his early life and his tenure as an itinerant preacher in the Pentecostal Holiness Church. After a decade-long string of short-term pastorates and small-scale revivalist campaigns that had taken him from one end of the rural South (Oklahoma) to the other (North Carolina), Roberts had witnessed firsthand the grinding poverty that characterized much of the region. As Bruce Schulman has noted, the industrialized North had sprinted ahead of the South economically prior to World War II, and the southern economy remained mired in a stagnant malaise of unmechanized agriculture and low-grade industrialism that induced low wages and a depressed standard of living.<sup>3</sup> Roberts knew this impoverished world intimately, having been born in a log cabin without running water or electricity and having grown up shucking corn and picking cotton to help his family make ends meet.<sup>4</sup> Although others in

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<sup>3</sup>Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 3–7.

<sup>4</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 25–27.

his generation reflected fondly on their years of prewar austerity, Roberts did not. “There was a cycle of poverty in our lives that kept gnawing away at me,” he later wrote of his adolescence. “I was on a dead-end road, and I felt my dreams could not be realized. There was no future or hope for me as the son of a poor preacher.”<sup>5</sup> As Oral and Evelyn crisscrossed the rural South in the 1930s and 1940s and lived off the unpredictable benevolence of their congregations, they began to look for an escape from their cycle of anxious financial precarity. Tulsa, where jobs and opportunity abounded, proved alluring.

The prospect of relief from heavy-handed denominational oversight also prompted Roberts’s decision to move to Tulsa. The first generation of Pentecostal revivals were known for their anarchic, fractious tendencies. Yet by the 1940s the PHC had fallen, in Roberts’s estimation, into bureaucratic denominationalism that stifled innovation, ministerial independence, and the work of the Spirit. His wariness towards the PHC reflected his own experiences, as denominational squabbles and the clashing of personalities shortened his tenure at many of the congregations in which he ministered during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>6</sup> Roberts was not alone in his critique. In the years after 1945, multiple up-and-coming Pentecostal figures chartered independent ministries to distance themselves from denominational oversight.<sup>7</sup> Although Roberts maintained close personal relationships with officials within the PHC well into the 1960s, when he resigned his PHC pastorate in Enid in 1947 and set out for Tulsa, he signaled that his days of loyal service and subordination to denominational interests were over.

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<sup>5</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 25.

<sup>6</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 69.

<sup>7</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 41–42.

Like a developer scoping out prime real estate for development, Roberts selected Tulsa for the logistical advantages that the city could offer his new, independent healing ministry. He observed that Tulsa was “centrally located in the United States” with “excellent travel facilities.” Moreover, it was “a progressive city” where “great ideas can be had and great movements can be launched.”<sup>8</sup> Economically, the exploitation of rich oil deposits in the 1930s had already placed Tulsa a step ahead of other southern cities.<sup>9</sup> Tulsa also reaped benefits from the infrastructural investments and economic subsidies that the federal government showered upon the South after World War II. In fact, by the late 1950s federal investments constituted a larger percentage of Oklahoma’s general revenue than any other southern state.<sup>10</sup> Attracted by this climate of subsidized economic opportunity, millions of rural southerners like Roberts settled in cities like Tulsa, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and Charlotte in search of stable jobs and a newly accessible middle-class lifestyle. Early Pentecostals were a restless, mobile group, and Oral and Evelyn had certainly embraced this nomadic mentality in their early years of ministry. By 1947, however, they were planting enduring, familial roots in the crabgrass soil of Tulsa’s suburban subdivisions. Once in Tulsa, they welcomed another son, Richard, in 1948, and another daughter, Roberta, in 1950.<sup>11</sup>

Upon arrival, Roberts chartered Healing Waters, Inc., and from 1947 to 1950 it grew at a tenacious pace. Initially, Roberts concentrated his ministerial efforts in three

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<sup>8</sup>Roberts, *My Story*, 130.

<sup>9</sup>Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019), 193–95, 212–13.

<sup>10</sup>Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 112–19.

<sup>11</sup>Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 207; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 188.

areas. He began travelling the country on tent-revival circuits, staying in cities for one to two weeks at a time and holding crusades centered around altar calls and healing lines. He also bought airtime to broadcast prerecorded sermons at radio stations across the country. Finally, he distributed a monthly magazine to his followers called *Healing Waters*, which was renamed *America's Healing Magazine* in 1953, *Healing* in January 1956, and *Abundant Life* in July 1956. In its early years, *Healing Waters* carried accounts of Roberts's crusades, healing testimonies, and a nationwide list of radio stations that carried his program. Tellingly, this monthly list of stations expanded tenfold in the first two years of his ministry.<sup>12</sup>

The size of Roberts's tent revivals served as another barometer for his ministry's growing prominence in the immediate aftermath of his move to Tulsa. In January 1948, Roberts purchased a "tent cathedral" capable of seating 2,000 people.<sup>13</sup> By April 1949, Roberts was reporting that this tent "for several months now...has been too small" to accommodate the crowds flocking to his crusades, forcing him to purchase a larger 4,500-seat tent.<sup>14</sup> Just eight months later, in January 1950, Roberts was borrowing money to buy an even larger 7,500-seat tent.<sup>15</sup> Early crusade accounts often highlighted the congested automobile traffic that accompanied Roberts's healing revivals as they

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<sup>12</sup>The inaugural issue of *Healing Waters* in December 1947 listed five radio stations. Two years later, the reach of Roberts's radio ministry had extended to fifty stations. See "Healing Waters Radio Log," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 1 (December 1947): 5; "Healing Waters Broadcast," *Healing Waters* 3, no. 1 (December 1949): 7.

<sup>13</sup>Oral Roberts, "Tent Cathedral," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 2 (February 1948): 7.

<sup>14</sup>Oral Roberts, "Thirty-Five Hundred Saved in the Oral Roberts Healing Campaign in Tampa, Florida," *Healing Waters* 2, no. 5 (April 1949): 1.

<sup>15</sup>O.E. Sproul, "The Largest Tent Ever Constructed for the Gospel Ministry," *Healing Waters* 3, no. 2 (January 1950): 15.

attracted visitors from all corners of the surrounding area. Minneapolis police officer Howard Ziemer, assigned to direct traffic outside of Roberts's April 1948 crusade in the city, expressed his astonishment at the size of the crowds that the faith healer attracted night after night. "Since I had no chance to join the Healing Line I asked Rev. Roberts to anoint me while I directed traffic," he recounted in a letter printed in *Healing Waters*. "[T]he cars stopped while he anointed me on the street, [and] thank God I was greatly benefited."<sup>16</sup> With these large crowds came an increase in donations, as the ministry's well-publicized purchases of a pricy Hammond organ and Steinway grand piano in May 1948 attest.<sup>17</sup> Roberts had an uncanny ability to draw an audience, and *Healing Waters, Inc.* flourished as a result.

Roberts's early revival circuits took him to cities across all regions of the United States, but he frequently found his largest and most receptive audiences in the blossoming cities of the Sunbelt South. "Never has Dallas seen in the last several decades the many thousands that came so early and were so eager to hear the gospel presented in such a dynamic manner," extolled one Pentecostal pastor after Roberts held a healing crusade in his city in October 1948.<sup>18</sup> Five thousand walked the sawdust trail to receive prayerful healing from Roberts when he held a crusade in Houston in late 1949.<sup>19</sup> Roberts's June 1949 revival in Fort Worth surpassed in attendance all of his previous meetings, drawing

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<sup>16</sup>"Pictures and Report on Minneapolis Campaign," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 4 (April 1948): 3.

<sup>17</sup>"Oral Roberts Purchases Hammond and Steinway for Use in Meetings," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 6 (June 1948): 11.

<sup>18</sup>"Roberts Healing Campaign Shakes Dallas - 2500 Saved, Multitudes Healed," *Healing Waters* 2, no. 1 (December 1948): 4.

<sup>19</sup>E.M. Yeats, "Houston, Texas, the Metropolitan City of the Great Southwest Moved Godward - 2,600 Souls Saved in 16-Day Roberts' Meeting," *Healing Waters* 3, no. 1 (December 1949): 3.

a crowd of 11,000 on its final night. “It has been said that, ‘the days of revival are over,’” local pastor Charles Jones averred, but “Fort Worth enjoyed what I believe to be the greatest revival in the history of our city.”<sup>20</sup> On the Sunbelt’s eastern edge, journalists dispatched from *LIFE Magazine* reported that Roberts “was packing his 10,000-seat tent night after night” during his 1951 crusade in Atlanta.<sup>21</sup> The following year, John Fulton, general manager of Atlanta’s WGST, wrote to Roberts that his Sunday morning radio program had the second-highest ratings in the city for its timeslot.<sup>22</sup> If it was in Tulsa that Roberts found a firm foundation upon which to base his growing ministry, it was in comparable cities of the Sunbelt South, where economic growth and federal investment had attracted and clustered scores of southern Pentecostals, that his healing campaigns found their most abundant responses.

At first inexperienced at operating such a rapidly growing ministry, Roberts recognized his need for a business-minded advisor to steward its expansion. Initially, he found assistance from Reginald G. Hanson, a Kansas City businessman who assumed the role of managing the logistics of Roberts’s healing campaigns in 1948.<sup>23</sup> Hanson’s tenure was short-lived, however, and by 1949 North Carolina businessman Lee Braxton had replaced him as Roberts’s business advisor.

As a self-made millionaire, the wealthiest layperson in the PHC, and an effusive booster of Healing Waters, Inc., Lee Braxton extensively influenced the ethos and

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<sup>20</sup>Charles Jones, “4,451 Souls Saved in Oral Roberts’ Meeting in Fort Worth, Texas,” *Healing Waters* 2, no. 9 (August 1949): 1–3.

<sup>21</sup>“A New Revivalist,” *LIFE Magazine*, May 7, 1951, 73.

<sup>22</sup>“Radio Stations Commend Healing Waters Broadcast,” *Healing Waters* 6, no. 7 (June 1952): 17.

<sup>23</sup>“Reg. G. Hanson Manager Roberts Healing Campaigns,” *Healing Waters* 1, no. 8 (August 1948): 11.

ascendant trajectory of Roberts's ministry through the 1950s and 1960s. Braxton was a former auto mechanic from rural Whiteville, North Carolina who had parlayed modest property investments into a successful real estate company. In early 1949, he had his first encounter with Roberts at a Miami crusade.<sup>24</sup> Braxton testified that he was "greatly impressed with the business like [sic] manner in which the entire program was handled," and was deeply convicted "that Brother Roberts' work is in its infancy, and that this will continue to grow and spread, and will be a great blessing to mankind."<sup>25</sup> Despite Braxton's positive first impression of Roberts's efficient revivalism, his visit later that year to the ministry headquarters—the Roberts household—revealed the disorganization plaguing Healing Waters, Inc. as it struggled to keep up with demand. As Roberts later recalled, Braxton was shocked at the untidy scene he found at Roberts's homely headquarters, where piles of mail extended haphazardly to the ceiling and proofs of the monthly magazine lay on the floor. Braxton took him aside, encouraging him that "this ministry...[is] going to grow and touch millions of lives," but adding sternly that "you've got to build an office and do this work in a businesslike way instead of piecemeal like you're having to do here." By guiding Roberts through the process of professionalizing his healing ministry, as well as supplying crucial financial backing for Roberts to secure a loan to build his first office, Lee Braxton disciplined Roberts in the pragmatic methods of the corporate world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 114–15.

<sup>25</sup>Lee Braxton, "N.C. Business Man Flies to Miami Meeting - Writes His Impressions," *Healing Waters* 2, no. 4 (March 1949): 12.

<sup>26</sup>Oral Roberts, "How I Learned a Lesson Early in My Ministry to Look to God as My Source for a Loan," *Abundant Life* 25, no. 12 (December 1971): 8–10.

By 1953, Braxton's professionalizing influence upon Roberts and his ministry was evident. In October of that year, Roberts could proudly report to his followers that "here at the office things are humming." In fact, the ministry's headquarters was undergoing significant renovation and expansion at the time, increasing to forty thousand square feet and adding two extra floors of workspace. He assured his donors that these renovations would foster the streamlined, speedy propagation of the gospel. The new additions would ensure that "our work will be much more quickly and efficiently done. We have a burning desire to do God's work in the best possible manner."<sup>27</sup> Efficiency, productivity, and systematized organization, as Roberts tacitly acknowledged in this article, had become the preeminent virtues of his style of evangelism. Braxton's guidance had transformed Roberts into a rigorous entrepreneur. In a few short years, Roberts had matured out of his slipshod, homebased operations.

Across all aspects of his ministry, Roberts wholeheartedly embraced this pragmatic persona, which befitted his nimble adoption of new outreach strategies and his relentless pursuit of greater efficiency in the dissemination of divine healing. "I've never married a method," Roberts freely acknowledged. "I'm never bothered by changing methods. Whatever works best is what I want to use."<sup>28</sup> Disclosing "the secret behind Oral Roberts' success" in a November 1951 *Healing Waters* article, Lee Braxton wrote:

I have been impressed with the unselfishness of Brother Roberts, and also with the efficiency and business-like manner in which all of the operations are carried on. Ministers are not usually trained and experienced in business because they are not ordinarily called on to handle matters of business, as much as they are for preaching. I have watched Oral Roberts and worked with him in matters of business, and I have found him to be an

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<sup>27</sup>Oral Roberts, "975,000 Souls to Go In Million-Soul Crusade," *America's Healing Magazine* 7, no. 11 (October 1953): 14.

<sup>28</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 176.

astute business man [sic]. I have been amazed at the business-like methods with which he approaches business matters. When he makes a purchase, he gets a good deal, [and] surely the Lord has been with him and many times God's hand could be seen working in [sic] his behalf.<sup>29</sup>

Others echoed Braxton's assessment of Roberts and his evangelistic methods. After visiting a Roberts crusade in Pennsylvania and hearing of the evangelist's multifaceted use of revivals, radio, and television, a businessman exclaimed, "Why, this is the most practical plan of preaching the gospel I have ever heard."<sup>30</sup> One could perceive Roberts's single-minded pragmatism as a callous or even crass approach to the gospel ministry, but Roberts himself, since he thought God had called him to bring divine healing to as many people as possible, believed he was simply being a faithful steward.

As Roberts remade himself into a religious entrepreneur, the healing revival became his marquee product. Crisply ordered and finely programmed, it too bore the marks of Roberts's pragmatic priorities. Although non-Pentecostal observers expressed shock at the over-the-top style of Roberts's revivals, attendees who had grown up in the Pentecostal tradition remarked how organized and assembled the whole affair was. Roberts's ministry embraced this reputation for the structured miraculous. An article printed in the September 1951 edition of *Healing Waters* described Roberts as "efficiency embodied in human flesh." The author of the article, G.H. Montgomery, went on to praise Roberts's poised stage presence as the glue that kept revivals from descending into disorder. "From the moment the organist sounds the first note of the theme *Where the Healing Waters Flow*," he wrote, "there is not a hitch, not a moment when the evangelist

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<sup>29</sup>Lee Braxton, "What's the Secret Behind Oral Roberts' Success," *Healing Waters* 5, no. 12 (November 1951): 6.

<sup>30</sup>Lee Braxton, "How Big Is God's Plan to Save Mankind?," *Abundant Life* 10, no. 11 (November 1956): 26.

seems uncertain of himself or any situation that arises.”<sup>31</sup> An elaborate card system, designed by ministry associate Bob DeWeese, undergirded the seamless efficiency of Roberts’s healing revivals. Those wishing to enter the healing line filled out a form releasing the ministry from any obligation to heal and granting permission for the ministry to publicize their stories. In exchange, each received a numbered card that, on whichever night it happened to be called, granted the owner the chance to enter the healing line. Some—particularly those who drove vast distances to the tent meetings—expressed dismay that they could not simply enter the healing line on the night of their choice, but most complied.<sup>32</sup> The ordered environment of Roberts’s revival tent ensured that his meetings never disintegrated into chaos, that as many as possible could receive the Holy Spirit’s healing power, and that all attendees could arrive home at a decent hour, satisfied with the service they had received.

Nevertheless, once one stripped away critics’ uneasiness at the perceived eccentricity of Roberts’s faith healing, much of the disapproval directed towards his early ministry targeted his businesslike pragmatism. W.E. Mann, an Episcopalian priest, expressed apprehension that so many of Roberts’s promotional techniques mimicked those of the corporate world of marketing and advertising.<sup>33</sup> To Mann’s credit, the logic of consumerism did seem to lurk in the background of Roberts’s entire ministry. Roberts operated under no direct ecclesiastical oversight and possessed no ecclesiastical jurisdiction over those who ventured to his meetings. Although local congregations

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<sup>31</sup>G.H. Montgomery, “Oral Roberts in Action,” *Healing Waters* 5, no. 10 (September 1951): 6.

<sup>32</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 95–97.

<sup>33</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 169.

helped to organize his revivals, Roberts never held crusades in church sanctuaries after he left the PHC pastorate in 1947. In the absence of traditional connections to ecclesial authority and the inherent power dynamics between clergy and laity, the relationship between Roberts and the crowds that visited his tent revivals, listened to his radio programs, and read his magazines evolved into a consumeristic paradigm. Roberts acted as a conduit of divine power that healed and inspired his “clients,” and in turn they donated to his ministry. At times, this subtext surfaced explicitly in ministry documents. Roberts boasted to prospective donors that his ministry’s radio and television initiatives saved one soul for every two dollars given, which he emphasized was an impressive rate of “conversions to Christ per dollar invested.”<sup>34</sup> With Roberts’s reputation for organizational efficiency and pioneering methods of evangelism, his donors could rest easy knowing that a dollar donated to his ministry was a dollar well spent. Roberts’s business-like philosophy of ministry may have repulsed critics like W.E. Mann, but it was also his selling point for his cadre of financial supporters.

As Roberts adopted entrepreneurial traits in the early years of his ministry, he also devoted his resources to spiritually nurturing a generation of like-minded businessmen under the auspices of the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGMBFI). Roberts’s early and enthusiastic involvement with the FGMBFI may have reflected the pro-business tilt of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, which had a long-standing denominational policy advising working-class congregants against joining labor strikes.<sup>35</sup> Regardless of its exact impetus, FGMBFI grew out of Roberts’s crusades in

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<sup>34</sup>Oral Roberts, “Announcing an Emergency,” *Abundant Life* 10, no. 9 (September 1956): 31.

<sup>35</sup>Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 269.

Fresno and Los Angeles in late 1951, at the Sunbelt's western edge. Demos Shakarian (1913–1993), a first-generation Armenian American and prominent Los Angeles dairyman, assumed the role of the organization's first president. The ever-present Lee Braxton served as vice president.<sup>36</sup> Like Shakarian and Braxton, FGMBFI's early members were mostly self-made Pentecostal men who were finding success in the emerging metropolitan oases across the southern rim of the United States. FGMBFI offered these men the chance to network with Christian peers at periodic preaching conferences and seminars. Roberts was a frequent fixture at their meetings. Sharing the parachurch status of Healing Waters, Inc., FGMBFI constituted another subtle but intentional subversion of Pentecostal denominationalism, providing these businessmen room to maneuver independently of the bureaucratic control of their denominational leaders.<sup>37</sup> In more ways than one, Roberts and the businessmen who joined FGMBFI were kindred spirits.

At its heart, FGMBFI's ministry and message were solidly evangelical, seeking to use the corporate world as an avenue to bring unconverted souls to Christ and converted souls into the fullness of Pentecostal spirituality. Yet the organization also affirmed the goodness, and even righteousness, of white-collar professionalism. As Kate Bowler has noted, FGMBFI's logo—two hands clasped in a handshake under a cross—gestured to the sacralization of the marketplace as an arena of Christian service. Early Pentecostals had lionized economic poverty, or at least an austere lifestyle, as a sign of one's complete dependence upon the spiritual riches of Christ. FGMBFI's entire ethos diverged markedly

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<sup>36</sup>“Full Gospel Business Men of America Start New National Association,” *Healing Waters* 6, no. 2 (January 1952): 12.

<sup>37</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 153–54.

from this mindset.<sup>38</sup> In this new construal of holiness, businessmen demonstrated their fervent relationship with Christ through their savvy business deals, not in spite of them.

Surveying Roberts's ministry magazines from the 1950s, the increasing predominance of testimonies from white-collar professionals reveals how FGMBFI's business-friendly ethos permeated Roberts's entire ministry. One representative article from the October 1956 edition of *Abundant Life* highlighted a group of Roberts's followers, bestowing upon them such honorifics as "God's Real Estate Man," "God's Automobile Man," and "God's Contractor."<sup>39</sup> Together, Roberts and FGMBFI sought tirelessly to meet the spiritual needs of the swelling ranks of middle- and upper middle-class male professionals in postwar America. The men they attracted appreciated not only how these ministries drew them closer to God but also how these ministries encouraged them to view their professional lives as divine assignments. Roberts's pragmatism attracted like-minded company.

Roberts's 1952 film *Venture Into Faith* illustrates how he struck a chord not only with businessmen but with the suburban households that they economically anchored. Screened at churches around the country, the film served to introduce Roberts's healing ministry to skeptical audiences. It weaved actual footage from his crusade in Birmingham, Alabama with the fictional Collins family's dramatized testimony of healing and salvation.

From the film's opening montage, the cinematic backdrop of *Venture Into Faith* exudes the middle-class respectability of southern suburbia. Shots of pastoral scenes from

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<sup>38</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 52–53; Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 61–62.

<sup>39</sup>Anita Snyder, "Master Soul Winners Meet for Conference," *Abundant Life* 10, no. 10 (October 1956): 6–7.

Palestine—a “land of miracles,” as the male narrator sonorously intones—seamlessly transition into emblematic images of the American landscape. “This too is a land of miracles,” the narrator suggests, “this America of ours, two thousand years later. . . . wherever there is faith, miracles are wrought daily.” This quick succession of shots gives way to a long panorama of brown-roofed suburban tract homes extending to a far-off horizon as the narrator remarks, “this is the story of just such a modern miracle, one that took place in a suburb of one of our largest cities not long ago.” Viewers soon encounter Jim Collins (Charles Gibb), his homemaking wife Ruth (Dorothy Fay), and their seven-year-old son Davy (David Day), who suffers from tuberculosis, just as Oral Roberts himself once did. Jim’s business attire unmistakably reveals his status as a white-collar professional, and Ruth discloses at one point that for the sake of Davy’s health, her husband had negotiated a transfer so that his family could migrate to the warmer climes of their unnamed southern city. At a neighbor’s invitation, the initially skeptical family attends multiple nights of Roberts’s healing crusade. Roberts in the end dramatically heals Davy of his tuberculosis, and Jim repents and commits his life to Christ. *Venture Into Faith* exhibits how Roberts sought to launch his faith-healing message into the American cultural mainstream by cloaking it in the perceived normativity of an upwardly-mobile, middle-class neighborhood in the suburban South. Billy Graham offered a variation on this exact theme the following year with his release of *Oiltown, USA* in 1953.<sup>40</sup>

Roberts’s foray into film set the stage for his pioneering adoption of television in the mid-1950s. As early as January 1952, Roberts was publicly expressing his plans to

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<sup>40</sup>Herb A. Lightman, *Venture Into Faith*, 1952, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfDPQT3ayFE>. On Graham’s *Oiltown, USA*, see Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 354–57.

extend his ministry into television.<sup>41</sup> His initial screen exposure on *Venture Into Faith* had primed him for putting together a television show, and in 1954 he began filming episodes consisting of a short sermon, a reading of testimonies, and a general prayer for his viewing audience's healing. The costs of television production and distribution proved expensive for his ministry, so he suspended his inaugural series in 1954 after five months. Yet Roberts was fully committed to commandeering television for the sake of the gospel. "I personally believe the greatest single means of preaching the gospel to the unsaved of this generation will be television," he wrote in 1954, explaining that "sinners are not coming to church in any great numbers as they should. ...Millions of them, however, are looking at a television."<sup>42</sup> Thus, he returned to the airwaves in 1955 with a revamped show format that interspersed an original sermon with eye-catching, prerecorded clips of healings from his revivals.<sup>43</sup>

Oral Roberts's early adoption of televangelism carried with it a set of revealing implications, both about his ministry supporters at the time and the audiences he hoped to reach in the future. When Roberts rhetorically gestured to the unsaved "millions" his television ministry could attract, he was implicitly referring to families whose rising income levels had afforded them a television set of their own, which was a relative luxury in the early 1950s. Indeed, only with the postwar suburban boom did housing designs with television-centric "family rooms" come into vogue.<sup>44</sup> Followers of Oral Roberts

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<sup>41</sup>G.H. Montgomery, "Looking Forward with Oral Roberts," *Healing Waters* 6, no. 2 (January 1952): 13.

<sup>42</sup>Oral Roberts, "My Plans for Television," *America's Healing Magazine* 8, no. 2 (January 1954): 12.

<sup>43</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 125–27.

<sup>44</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 51.

enjoyed the novelty of their favorite preacher beaming into their own homes. Ray Stewart wrote to Tulsa, saying “it is a thrill and a treat to have Brother Roberts come into our homes every Sunday by way of television.” “I was at a friend’s home last Sunday when you were on TV,” Mrs. H.D. Duncan of California reported to Roberts, “and she was healed of bursitis in her right shoulder.” A viewer from Detroit rated Roberts’s television program as “fine,” testifying that “I was healed instantly sitting on my footstool in my living room while watching it.”<sup>45</sup> Given the television’s status as a high-end purchase in that era, the fact that his viewers embraced television as a means of spiritual nourishment disclosed not only their probable income levels, but also their enthusiastic adoption of a consumer good as a mediatory tool for the Christian life.<sup>46</sup> From early on, Roberts had his finger on the pulse of the upwardly mobile postwar household. His trailblazing venture into television revealed his intention to reach them with his gospel of healing.

Roberts’s desire to reach the emerging suburban middle and upper-middle classes cuts against the grain of many of the caricatures that critics have conferred on his ministry and Pentecostalism more broadly. From the origins of Pentecostal revivalism, a lengthy journalistic tradition had associated the phenomenon with the dispossessed underclasses, construing faith healers like Roberts as magnets for poverty-stricken individuals in search of simplistic spiritual solace. Although early historians of Pentecostalism echoed this journalistic perspective, it was only ever an inaccurate portrayal of the movement, one which recent scholarship has demolished. Roberts may

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<sup>45</sup>“‘Your Faith Is Power’ Catching Fire Across America,” *America’s Healing Magazine* 8, no. 4 (March 1954): 8.

<sup>46</sup>John Wigger makes a similar observation about latter-day televangelist Jim Bakker’s ministry in John Wigger, *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Evangelical Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

have grown up among the working poor, but Grant Wacker has shown that in its early years, Pentecostalism actually drew a fair share of adherents from across the economic spectrum.<sup>47</sup> As Randall Stephens has argued, the popular association of early Pentecostalism with poverty did not reflect an overwhelming preponderance of poor adherents within the movement, but rather the movement's broadly held sensibilities against wealth and excess. The southern holiness churches that seeded early Pentecostalism "were united in their identification with the poor," Stephens writes. "For this reason, critics too often confused the plain-folk style and biases of holiness people with actual social status."<sup>48</sup> That Roberts found enthusiastic support for his ministry across economic strata was not, in itself, a new development in Pentecostalism's history.

Where Roberts did part ways with his Pentecostal forebearers was that he did not perceive wealth as inherently incongruous with a spiritually fulfilled life. He found no particular Christian virtue in austerity. At times, Roberts suggested cash was spiritually neutral, inflected towards sin or sanctity by one's use of it. "Neighbor," he wrote in April 1952, "whether money is a blessing in your hands or a curse depends on the kind of person you are. If you have the love of God in your heart money can be a blessing, if you don't your money can be a curse."<sup>49</sup> At other times, Roberts granted wealth a positive valence, identifying it as a sign of one's faithfulness to God. "God is more than a God of bare necessities," he averred in a 1958 article. "There is no poverty except man-made poverty," which could be avoided by "those who confidently expect God to provide them

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<sup>47</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 199–205.

<sup>48</sup>Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 62.

<sup>49</sup>Oral Roberts, "A Man's Life," *Healing Waters* 6, no. 5 (April 1952): 6.

a surplus of all their needs.”<sup>50</sup> As a contributor to Roberts’s ministry magazines, Lee Braxton often echoed these trendsetting stances on wealth, asserting on one occasion that “I cannot believe that anyone in dire poverty can be fully happy.”<sup>51</sup> He returned to this theme months later, conceding that “someone might say, ‘It is no sin to be poor.’” Nevertheless, Braxton added, “while I agree that it is no sin, I can say that it is awfully inconvenient. I know, because I came from the other side of the tracks.”<sup>52</sup> To be sure, Roberts devoted relatively little attention to the topic of wealth in the 1950s, subordinating the issue to his emphasis on salvation and faith-healing. Yet Kate Bowler has rightly identified Oral Roberts as a “major architect of the prosperity gospel,” for one sees the seeds of this gospel of wealth in Roberts’s early, scattered musings on money, even if his systematizations of such doctrines followed only in later decades.<sup>53</sup>

An observer operating under the false assumption that Roberts’s audience of mid-century Pentecostals was predominantly poor might erroneously identify Roberts’s embryonic prosperity gospel as the first stirrings of a get-rich-quick theology targeted at the impoverished. Historian George Marsden has argued along these very lines in his book *Religion in American Culture*, claiming Roberts drew his support “especially among the poorer and less educated.”<sup>54</sup> The available evidence suggests however that Roberts, like many Pentecostal preachers of his day, was “preaching upward mobility to

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<sup>50</sup>Oral Roberts, “God Has a Surplus for You,” *Abundant Life* 12, no. 8 (August 1958): 4–5.

<sup>51</sup>Lee Braxton, “Outreach of the Soul,” *America’s Healing Magazine* 8, no. 3 (February 1954): 10.

<sup>52</sup>Lee Braxton, “Fear of Prosperity,” *America’s Healing Magazine* 8, no. 10 (September 1954): 10.

<sup>53</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 48. I pick up this theme once more in chapter four.

<sup>54</sup>George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1990), 218.

people already on the way up,” in the words of Kate Bowler.<sup>55</sup> In his articles in Roberts’s ministry magazines, Lee Braxton seemed to connect with this *nouveau riche* demographic when he confessed that “it makes me feel better to wear a good suit of clothes, to drive a good car, to have a nice home and to have money to contribute to the Lord’s work.”<sup>56</sup> Braxton spoke a message attuned to, as Donald Meyer has phrased it, the “objectively abundant life of successful middle-class people who still felt themselves subjectively poor.” In essence, he presented a sacralized version of a common theme of American self-help books.<sup>57</sup> After enumerating sundry pleasures of suburban affluence, Braxton advised that “I see nothing wrong with desire to have these good things in life, but I must warn you not to be disappointed if you find after you get any of them, or all of them, that the outreach of your soul has not yet been satisfied.”<sup>58</sup> Braxton wrote to an abstracted audience of readers climbing the ladder into the middle classes yet encountering spiritual anxiety along the way, but Roberts spoke to them as neighbors down the street in Tulsa’s burgeoning subdivisions. Addressing a sell-out crowd at a meeting of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce on March 1, 1956, Roberts demonstrated his appeal to Tulsa’s business class, to men who emulated him in their own pragmatic entrepreneurialism and who had already secured a high economic station.<sup>59</sup>

No artifact from Roberts’s early ministry so perfectly distilled the sacralization of the interlaced themes of upward financial mobility, suburban migration, and the postwar

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<sup>55</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 51.

<sup>56</sup>Braxton, “Fear of Prosperity,” 10.

<sup>57</sup>Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 276.

<sup>58</sup>Braxton, “Outreach of the Soul,” 10.

<sup>59</sup>Lee Braxton, “The New Ministry of Oral Roberts,” *Healing* 10, no. 6 (June 1956): 15.

economic growth of cities as the collage of illustrations that accompanied Roberts's article "God Has a Surplus for You" in the August 1958 edition of *Abundant Life*. In this collage, an arc of images depicting a staid nuclear family surrounds an open Bible. Alongside illustrations of the family reading scripture together and sitting in a church pew, the collage also presents the father in business attire working at a desk with the towering silhouettes of a skyscraper skyline in the background. Just beneath this vignette is another, which portrays a sprawling ranch home with the garage door left up to reveal two cars inside. God's "surplus," judging from this display, incorporated traditional evangelical themes like a passion for the Bible and a tidy domestic life, but also included a father's lucrative white-collar vocation in an urban core, which in turn provided a steady income for a spacious home in the suburbs.<sup>60</sup> These illustrations certainly may have motivated the precariously poor among Roberts's readership to reach out in prayer to God as a means of economic uplift. Yet these illustrations also disciplined affluent readers by signaling the sanctity of the postwar economic conditions that had secured for them material comforts unimaginable to their parents and grandparents. In short, it put at ease the newly prosperous reader for whom gazing at these printed images of divine "surplus" was akin to gazing into a mirror.

Roberts's message of sanctified success may have put himself at ease as well. In the decade after his migration to Tulsa, the Pentecostal preacher of hardscrabble origins from southern Oklahoma had become one of the most prominent religious figures in America. When Roberts's ministry—eponymously renamed the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association in 1956—celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1957, it showcased

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<sup>60</sup>Roberts, "God Has a Surplus for You," 3.

its impressive accomplishments. Roberts had conducted 147 healing campaigns, prayed personally for 500,000 people, “led to Christ for salvation” close to three million, and preached to over eight million. Even taking into account the possibility of exaggerated self-reporting, his pragmatic, inventive, hard-charging approach to ministry was clearly bearing fruit.<sup>61</sup> Tulsa County’s rapid population growth mirrored the successes of Roberts’s ministry, rocketing from a mere 193,363 residents in 1940 to 251,686 in 1950, and then to 346,038 in 1960.<sup>62</sup> As millions of Americans migrated to southern cities like Tulsa and bought homes in the sprawling suburban developments that were spilling into the southern landscape, they found steady jobs and enjoyed living standards that had once been out of reach. As economic capital flowed from the wallets of these newly affluent southern suburbanites into the offering plates of Roberts’s ministry, it was no longer difficult to believe that God desired “an abundant life” for the go-getting believer, or an abundant ministry for the pragmatic preacher.

As Tulsa’s suburbs dispersed outward into the Oklahoma prairie, the towering office buildings in Tulsa’s downtown core edged upward into the Oklahoma sky. In 1959, Roberts’s new ministry headquarters joined this architectural ensemble. Comprising 108,000 square feet of office space, Roberts’s Abundant Life Building had a seven-story layout designed for a future five-story expansion. “The building throughout is very functional and extremely well planned,” Roberts explained, “with a view toward providing the most efficient working area for the tasks God lays upon us.”<sup>63</sup> The day of

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<sup>61</sup>G.H. Montgomery, “Anniversary,” *Abundant Life* 11, no. 6 (June 1957): 2.

<sup>62</sup>Richard L. Forstall, *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990* (Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census, March 27, 1995), accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/cencounts/files/ok190090.txt>.

Abundant Life Building's dedication ceremonies attracted not only Roberts's faithful supporters, but many of Tulsa's leading business leaders and a retinue of Oklahoman politicians. Oklahoma governor J. Howard Edmondson (1925–1971), a spry thirty-four years old, was slated to give the dedicatory address. As Roberts surveyed the crowd and gave a few introductory remarks, he no doubt felt a level of gratitude for how far God had brought his ministry in the past twelve years. Nevertheless, he also admitted, years later, that by the late 1950s he was sensing that the currents that had propelled his ministry to this moment of triumph were shifting. By the time the Abundant Life Building had been built, Roberts recalled that he “could see that the tent was ceasing to be an asset. People were no longer attracted by its novelty.”<sup>64</sup> Roberts thought television, despite its expensive costs, showed promise as a new nucleus for his ministry. Yet he recognized the ephemeral quality of a ministry tied to the airwaves. He yearned to transform his ministry into something institutional, something enduring.<sup>65</sup>

Finishing his opening remarks, Roberts found his seat and Governor Edmondson strode to the podium. Edmondson lauded the gleaming new structure behind him. “To the skyline of Tulsa, the most beautiful city in the United States,” he exclaimed, “we have added one of the most beautiful buildings in the United States.” His focus turned to Roberts. “There is a tremendous void in the world today with reference to genuine faith. I am sure all of us enjoy having this opportunity to participate in the dedication of this building. It is not only a monument to Tulsa's beauty but to the efforts of a man who is

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<sup>63</sup>Oral Roberts, “This Is the House the Lord Told Me to Build,” *Abundant Life* 13, no. 4 (April 1959): 4.

<sup>64</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 175.

<sup>65</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 196.

contributing so much to the filling of that world-void with faith in the hearts and minds of men throughout the earth.” What were the qualities of this “faith” that Edmondson described? Giving his own definition, Edmondson told the crowd, “faith is believing strongly enough in something that you do something based upon that believing.”<sup>66</sup>

Two years later, in the summer of 1961, Roberts purchased 160 acres of land at the outskirts of Tulsa from a wealthy oil family. Within another year, construction began for the campus of the new Oral Roberts School of Evangelism. There was work to be done.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>“Dedicated to the Glory of God!,” *Abundant Life* 13, no. 7 (July 1959): 15; W.T. Jeffers, “And So We Sail On!,” *Abundant Life* 13, no. 10 (October 1959): 2.

<sup>67</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 208–209; Oral Roberts, “A Spiritual Revolution Throughout the Earth,” *Abundant Life* 16, no. 5 (May 1962): 8.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Turn Your Faith Loose”: Roberts as Theologian, 1947–1960

Oral Roberts received several visitors during the five and a half months that he lay bedridden with tuberculosis in 1935. One day, the minister of a local Methodist church that Roberts frequented dropped by to see the frail seventeen-year-old. “Oral, you’ve just got to be patient,” he counseled. Roberts, his enfeebled, 6’1” frame having wasted away to a mere 120 pounds, recalled thinking, “Brother, if that’s all you’ve got to offer, I don’t want it.” Yet Roberts also remembered having little tolerance at the time for those around him who, despairing of his worsening condition, urged him to find solace in a heavenly afterlife. “I’m not interested in dying and going to Heaven or dying and going to hell,” Roberts told them, confined to his bed. “I’m interested in living. I want to be made well.”<sup>1</sup> When Roberts narrated this dreadful period of affliction three decades later, he presented it as the crucible that formed the distinctive gospel message that he later spent his adulthood communicating to the ends of the earth. Eschewing what he perceived to be the trite, inefficacious musings of Protestant liberalism and the otherworldly, fire-and-brimstone rhetoric of Protestant fundamentalism, Roberts encouraged his followers to experience an “abundant life” of healing and inner peace in the present moment through unmediated contact with a proximate God.

The previous chapter of this thesis explored the pragmatic dimensions of Oral Roberts’s early ministry from his move to Tulsa in 1947 to the completion of the Abundant Life Building in 1959. This chapter will focus on Roberts’s theology as it

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<sup>1</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 32.

developed during the same timeframe and into the early 1960s, before the next chapter picks up the historical narrative and carries it into the mid-1970s. I argue that Roberts does not fit in the polarized binary of “fundamentalism” and “modernism” that some historians have used to describe American Protestantism in the early twentieth century. Instead, he constructed an ad hoc theology by preserving or slightly reconfiguring many of the doctrines and practices of early Pentecostalism and mixing in a strong dose of the eclectic philosophy of New Thought. The result was not a theological *via media* between fundamentalism and modernism (the goal of his postwar neo-evangelical contemporaries), but an unconventional metaphysical framework of the Christian life. At the heart of this framework was a subtle but crucial redefinition of “faith.” Roberts’s redefinition of faith implicitly encouraged the uncoupling of individual religious practice from congregational life. Indeed, he coaxed his followers to attend his revivals and listen to his radio and television broadcasts with promises of rapturous moments of healing and revelation beyond the thresholds of the church. Roberts offered his audiences neither the otherworldly fundamentalism nor the platitudinous liberalism that he had found so unsatisfying during his harrowing bout with tuberculosis. Although facilitated by his savvy, business-minded acumen, the message that Roberts preached ultimately bore fruit because it beckoned people into an alluring alternate cosmos where imagined boundaries between the “supernatural” and “natural” faded, where human agency fused with divine agency to the point of indistinguishability, and the transformative, immediate presence of God was palpably felt and witnessed.

Roberts’s life experiences were the foundation of his theological thinking. He confidently believed that God had saved him from certain death by healing his tubercular

body in 1935. With each retelling of this dramatic encounter with God in the pages of *Abundant Life* and in his revival sermons, Roberts's testimony seemed to accrue the force of irrefutable authority. In this regard, he emulated his early Pentecostal predecessors who, as Grant Wacker has observed, "assumed that their personal faith stories bore normative implications for others."<sup>2</sup> Since the accounts of healing in the Bible corroborated his experiences, Roberts felt that his assertion that the power of God could enter into physical reality and heal intractable bodily ailments required no additional confirmation from reasoned argument. "I have been asked to prove healing. I couldn't prove anything," Roberts admitted. "I feel something in my heart, and [healing] is the way I worship and serve God."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Roberts rarely expressed his theological views systematically, instead lacing together vignettes drawn from his own life, scripture, the testimonies of his followers, and popular culture.

Yet lurking underneath Roberts's vast collage of sermons, pamphlets, books, and seminars from the 1940s and 1950s was a tacit theological metaphysics, more assumed than espoused, that he derived to a great extent from his Pentecostal roots. Like the preceding generation of Pentecostals, Roberts refused to situate God at a lofty distance from the created realm. "A man who accepts God as a personal Being," he argued, "must allow for His present participation in His universe. Deny Him the power to perform miracles and you have imprisoned God the creator. Deny Him this freedom and He is not omnipotent but rather impotent."<sup>4</sup> Roberts chafed at worldviews that fashioned rigid

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<sup>2</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 58, 69; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 449.

<sup>3</sup>Oral Roberts, "Talitha Cumi...It Is Time for Your Healing," *Abundant Life* 18, no. 9 (September 1964): 17.

<sup>4</sup>Oral Roberts, *What Is a Miracle?* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1964), 6–7.

boundaries between a supernatural realm and a natural order. David Harrell Jr., Roberts's biographer, observed that he consistently taught that "human history was constantly interrupted [sic] by 'new manifestations' of [God's] power outside of natural law."<sup>5</sup> In teaching this, Roberts absorbed the early Pentecostal disposition that intuited the cosmos as a gradient where the categories of supernatural and natural blended to the point of indistinction at the median space of the preternatural, in which healings, visions, and rapturous worship occurred.<sup>6</sup> Whereas skeptics saw Roberts's acts of healing, prophetic revelation, and exorcism as apparent deviations from the laws of nature, Roberts saw them as unsurprising occurrences in a world charged with the energy of God's presence.

One way in which Roberts expressed his belief in this metaphysical outlook was his promotion and distribution of prayer cloths, which he and his followers viewed as physical, tangible reservoirs of healing energy. Grant Wacker has noted that among early Pentecostals, the most popular tool to concentrate and enact God's healing power in the physical realm was the "anointed handkerchief."<sup>7</sup> Roberts carried forth this tradition from the beginnings of his independent ministry. In fact, the first edition of his ministry magazine, issued in December 1947, featured a letter from George Riley of Russellville, Arkansas. Riley had been suffering from tuberculosis but had taken the initiative to read Roberts's forthrightly-titled book *If You Need Healing – Do These Things*. Soon after, Riley's niece sent him an anointed prayer cloth that she had ordered from Living Waters, Inc. Roberts touted that he consecrated each prayer cloth himself and Riley firmly

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<sup>5</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 441–42.

<sup>6</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 87–91.

<sup>7</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 94.

believed that the handkerchief he received was a physical locus of divine healing power. It “was applied with prayer,” he happily reported, and “the wonderful healing virtue came down and I have been getting better ever since.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, through their hearty embrace of prayer cloths, Roberts and his followers disclosed their conviction that they lived in an enchanted world.

As intuitive as this spiritualized worldview was to him, Roberts recognized that he was fundamentally diverting from the prevailing, disenchanting metaphysics of western culture at the time. This breach came into sharper focus when he began holding healing crusades outside of the West. After a 1958 revival campaign that took him through Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, Roberts reflected that “the *awareness* of the natives in Africa to the reality of God is one of the most outstanding things I have ever seen.”<sup>9</sup> Roberts made similar comments after holding another revival in Africa ten years later, remarking that “the black natives in Africa may not be educated...but they have the most terrific discernment. They understand the spirit world and they know when they come up against supernatural power.”<sup>10</sup> In Africa, Roberts found a refuge from the rationalistic tendencies of western intellectual life that he found spiritually stultifying. Elsewhere in his writings, he even construed the Edenic fall of humanity as a fall into skeptical rationalism. He attacked those who “did not accept the supernatural power of God” because they believed that the world “operates according to fixed rules and patterns and

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<sup>8</sup>“God Undertakes for Tubercular Victim,” *Healing Waters* 1, no. 1 (December 1947): 4; for Oral Roberts, “Healing Waters Anointed Cloths,” *Healing Waters* 1, no. 2 (February 1948): 4.

<sup>9</sup>Oral Roberts, “You Sent Me on My Greatest Campaign,” *Abundant Life* 11, no. 4 (April 1957): 7. Italics original.

<sup>10</sup>ORU Chapel Transcript (September 1, 1968), quoted in Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 261.

all we have to do is to discover those natural laws.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Roberts had little interest in a liberal Protestantism that conformed to axioms of the Enlightenment by denying present-day miracles.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to describe Oral Roberts’s theology as descending from early twentieth-century Protestant fundamentalism, at least as historians have traditionally understood the term. If the “basis of much of the unity in fundamentalist thought,” as George Marsden has argued, was a folk appropriation of Scottish Common Sense Realism as a scriptural hermeneutic, Roberts scarcely qualifies as a fundamentalist.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, Roberts echoed these fundamentalists in heartily affirming the propositional truthfulness of the Bible. He did not, however, see scripture as a static storehouse of facts awaiting systematization from an interpreter armed with the tools of common-sense rationality. In 1952, Roberts recounted an experience from his young adulthood that was paradigmatic of his lifelong approach to the Bible:

That morning my Bible fell open at the little book of 3 John. Why, I perhaps will never know until I get to Heaven unless it was a special act of Providence. What I read that morning changed my life - abruptly, completely. It closed the door to the past and opened another through which I saw the hand of Jesus of Nazareth beckoning me to enter. I read to the second verse of 3 John, when I stopped. The words fairly leaped up to meet my eyes, 'Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth' (3 John 2). These words literally astounded me. I could scarcely believe my eyes. It was simply beautiful. Yet, it had something more than beauty. It had power and it gripped my heart.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Oral Roberts, “The Supernatural Power of God,” *Abundant Life* 18, no. 10 (October 1964): 12–13; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 483–84.

<sup>12</sup>George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7–8.

<sup>13</sup>Oral Roberts, “God Is a Good God,” *Healing Waters* 6, no. 8 (July 1952): 2.

Roberts encountered the Bible as a text with magnetic vivacity that obtruded into his perception of reality. To the extent that fundamentalists of his time reified scripture as the sole fixed and authoritative source for doctrinal systematization, Roberts deviated by preaching and living as if there was a playful interplay between scripture and experience and that the line dividing the two was not always discernible.<sup>14</sup>

Roberts was neither a card-carrying fundamentalist nor a card-carrying modernist, but the animating doctrines of his early theology disclosed an indebtedness to a strand of American philosophy known as New Thought. New Thought was not so much a development within Christian theology as it was an esoteric worldview, originating in New England in the late nineteenth century, from which various Christian and non-Christian figures borrowed concepts and vocabulary well into the postwar period. In essence, proponents of New Thought claimed that the mental held complete primacy over the material in the shaping of reality. The long shadow that Puritanism had cast upon early American religious experience had emphasized God's sovereign Will, predetermining and arbitrary in its inscrutability, but New Thought theorists reconceived God as an accessible, pliable Mind that thought into existence all occurrences in the material realm. If there was a partition between the mental consciousness of God and the mental consciousness of humans (New Thought advocates disagreed on this issue), it was vanishingly thin and extremely permeable. The upshot was that individuals could affect change in the material world through their mental connectivity with the Mind of God. All they needed to do was channel their wishes through clear, concentrated thoughts, or as Christian adoptees of New Thought phrased it, prayer.<sup>15</sup> As New Thought made inroads

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<sup>14</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 441.

into American Protestantism in the early twentieth century, it encouraged Christians to reimagine their relationship with God as one of psychic proximity rather than of unbridgeable ontological distance.

During the first half of the twentieth century, isolated but influential figures in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements excitedly adopted elements of New Thought. The Baptist faith healer E.W. Kenyon (1867–1948) was a noted promoter of the philosophy in his loose circles of Keswick holiness preachers and first-generation Pentecostals. F.F. Bosworth (1877–1958), a Pentecostal faith healer prominent in the interwar years, absorbed Kenyon’s teachings and emphasized the speaking of positive words as a necessary precondition of divine healing.<sup>16</sup>

Like Kenyon and Bosworth, Roberts expressed ideas suggestive of New Thought. He joined New Thought proponents in disparaging the idea that God’s actions stemmed from a predetermined, unbending Will. Returning as he often did to his adolescent healing from tuberculosis, Roberts wrote in a 1952 article that when he was bedridden:

Religious people came to visit me and told me to be patient, to accept my afflictions for it was the will of God that I was sick. They said, 'Son, God has put all this on you.' These people had come to accept life's tragedies as God's will and they didn't expect Him to change the inequalities of life. One was to be sick - another well. One poor - another rich. One happy - another miserable. And that was that. ...To them, religion was not divine deliverance but acceptance of life's tragedies. Something inside me said this wasn't true, but I was chained to the bed with tuberculosis and had to listen to these misguided comforters.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 14; Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 76–79.

<sup>16</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 15–22.

<sup>17</sup>Roberts, “God Is a Good God,” 2.

Roberts came to remember his battle with tuberculosis solely as the consequence of a fallen world, not of God's will. The cathartic moment of healing in which God delivered him was the moment when his mindful supplications and God's desires for his good finally aligned. To Roberts, imagining God as an unresponsive Will cruelly seemed to deprive humans of agency and consign them to suffering without recourse. Instead, he taught his followers to conceive of God as an accessible Mind, echoing the purveyors of New Thought. Describing the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, Roberts wrote that "it was not long until twelve men were traveling with Him and daily he tried to merge His mind with theirs, thus creating the master mind, telling them if they could believe, all things would be possible unto them." Reinforcing his point, Roberts added that "the merging of two or more minds into a master mind of believing right was Jesus' goal. When people get together and believe God in unity of spirit and harmony of mind they find nothing is impossible unto them."<sup>18</sup> His vocabulary was Christian, but the animating idea behind it clearly derived from New Thought—that a reciprocal mental connectivity existed between God and humans which, once aligned, was invincible.

Roberts called this theorized mental connectivity "faith." Thus, the concept of faith was central to Roberts's theology, as it was for many Protestant fundamentalists of his era, but he subtly reimagined faith in ways more innovative than traditional. Yes, Roberts sometimes described faith using tried-and-true categories of repentance and profession of propositional beliefs concerning Christ's atonement. In a 1952 tent-revival sermon recorded for inclusion in *Venture Into Faith*, Roberts prepped his audience for an altar call by stating "if you didn't have faith you couldn't even be saved. ... Why, we're

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<sup>18</sup>Oral Roberts, "Some Things About Faith," *Healing Waters* 6, no. 11 (October 1952): 11–12.

saved through faith by the grace of God.” Yet a few moments later, Roberts pivoted to claiming that faith was something more constitutive than volitional, something akin to a fundamental mental agency shared by all humans. “Neighbor,” Roberts averred, “you have faith and I have faith. What is faith? It’s the power to believe right. Everybody has the power. ...Right believing is faith in God, and faith is right believing.”<sup>19</sup> Roberts deemphasized faith as the mental affirmation of certain theological doctrines and instead emphasized faith as an alignment of one’s mental energy with God’s efficacious power. “Turn your faith loose and link yourself to that Power,” Roberts directed his readers in an early article, adjuring them to “get in tune” with God through prayer.<sup>20</sup>

In Roberts’s teaching, faith became the process of mentally declaring to God one’s desire for physical healing, inner peace, or certain situational outcomes in such a way that God would automatically fulfill the request. Through “right believing,” the borders delineating the believer’s psychological activity from the mind of God wore thin to the point of dissolving altogether:

With your faith you form an image of God in action, doing the very thing you have asked Him to do. ...Thus when you pray you are to believe that the thing you pray for is already in existence. ...By holding the image of these things before God and in your own thinking your faith will release and reveal them to you. In this way the Almighty Power that brings things to pass is already working; your faith has set in motion the powerful influences that never fail to bring deliverance.<sup>21</sup>

In the language of “faith,” Roberts had translated New Thought’s concept of God-human mental connectivity into a Christian idiom, reconstructing faith as an instrument of

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<sup>19</sup>Lightman, *Venture Into Faith*.

<sup>20</sup>Oral Roberts, “You Will Find Deliverance When You---TURN YOUR FAITH LOOSE!,” *Healing Waters* 1, no. 4 (April 1948): 1.

<sup>21</sup>Oral Roberts, “Seven Ways to Take the Sting out of Criticism,” *Healing Waters* 5, no. 5 (April 1951): 13.

psychological power and an expression of human agency that could prompt divine action in physical reality. Protestant fundamentalists of Roberts's time had construed faith as adherence to a set of doctrinal propositions distilled from an inerrant Bible, but Roberts adopted concepts from New Thought to reimagine faith as the method by which the individual could mentally tap into the mind of God. Liberal Protestants of Roberts's time had posited that God did not intervene in an ostensibly exceptionless natural order, but Roberts taught followers to use prayerful thoughts to access the mind of God and direct his power towards reshaping the physical world to their aspirations and goals. Thus, his theology stood in stark contrast to both theological camps.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact inspiration for Roberts's New Thought theology or even the extent to which he was aware of his appropriation of the tradition. Kate Bowler has argued that Roberts gleaned the concepts of New Thought from Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993), the pastor of New York City's Marble Collegiate Church and the purveyor of a form of vaguely theologized self-help he called "positive thinking." The crucial intermediary between Peale and Roberts, she contends, was Lee Braxton, who lent several of Peale's books to Roberts in the late 1940s.<sup>22</sup> Bolstering Bowler's hypothesis (at least in an anecdotal manner) is the fact that in December 1949, around the time Roberts and Braxton's relationship took shape, Roberts's *Healing Waters* magazine prominently reprinted a portion of Peale's *The Art of Living*.<sup>23</sup> Yet as the example of F.F. Bosworth reveals, Roberts was not the only faith-healing revivalist of the 1940s and

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<sup>22</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 56–59; for the place of Norman Vincent Peale in the history of New Thought, see Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 258–286.

<sup>23</sup>Norman Vincent Peale, "Christ's Healing Power," *Healing Waters* 3, no. 1 (December 1949): 6–7.

1950s who appropriated New Thought, and Roberts may have first encountered it in the loose but collegial band of independent healers who struck out from their denominations in those decades. Regardless of its source, New Thought pulsated through Roberts's early theology, laying primary stress on the faithful individual's unmediated mental connection with God—a thoroughly primitivistic message.

Indeed, by so strongly accenting the individual's exceedingly intimate noumenal relationship with God, Roberts's new definition of faith threatened to marginalize the traditional role and authority of formal congregational life. In Roberts's theology, faith became one's exercise of psychic power in response to the undulating current of one's felt needs and personal concerns. Faith was no longer strictly synonymous with outward conformity to corporate confessions or submission to the disciplinary structures of a local church. That is not to say that Roberts's early ministry avoided engaging with churches. Roberts's staff worked with local ministers in the logistical coordination of his revivals and Roberts himself maintained cordial relationships with the Pentecostal Holiness Church. "Join the church of your choice" was his advice to those who received salvation at his altar calls.<sup>24</sup> But if faith was primarily the noumenal connection between the individual and God, the church found itself sidelined. At best the church was a nurturer of a person's spiritual life, a beneficial (but not strictly necessary) communal context where the signal of his or her mental connection with God could intensify. Roberts counselled his followers to join the congregation with the strongest signal. "Go where the power is,"

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<sup>24</sup>"Roberts Healing Campaign Shakes Dallas - 2500 Saved, Multitudes Healed," 4–5; Roberts made the "church of your choice" comments at his Birmingham, Alabama crusade in May 1952 in a sermon recorded and featured in Lightman, *Venture Into Faith*.

he advised in 1952. “You may find it wise to change creeds and church connections before you can truly be healed.”<sup>25</sup>

Roberts’s theology of faith also substantiated itself in his ministry’s outreach efforts, which created alternative sacred spaces where individuals could draw near to God beyond the Sunday morning pew. His tent revivals in particular were alternative sacred spaces finetuned for the diffuse topography of postwar America’s suburbanized cities. Gibson Winter, an astute observer of suburban life writing in the 1950s, noted that “impersonal interdependence” characterized an increasing number of interactions between the residents of America’s swelling metropolitan areas. His point was that as automobiles and highways freed city dwellers to range comfortably over ever-expanding sprawl, their interpersonal relations (whether at the store, in the park, or their morning commute) increasingly tended towards a proximate anonymity.<sup>26</sup> Roberts’s revivals extended this emerging societal dynamic into the religious domain. When Roberts and his team erected their revival tent in a city, it served as a magnet for the curious and the convinced, who journeyed from neighborhoods throughout the immediate region, filled makeshift open-field parking lots with their cars, streamed into the pavilion, and found seats next to one another in mutual namelessness.<sup>27</sup> Yet the question remains: how did Roberts’s revivals elicit such enthusiastic collective responses from his audiences, such feelings of spiritual euphoria, when their communal ties were so tacit and tenuous?

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<sup>25</sup>Oral Roberts, “Seven Rules of Faith That Get You What You Want,” *Healing Waters* 6, no. 12 (November 1952): 5.

<sup>26</sup>Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 20–21.

<sup>27</sup>A representative account of how Roberts’s revivalism interacted with the postwar cityscape can be found in Jones, “4,451 Souls Saved in Oral Roberts’ Meeting in Fort Worth, Texas.”

The philosopher and intellectual historian Charles Taylor has offered a convincing schema with which to decipher the enthusiastic response to Roberts's crusades. In his work *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that in the premodern West the timely Eucharistic rituals of the rhythmic church calendar, practiced within consecrated sites like shrines and churches, generated spatiotemporal thresholds where God's "higher times" could intersect with the created realm. Medieval Christians interpreted these rapturous moments of spirituality as the inbreaking of divine eternity into the earthly order. The triumph of western modernity, he contends, was a two-pronged transformation of public consciousness: the flattening of once-intuited liturgical rhythms of time into the mechanical churn of an undifferentiated Newtonian time, and the leveling of exalted holy spaces into a latitudinal/longitudinal grid of undifferentiated space.<sup>28</sup> Taylor adds, however, that a human yearning has persisted in the modern West for profound temporal moments when one's spatial surroundings take on an aura of transcendent depth. "In modern urban society," Taylor theorizes, where "so many people rub shoulders in mutual anonymity," events like rock concerts and sporting events act as spatiotemporal contexts where crowds of "urban monads hover[ing] on the boundary between solitude and communication...may sometimes flip over into common action." These moments "can be powerful and moving" for participants "because they witness the birth of a new collective agent out of its formerly dispersed potential." This collective catharsis, Taylor suggests, serves as a satisfying (though secularized) proxy for a hallmark of medieval spirituality—the Eucharistic inbreaking of a felt presence of God's eternity into an immanent present.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 328–29.

<sup>29</sup>Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 715.

Although Taylor does not use his theory to analyze faith-healing revivals, he nevertheless provides a cogent means for grasping the unique appeal of Roberts's crusades in the cities of postwar America. Notionally, Roberts's tent was merely a large piece of canvas unloaded and pitched in an open field only to be uprooted days later. Yet many who ventured inside the walls of Roberts's tent found a holy ground and reached for Gothic language to express their experiences. A 1948 ministry promotional for Roberts's healing campaigns boasted that "the very atmosphere of the great 'cathedral tent' is veritably charged with [God's] divine presence and power."<sup>30</sup> The character of Ruth Collins in *Venture Into Faith* narrates that when she entered Roberts's tent for the first time, "[t]here was something else. Something I couldn't see. Something I could only feel. And as the music flowed around me, I knew this wasn't just a tent. This was a cathedral, a place of holiness."<sup>31</sup> Roberts's revival tent was a jury-rigged medieval cathedral, a locus of God's presence for the midcentury American metropolis.

Yet Taylor's theory parses Roberts's crusades at an even more penetrating level, extending to the rituals enacted inside his revival tent. Medieval cathedrals possessed a rooted permanence that Roberts's tent lacked, given that once Roberts packed up and moved to the next city, all that remained was a temporary imprint of dead grass. The sanctity of Roberts's tent lay not in the perceived holiness of its temporary location but in the fervor catalyzed by the crowd itself. Chronicling a 1961 Topeka crusade, a ministry associate hinted at this dynamic when she wrote that "the presence of Christ was there in a very special way. The glow of heart and elation of spirit that pressed in upon one's

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<sup>30</sup>Reginald G. Hanson, "The Holy Spirit in the Roberts Campaigns," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 7 (July 1948): 8.

<sup>31</sup>Lightman, *Venture Into Faith*.

consciousness said plainly, ‘The Master is here,’” for “crowds always thronged Christ during his ministry here on earth.”<sup>32</sup> As those who came located themselves within the larger, unified crowd assembled under Roberts’s tent, the sensation of God’s presence intensified. Moreover, attendees were not mere spectators of Roberts’s electrifying healings, but collective participants in the healing event. With each afflicted individual who reached the front of the healing line, Roberts instructed his audience to press their hands against the back of the folding chair in front of them and mentally channel the words of his healing prayer as he spoke. The result, as a visitor to Roberts’s 1950 revival in Miami reported, was that “those who stood in the prayer line told of feeling the very atmosphere charged with the power of God, like an electric current.”<sup>33</sup> At Roberts’s revivals, when the crowd of metropolitan strangers joined as one in psychically directing their prayerful thoughts towards the healing of the infirm, God seemingly entered into the tent in electrifying, jaw-dropping fashion as the blind saw and the paralyzed walked.

In sum, Roberts’s healing revivals struck a chord with so many attendees because he successfully gathered the “dispersed potential” of postwar metropolises under his canvas tent and drew them into a primitivistic encounter with God. And although he called his portable structure a “tent cathedral,” Roberts had made this primitivistic encounter more accessible by excising it from the formal confines of the church. In fact, one could argue that the suburban megachurches that developed three decades later appropriated Roberts’s style in drawing together large crowds of mutually anonymous

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<sup>32</sup>Alice Duncombe, “Christ in the Midst of the Topeka Crusade,” *Abundant Life* 15, no. 4 (April 1961): 16.

<sup>33</sup>Tom Miller, “Great Holy Ghost Outpouring During Miami, Fla. Meeting,” *Healing Waters* 3, no. 4 (March 1950): 14; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 84.

individuals and families from across the metropolitan sprawl and distilling their collected energy into an effusive worship experience.

If Roberts's tent revivals provided a physical space for a primitivistic encounter with God outside of the mediation of the local church, his eager adoption of radio and television obliterated the notion that a physical space was even necessary to facilitate such an encounter. If the Spirit was omnipresent, Roberts reasoned, its healing power could pulse through the hypervelocity of broadcast frequencies that collapsed the time and space separating him from his audience. Roberts typically concluded his radio and television programs by cupping his hand around his microphone and leading his listeners in a prayer for healing. A radio broadcast from June 1949 supplies a representative example of Roberts leading this recurring ritual:

Now, neighbors, reach out and lay your hands on your radio cabinets. If you can't do that, lift your heart to God wherever you are. God told me His healing power would be felt in my right hand, and I lay my hand over this microphone, and, lo, I am laying it upon you there in your home. Now, Father, I come to Thee in the name of Thy son, Jesus of Nazareth. Grant me this miracle according to Thy will in heaven. And now, Father, I meet sickness and disease. I meet sin and despair, and fear and demon oppression through the authority of God. And I charge you, Satan, to loose suffering humanity. I command thee to let them go free today. Let Thy healing virtue surge into every fiber of their body, oh God. Heal those little children. Heal those dads and mothers, and these precious ones who are gathering around their radios now. In Jesus' name, I command their diseases to go! Now, neighbor, rise and be made whole by the power of God. Only believe.<sup>34</sup>

In these moments, according to Roberts, the twentieth-century technologies of radio and television became instruments of cosmic deliverance, uniting his prayers and his distant

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<sup>34</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 118; Oral Roberts, "What Healing Waters Broadcast Is Doing and Can Do For God and Humanity," *Healing Waters* 2, no. 8 (July 1949): 6.

listeners' supplications for healing with the transformative, reality-bending energy of the Holy Spirit.

As with his tent revivals, Roberts claimed that the catalyst that stimulated these telecommunicated healings was faith, the concentration of one's mental desires toward the aim of receiving healing. Indeed, Roberts stressed to his radio and television audiences that without exercising this form of declarative faith, healing could not occur. It was essential, he told his radio listeners, to "believe then, the very moment your hands touch your radio by faith."<sup>35</sup> Letters poured in from listeners praising the efficacy of this form of faith. In 1947, Mrs. E.C. Gill of Tulsa reported that when she laid her hands on her radio in faith during one of Roberts's first radio broadcasts, her high blood pressure had "gone down from 220 to 138."<sup>36</sup> More dramatically, Mrs. T.R. Burkman of Pinehurst, North Carolina recounted how her four-month-old nephew's "blood was not sufficient" and that he was "in the clutches of death with just a few more days to live." With the permission of the baby's parents, in faith she pressed her nephew's hand against her radio when Roberts began to pray, and swore that "when you said amen, I knew the child was healed for I had felt the mighty healing power surging through my arms." To doctors' amazement, Burkman wrote, the baby was now healthy and growing, a vivid testimony to God's power to heal across the airwaves.<sup>37</sup> Roberts's Pentecostal forebears had championed euphoric moments of healing where divine power swallowed up human infirmity. He exported this primitivistic practice to radio and television.

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<sup>35</sup>Oral Roberts, "Healing: Today's Promise - Not Tomorrow's Dream," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 2 (February 1948): 3.

<sup>36</sup>Mr. and Mrs. E.C. Gill, "Healed During Broadcast," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 1 (December 1947): 5.

<sup>37</sup>T.R. Burkman, "Baby's Life Saved Through Broadcast," *Healing Waters* 3, no. 6 (May 1950): 8.

Yet for all its appeal to certain segments of postwar society, Roberts's theological worldview had no shortage of critics. Skeptics raced to find a naturalistic explanation for Roberts's healings that could keep the physics and metaphysics of modernity intact. The Federal Communications Commission summoned Roberts to Washington in 1950, where commissioners interrogated him about his telecommunicated healings. In the years to come, lobbyists from the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Church, zealously guarding the reputed American religious mainstream, pushed (unsuccessfully) for the FCC to force "fringe" preachers like Roberts off the airwaves.<sup>38</sup> In 1956, as Roberts's antics drew increasing attention, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article condemning faith healing.<sup>39</sup> In short, Roberts was a polarizing figure, for his primitivistic theology loudly dissented from "conventional" conceptions of the natural and the supernatural. Yet the fact that Roberts gained significant prominence and support in the first decade of his ministry indicated that these conceptions were not as self-evident to everyone as societal gatekeepers thought.

Beyond his tactics—tent revivals, radio, and television—why did Roberts strike such a nerve in the 1950s, drawing more attention and support than any prior Pentecostal faith healer? I argue that Roberts's unique theology of faith tapped into three elements of the cultural consciousness of midcentury America. In an age of white-collar industriousness, Roberts drew a succinct rendering of the Christian life for the non-nonsense worker; in an age marked by fire-and-brimstone revivalism, he offered the optimistic prospect of abundant life; and in an age where psychological language was

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<sup>38</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 171–72.

<sup>39</sup>"The Faith Healer," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 160, no. 4 (January 28, 1956): 292.

seeping into public consciousness, he encouraged people to find a therapeutic release in faith.

Fans of Roberts praised his clarity. Simply exercise mental agency by believing and praying for healing, Roberts claimed, and God would answer. He redefined faith as mental agency to achieve one's felt needs in an era when postwar economic growth had already afforded many Americans more agency across other aspects of their lives. Donald Meyer has observed that the "believe-it-and-achieve-it" message present in the self-help books authored by New Thought writers in the 1910s and 1920s found its strongest audience among men of humble backgrounds who had just established a foothold in the white-collar middle class.<sup>40</sup> A generation later, Roberts dipped into this same well of New Thought to devise an uncomplicated picture of the Christian life for a new suburban society hungry for it. Hence *Venture Into Faith* depicts Jim Collins, the brusque Sunbelt businessman, commending Roberts for being "direct, right to the point, sound."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Roberts spoke the language of business when he contended that "faith is a personal, literal transaction between your spirit and God Who is Spirit. There can be no indefinite or haphazard dealings with God. We come in a business-like manner, brisk, sober, believing, expecting."<sup>42</sup> In an age of economic opportunity and uplift, Roberts offered simple steps, via tent revivals or the television set, to bypass traditional religious superstructures and directly encounter God in transformative, reality-shifting ways.

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<sup>40</sup>Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 170–71.

<sup>41</sup>Lightman, *Venture Into Faith*.

<sup>42</sup>Oral Roberts, "How To Receive and Keep Your Healing," *Healing Waters* 1, no. 7 (July 1948): 2.

Another aspect of Roberts's appeal was his promotion of an abundant life that faith could secure in the present. Although he affirmed hell's existence and occasionally dipped into dour dispensational end-times prophecies, Roberts consciously avoided articulating salvation as knowing the right facts about Christ in order to evade a fast-approaching apocalypse. This message, he suggested, was Billy Graham's purview.<sup>43</sup> Roberts's gospel was much sunnier, befitting the optimistic boosterism that pervaded the prospering culture of the Sunbelt South in the 1950s. If his southern evangelical audiences had found the quintessential fire-and-brimstone sermons of their tradition hard to square with their objectively improving socioeconomic conditions, Roberts's theology seemed to resonate with their auspicious times.

In deemphasizing fire-and-brimstone histrionics and instead emphasizing "abundant life" in the here and now, Roberts promoted a therapeutic Christianity. According to him, Christians were not trapped inside a clockwork universe where the laws of nature unflinchingly persisted under God's inexorable Will. For those who absorbed Roberts's theology, faith became "letting go," a cathartic crossover from the confining strictures of this modernistic worldview into an alternate conception of the cosmos where an immanent God made mentally-imagined miracles happen and dreams come true. One had only to believe. As popular psychology exerted increasing influence on midcentury American culture, Roberts's therapeutic gospel had particular appeal.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize, the uncomplicated, optimistic, and therapeutic strands of Oral Roberts's primitivistic theology were central in attracting the broad, enthusiastic support

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<sup>43</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 180.

<sup>44</sup>Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 262; Winter, *Suburban Captivity*, 175; Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

that rocketed him to stardom in the 1940s and 1950s. Roberts did not practice either his eclectic primitivist theology or his entrepreneurial, Sunbelt-style pragmatism in isolation from each other. Rather, much like his predecessors in early Pentecostalism, Roberts joined them in a potent, attractive synthesis, albeit updated for the new realities of a modernizing and suburbanizing postwar America.

For this reason, the Abundant Life Building, a symbolic edifice of Roberts's business-minded ingenuity, also included ample space for individuals to draw exceedingly near to God. Roberts championed the functionality and efficiency of his new headquarters when it was built in 1959, but he also treasured the sealed-off prayer chamber deep inside the building. Shortly before the dedication ceremonies for the headquarters, Roberts toured it with his ministry trustees. Roberts reflected that when they entered the prayer room, "reverence and sanctity [was] in the very atmosphere of this holy place." "God is in this room!" one trustee reportedly gasped, "now I know what it must be like to stand near the Holy of Holies." The only experience to which these trustees could liken the prayer room's atmosphere, according to Roberts, was "the grip of that mysterious and wonderful quality" of approaching God in the concentrated psychic power of faith.<sup>45</sup> The Abundant Life Building's design communicated that underneath the pragmatic, relentlessly entrepreneurial shell of Oral Roberts and his ministry lay an abiding core of primitivism. In 1959, the lofty heights of the Abundant Life Building confirmed that this synthesis had worked wonders so far. Who knew what the future could hold?

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<sup>45</sup>Roberts, "This Is the House the Lord Told Me to Build," 5.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “A Figure in Transition”: Roberts as Cultural Icon, 1960–1975

In the waning hours of August 5, 1962, Oral Roberts and Raymond Corvin engaged in earnest conversation beside a hotel pool in Houston, Texas, the city where Roberts had finished conducting a revival earlier that evening. Corvin had received a doctorate from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and at the time served as president of a Pentecostal bible college. More importantly, he was Roberts’s childhood friend, having converted to Christ under the preaching of Roberts’s father. As the moon rose into the night sky, these old friends spoke at length about the unaccredited soulwinning “boot camp” that Roberts had been constructing since February in Tulsa. In the intervening months, however, Roy Dotson, a Tulsa-based Pentecostal construction magnate who was building large-scale suburban housing developments across the South, had expressed interest in funding the campus’s transformation into a full-fledged accredited college. Now, with the philanthropic support to develop the boot camp far beyond its initial scope, Roberts invited Corvin to join the project as an educational advisor. Corvin responded enthusiastically, proposing that he and Roberts swear a pact:

Within the next 25 years, in addition to your work of evangelism, we will give ourselves to building the Oral Roberts University, with the goal of 3,000 students including graduate and seminary students and, by the time 25 years have passed, that our graduates will be preaching or following their careers throughout the world and winning a minimum of 2,000,000 souls to Christ every year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Oral Roberts, “The R.O. Corvin Story,” *Abundant Life* 17, no. 1 (January 1963): 11; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 208–11; Carl H. Hamilton, “He Earns to Give That Others May Live,” *Abundant Life* 16, no. 5 (May 1962): 12–15.

Sealing their promises with a handshake, the next era of Roberts's ministry began.

Oral Roberts University was officially established three months later on November 27, 1962 with Oral Roberts as president, Raymond Corvin as chancellor, and Lee Braxton as chair of the board of regents. From the outset, the name "University" advertised that Roberts aimed to turn his school into an evangelical graduate-level research institution.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his goals were so audacious that ORU would define Roberts's ministry and absorb the lion's share of his attention for the next three decades. The underlying elements of his spiritual character—his primitivism and pragmatism—had developed in the 1950s, but in the 1960s and early 1970s they received new expression as he pivoted away from the revival circuit towards a ministry anchored by ORU and propagated through his extravagant televangelism. In the fifteen years between 1960 and 1975, ORU became the project through which Roberts reinvented himself. He drifted away from denominational Pentecostalism, shepherded the Charismatic Renewal, formed strategic relationships with neo-evangelicals, and joined the mainline United Methodist Church. He tapped into the embryonic Christian conservatism coalescing in Tulsa and elsewhere in the Sunbelt South, astutely presenting ORU less as a Pentecostal bastion and more as a redoubt from the 1960s counterculture. In his public preaching, Roberts deemphasized faith-healing and prioritized the prosperity promises of "Seed-Faith," a more widely marketable doctrine. Finally, he achieved staggering popularity through his primetime television specials in the early 1970s. In effect, Roberts spent the period between 1960 and 1975 shoring up his credentials as one of the savviest ministry

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<sup>2</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 212; Vinson H. Synan, "Pentecostal History and Oral Roberts: Oral Roberts and Higher Education," interview by Daniel D. Isgrigg, 2019, Holy Spirit Research Center, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/synan/14>.

leaders in America. By the mid-1970s, Roberts stood at the helm of an evangelical megaministry at its zenith, presiding over a quasi-congregation of perhaps two million devoted followers and thirty million fans across the United States and the world.

Roberts claimed that changing times prompted him to found ORU. As I noted at the end of Chapter Two, Roberts already sensed by the early 1960s that his tent revivals no longer possessed the magnetic pull that they once had. “I could see that the tent was ceasing to be an asset,” he recalled later. “Why go to our tent when they could watch our television program in the comfort of their own living room each week?”<sup>3</sup> Roberts recognized that if he could educate students in the ideals of positive faith and impart to them his zealous desire for divine healing, they could carry the animating principles of his crusades to a hurting world, even as the crusades themselves became an increasingly neglected aspect of his ministry.

Roberts also admitted that his son Ronnie’s difficult experience at Stanford weighed heavily on his long-term plans to expand ORU into a research university. According to Oral, professors at Stanford attacked his son’s beliefs, belittling him for his status as the son of the famous faith healer. Oral even flew out to Palo Alto to be with Ronnie when he began to express intentions to walk away from the faith. Oral’s wife Evelyn expressed her frustrations with higher education at a 1964 conference aimed at attracting donors to ORU. “I’m tired of colleges brainwashing our children, aren’t you?” she told the audience. “I’m really tired of it. Our son’s gone through this and over the Christmas holidays he told us of the atheistic pressures and frustrations.”<sup>4</sup> Oral himself

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<sup>3</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 175.

<sup>4</sup>Yvonne Nance, “A Lift from the Lord,” *Abundant Life* 18, no. 5 (May 1964): 22; Roberts, *The Call*, 18–19.

was expressing alarm as early as 1962 that so many young Christians were leaving “the Full Gospel Movement by virtue of going to these other universities where God was not supreme.” Such troubling trends, Roberts claimed, were compelling him to “build a major, Class ‘A,’ academic university.”<sup>5</sup>

Another factor that fed Roberts’s driving ambition to build ORU into a research university was his desire to eventually create a medical school that trained doctors to integrate his brand of faith-healing spirituality with healthcare. Indeed, Roberts later claimed that God had appeared to him in 1962—the year Roberts chartered ORU—and commanded him to build a “Spirit-filled medical school.” Whether this vision occurred or not, surviving minutes from the initial ORU regents meeting in November 1962 indicate that Roberts presented a strategic plan that included founding a medical school (as well as law and business schools) by 1980.<sup>6</sup>

Roberts found an unlikely proponent of Spirit-filled healthcare in Dr. Bill Reed (1922–2010). Reed was a physician from Michigan with strong ties to the Order of St. Luke the Physician, a proto-Charismatic network of Episcopalian surgeons based in New England that practiced faith-healing using New Thought principles. In a 1961 *Abundant Life* article, Reed decried mainstream medicine’s failure to harness the power of the patient’s spiritually attuned mind, which he believed held great sway over physical illness.<sup>7</sup> Three years later, he appeared alongside Roberts at a conference for Christian healthcare professionals on ORU’s partially constructed campus, in which Roberts asked:

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 210–11.

<sup>6</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 212; Roberts, “The Vision of God and of Oral Roberts,” 6.

<sup>7</sup>William S. Reed, “We Must Save the Sick to Save Souls,” *Abundant Life* 15, no. 2 (February 1961): 8–10. As early as 1956, representatives from Roberts’s ministry were visiting healing seminars facilitated by the Order of St. Luke, suggesting that the ties between Roberts and Reed may have formed

Well Bill, have you thought about what we plan here? Because I've always thought that spiritual and divine medical healing should be brothers, they should not be alien. ...[W]e're hopeful that there can be some sort of merging of the two groups, that we can have a tremendous medical program in this university so that someday we will have a medical college and we will turn out Holy Ghost-filled medical doctors.<sup>8</sup>

Roberts recognized that the sheer amount of financial capital required to start a medical school placed its realization far in the future, but in the 1960s he was laying the institutional foundations so that one day it could be built. When ORU opened to undergraduates in 1965, the first step was complete.<sup>9</sup>

In the earliest years of his revival circuits, Roberts had purchased a series of progressively bigger tents to hold his audiences. Similarly, in the 1960s Roberts built a big-tent coalition of Christians that could financially sustain ORU's growth trajectory toward research university status. He began by firmly partitioning ORU off from the Pentecostal Holiness Church. "As the University began to take form," Roberts later remembered, "I began to see the possibility of others unwittingly taking it down the denominational trail."<sup>10</sup> In 1964, he reported to supporters that God had mandated him to make ORU "a neutral place of training" with an interdenominational board of regents.<sup>11</sup> Although ORU hired most of its early faculty from Pentecostal bible colleges, Roberts signaled his irenic vision for ORU by selecting John Messick, a Methodist with a PhD in

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during the late 1950s. See G.H. Montgomery, "The March of Deliverance," *Abundant Life* 10, no. 11 (November 1956): 31.

<sup>8</sup>Oral Roberts, *1964 Talk on Healing and Medicine at ORU* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1964), <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/communities.html>.

<sup>9</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 216.

<sup>10</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 130.

<sup>11</sup>Oral Roberts, "The Growth of a Miracle," *Abundant Life* 18, no. 2 (February 1964): 6.

education from NYU, as the university's founding dean. Messick himself proudly proclaimed ORU "an ecumenical university" that did not "stand as a monument for any denomination."<sup>12</sup> As Roberts distanced his school from denominational Pentecostalism, his previously positive relationship with the PHC soured, since many within the PHC saw ORU as a rival to the denomination's Southwestern Bible College in Oklahoma City.<sup>13</sup>

Yet when Roberts strayed from the Pentecostal fold in the early 1960s, he found many others outside Pentecostal denominations that were gathering around his style of Spirit-filled religion. On April 3, 1960, Episcopalian priest Dennis Bennett revealed to his staid congregation in Van Nuys, California that he had received what Pentecostals called the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Historian John Wigger has described this episode as "an Azusa Street moment" that sparked the Charismatic Renewal, a decade of revivals in which Pentecostal practices seeped into Protestant and Catholic denominations. The Roberts-aligned Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International played a major role in the revival, as did spontaneous events among Catholics at Duquesne University and the University of Notre Dame.<sup>14</sup> As early as 1962, Roberts was taking notice of how the Holy Spirit was beginning to work in "Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and many other denominations" by indwelling "prominent doctors, surgeons, noted business leaders and professional people."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>"A Time for Titans," *Abundant Life* 20, no. 3 (March 1966): 8; William C. Armstrong, "Divine Moment," *Abundant Life* 17, no. 2 (February 1963): 4; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 213–22.

<sup>13</sup>Synan, "Pentecostal History and Oral Roberts"; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 217–18.

<sup>14</sup>Wigger, *PTL*, 61–62.

<sup>15</sup>Roberts, "A Spiritual Revolution Throughout the Earth," 6.

No institution was as central to the Charismatic Renewal as ORU. From the university's earliest days, Roberts opened the campus to ecumenical seminars that taught attendees to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, practice faith-healing, and speak in tongues. Articles in *Abundant Life* lauded how these ORU conferences were drawing curious Christians from across the denominational spectrum and around the world. A November 1963 seminar at ORU hosted 212 attendees from 56 countries, indicating how the Charismatic Renewal was taking on global dimensions.<sup>16</sup> Dennis Bennett became a friend of Roberts and attended several conferences at ORU. "I think Oral Roberts has done a great deal in recent years to help bridge the gap between the understanding of the ministry of the gifts of the Spirit, and the denominational churches," Bennett said while in Tulsa in 1965.<sup>17</sup> A Presbyterian minister echoed Bennett when he said that Roberts's ministry was "the biggest factor that has helped to bring forth [the Charismatic Renewal] in our generation."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the clearest sign of Roberts's shedding of sectarian Pentecostal proclivities was his embrace of Catholic Charismatics. As Grant Wacker has noted, early Pentecostals had vociferously opposed Roman Catholicism and tarred it as a false religion, but these hardened animosities melted at ORU's conferences in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> The Charismatic Renewal of the 1960s opened doors for Pentecostal spirituality to enter into mainstream denominations. Roberts took full advantage.

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<sup>16</sup>Doyle Helbling, "International Seminar," *Abundant Life* 18, no. 2 (February 1964): 10–13; William C. Armstrong, "Disciples: 1964," *Abundant Life* 18, no. 4 (April 1964): 7.

<sup>17</sup>"What Does the Ministry of Oral Roberts Mean to You as a Denominational Pastor?," *Abundant Life* 19, no. 10 (October 1965): 6–8.

<sup>18</sup>"What Does the Ministry of Oral Roberts Mean to You," 8.

<sup>19</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 182; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 289–90.

Along with his ecumenical outreach to Charismatics, Roberts simultaneously nurtured friendly ties with neo-evangelicals, which pulled his university into at least the peripheries of their influential institutional orbit. Beginning in the early 1950s, Roberts had cordial but sporadic interactions with neo-evangelical stalwart Billy Graham. Apart from their loose relationship, however, Roberts's ministry had developed entirely independently of this northern network of moderate evangelicals, who had organized in the 1940s and 1950s around institutions like the National Association of Evangelicals, *Christianity Today*, Wheaton College, and Fuller Seminary. Carl F.H. Henry (1913–2003), neo-evangelicalism's institutional architect, broke the ice first. He penned a letter to Roberts in 1965 congratulating him on ORU's opening to undergraduates and inviting him to join Billy Graham and British evangelical icon John Stott (1921–2011) at the Berlin World Conference on Evangelism in 1966.

Roberts cautiously accepted the invitation, but he feared at the time that “many delegates to the Congress considered my ministry of evangelism and healing to be on the periphery of the great stream of evangelical Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Raymond Corvin, who accompanied Roberts to Berlin, remarked that upon arrival at the conference “every room we entered people turned and looked, whether it was the convention hall, the lunch room, or the hotel lobby.”<sup>21</sup> Despite this frosty introduction, neo-evangelical luminaries at the conference forcefully defended Roberts's presence in Berlin. When Roberts received pointed questions about faith healing during a panel discussion, Harold John

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<sup>20</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 120–21.

<sup>21</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 120.

Ockenga (1905–1985), a prominent neo-evangelical theologian and fellow panelist, interjected and offered a staunch defense on his behalf.<sup>22</sup>

What prompted so many figures in the neo-evangelical world to embrace Roberts, a man whose theology strayed far from their own broadly Reformed leanings? They saw Roberts as a strategic partner in creating what they themselves had long set their sights on: an evangelical research university.<sup>23</sup> Raymond Corvin related a striking anecdote from the Berlin Conference that suggested Roberts’s educational ambitions smoothed out the theological friction that had separated the faith healer from these neo-evangelicals:

One afternoon Oral attended an educational panel in which the general consensus was that Christian schools should carry the educational load through the bachelor's degree in liberal arts and maybe up to the master's degree, and do a good job, but because of the extensive outlay of capital they didn't feel they had the financial strength to produce the program where the Ph.D. could be given. It was at that point that Brother Roberts stood up and said, "I believe Christianity should take the ball and move forward. We need at least 12 evangelical universities with their own doctoral programs. We can do it as we believe God!" And someone said, "It has been estimated that to build a school of this kind will cost 90 million dollars." Brother Roberts said, "Well, that's all right. We have already designed our program at ORU to be a Ph.D. granting institution, and it will cost 100 million. I cast my vote here today in favor of faith. By God's help we in Christian education can build these great Christ-centered universities and furnish educators who really know the Lord."<sup>24</sup>

Billy Graham and other neo-evangelicals were evidently quite taken with Roberts’s confidence and access to philanthropic capital. It was in Berlin that Roberts invited Graham to be the keynote speaker at ORU’s dedication ceremonies in 1967. On a cloudy,

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<sup>22</sup>R.O. Corvin, "Oral Roberts and R.O. Corvin Attend World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin," *Abundant Life* 21, no. 1 (January 1967): 21–22.

<sup>23</sup>Henry, Ockenga, and Graham together made extensive but ultimately fruitless efforts to form an evangelical research university in the 1960s. See Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 127–57.

<sup>24</sup>Corvin, "Oral Roberts and R.O. Corvin," 24.

windswept day that April, Graham delivered a rousing speech before an audience of students, parents, and ministry partners. “Evangelical Christendom can be proud today of this university,” Graham thundered, “and what it will mean to the future of this country.”<sup>25</sup> With these words, Graham consecrated ORU as a neo-evangelical institution.

Roberts later cited his positive experiences at the Berlin Conference as a contributing factor to his decision to leave the PHC denomination and join Tulsa’s Boston Avenue Methodist Church on May 27, 1968.<sup>26</sup> Initially, his transfer of membership to the United Methodist denomination had disastrous effects on his ministry. Roberts lost over half of his Pentecostal ministry supporters, which resulted in a 20 percent decline in donations.<sup>27</sup> Raymond Corvin resigned from ORU out of loyalty to the PHC, though in fact conflict had been brewing between him and Roberts for a few years. Corvin had first expressed concern when Roberts began reading the likes of Barth, Bultmann, and Camus, and he stridently opposed Roberts’s decision to not affiliate ORU’s seminary with the PHC. Roberts’s move to the more liberal United Methodist Church was the last straw.<sup>28</sup> Despite the short-term drawbacks, Roberts found his Methodist identity paid long-term dividends. Although church authorities rarely elevated him within the denomination (“there just isn’t any slot in our structure for someone with his own constituency,” one official remarked), they were receptive to Roberts and rarely

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<sup>25</sup>ORU Dedication 1967 - Billy Graham (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1967), accessed April 2, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/210812674>; Corvin, “Oral Roberts and R.O. Corvin,” 26.

<sup>26</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 124; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 295.

<sup>27</sup>Edward B. Fiske, “The Oral Roberts Empire,” *New York Times* (New York, NY, April 22, 1973); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 297.

<sup>28</sup>Synan, “Pentecostal History and Oral Roberts”; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 232–38.

critical.<sup>29</sup> Roberts appreciated this hands-off approach, which allowed him to enjoy the esteemed status of membership in a mainline denomination while maintaining maximal autonomy in his ministry operations. By 1968, Roberts boasted a network of connections that spanned across the denominational divides separating Charismatics, neo-evangelicals, and the Protestant mainline.

Roberts's membership at Boston Avenue Methodist Church, one of Tulsa's most prominent congregations, also signaled his intentions to make a place for himself among the civic elite of his Sunbelt city. With a relaxed travel schedule thanks to the ebbing of his crusades, he now had more time to devote to local affairs. Roberts lent out his facilities to host Tulsa civic clubs; in turn, he and his ministry executives became members of fraternal organizations and Tulsa's prestigious Southern Hills Country Club, where Roberts was reputed to have a six-stroke handicap.<sup>30</sup> Roberts's friend John Williams, a local businessman who commanded a sprawling conglomerate of fossil fuel and real estate investments, served as his escort into Tulsa's jet set. "There is starting to be a move in Tulsa," Roberts explained about his enmeshment in the city's elite. "There is now at least a small definite move among some of the top people—the power structure of our city—toward the Baptism of the Holy Ghost." Yet there is no denying that his friendships came with political incentives in the laissez-faire environs of the Sunbelt South, where chambers of commerce held the controlling stake in metropolitan politics.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Fiske, "The Oral Roberts Empire."

<sup>30</sup>"Come, Visit Us!," *Abundant Life* 14, no. 3 (March 1960): 16; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 279; Fiske, "The Oral Roberts Empire."

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 311; see Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 21–22; Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, ix; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 352–53.

With time, Roberts's budding relationships with Tulsa's elite took on an economic dimension as well. In 1972, Roberts became a prominent backer of University Bank, which was slated to be built along Tulsa's fast-growing suburban fringe. A feasibility study communicated that the bank would exploit Tulsa's Sunbelt boom by planting itself in a new neighborhood regarded as "one of the most affluent in Tulsa."<sup>32</sup> Roberts's backing of the bank was well-publicized, for as one competing Tulsa banker acknowledged, an Oral Roberts bank was quite attractive to some customers, given his teachings on financial prosperity. Speaking more generally, Tulsa Mayor Robert LaFortune claimed in 1974 that "ORU has a very important role in the economy of the city. ...It accommodates any community's desire to have good paying jobs and jobs that require professional competence."<sup>33</sup> Tulsa boosters like LaFortune recognized that Roberts not only brought jobs to the city, but also tourists to ORU's campus. A worker at the Tra-Vel Information Center in Tulsa quipped in 1970 that Roberts and ORU were "just about the best thing Oklahoma and the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce have going for them."<sup>34</sup> Thus, it was with good reason that the *New York Times* identified Roberts as "one of the shrewdest businessmen in Tulsa."<sup>35</sup> As Roberts's relationships with Tulsa business leaders warmed, the line between his ministry and business dealings blurred.

Roberts also altered his public persona during the 1960s, revamping his early image as a folksy southern Pentecostal and presenting himself as a less regionalized

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<sup>32</sup>"University Bank Plans Progress," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, May 12, 1972), 1.

<sup>33</sup>Randy Day, "Mayor LaFortune Discusses ORU, Tulsa," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, August 24, 1974).

<sup>34</sup>Yvonne Nance, "Will You Please Tell Me How I Can Find Oral Roberts University?," *Abundant Life* 24, no. 7 (July 1970): 13.

<sup>35</sup>Fiske, "The Oral Roberts Empire."

Sunbelt figure. He forewent the boots and cowboy hat that he had often donned in the 1950s, opting instead for business suits. His nasally Texahoma twang gradually deepened into a more robust baritone. He projected an image that Charlotte-based televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker would copy a decade later: predominantly Southern in target audience, but by no means Southern in presentation.<sup>36</sup> Most historians of the Sunbelt South have focused on its emergence as a postwar political phenomenon, but Roberts's shift in presentation subtly illustrated how the Sunbelt also carried with it a new cultural paradigm. Roberts avoided partisan politics but nevertheless crafted a religious brand tailor-made for an air-conditioned Sunbelt sociocultural climate as it superseded its humid Southern predecessor in the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, Roberts championed the values of racial colorblindness, propriety, and prosperity that were coming to characterize the ethos of southern suburbs stretching from Tulsa to Charlotte.<sup>37</sup>

Historian Kevin Kruse has chronicled how a suburbanized colorblind conservatism, which trafficked in the language of property rights, individual responsibility, and "law and order," supplanted segregationist rhetoric in metropolitan Atlanta in the late 1960s as whites evacuated urban neighborhoods for the suburbs.<sup>38</sup> Roberts's approach to racial issues shifted this colorblind conservatism, common across the post-Jim Crow Sunbelt South, into a religious register. Hardly an apologist for the

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<sup>36</sup>For an early image of Roberts in a cowboy hat, see Oral Roberts, "Right Believing and Wrong Believing," *Healing Waters* 7, no. 8 (August 1953): 8–15; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 195; Wigger, *PTL*, 41.

<sup>37</sup>For accounts of the rise of the Sunbelt that emphasize the phenomenon's political ramifications, see Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup>Kruse, *White Flight*, 9–13.

Lost Cause, Roberts decried racism as sin, and even once wrote that the United States was “not a Christian nation” because of continuing cultural opposition to interracial marriage.<sup>39</sup> Historian Randall Balmer has alleged that opposition to school desegregation prompted a wave of private Christian school and college openings in the 1960s, but ORU hardly fits Balmer’s “segregation academy” theory, having opened its doors to black students from its inception in 1965.<sup>40</sup> Roberts’s forward-looking views on race reflected his upbringing in Pentecostalism, a movement that (with some deviations) had promoted racial egalitarianism.<sup>41</sup> Roberts drew on his Pentecostal roots in 1968 by offering a decidedly spiritualized solution to racism, claiming that it would “end only when we come face-to-face with Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Roberts often hedged and equivocated on racial issues. In 1967, on the eve of the 12th Street Riot, Roberts preached in Detroit that racial strife stemmed not only from the sins of whites, but of blacks as well:

Why is the white man manipulating the black man? To cover up his sin of enslaving that man, of violating his human rights, his dignity and the image of God upon his soul. Why is the black man striking at the white man? To cover up his own shortcomings, failures and refusal to rise to the full dignity of his birth. We're manipulating each other because we want to conceal our guilt. We have sinned. ...God's love coming into your heart and my heart can do more in five minutes to settle the racial issue than we can do in an eternity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 106.

<sup>40</sup>Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 59–69.

<sup>41</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 96; Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 72–73.

<sup>42</sup>Oral Roberts, “Hate, Love and the Christian,” *Abundant Life* 22, no. 3 (March 1968): 12.

<sup>43</sup>“Before the Storm...The Story of the Detroit Crusade,” *Abundant Life* 21, no. 11 (November 1967): 27.

Roberts strongly identified racism with internal, felt dispositions because it reflected his New Thought convictions that one's psychological state shaped one's physical universe. Thus, echoing proponents of colorblind conservatism, he called for conversion rather than advocating for policies that could mitigate racism's structural substantiations.

Roberts's friendships with segregationists also called into question his commitment to racial equality. In 1972, when an assassin's bullet paralyzed Alabama governor George Wallace, who had tepidly abandoned his segregationist platform a year prior, Roberts led an ORU chapel service in which two white and two black students prayed for Wallace over the phone.<sup>44</sup> The next week, ORU hosted black civil rights activist Charles Evers (1922–2020), who preached a sermon entitled “Racism is Wrong.” In a stunning juxtaposition, ORU's student newspaper covered both events on subsequent pages of the same edition, its editors seemingly unaware of the incongruity.<sup>45</sup> The ambiguity of Roberts's position on race befitted the uneasy racial moderation of the Sunbelt South in the 1970s. As Kruse has argued, suburban whites developed colorblind conservatism to promote Atlanta as a city too busy to hate. Similarly, Roberts was an evangelist too busy building a megaministry to either cling to the racism of the Jim Crow South or meaningfully combat it.

In line with Roberts's mixed treatment of racial issues, ORU's advertising appealed to other values of a southern suburban clientele, emphasizing the university's commitment to discipline and exacting standards of conduct. By the late 1960s, ORU was

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<sup>44</sup>“ORU Chapel Transcript” (Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 13, 1972), accessed February 25, 2019, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=chapel>.

<sup>45</sup>“ORU Honors First Black Mayor of Mississippi,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, September 22, 1972); “George Wallace Receives Prayer in a Special Chapel,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, September 22, 1972).

benefitting from a generation of upwardly mobile Pentecostal families in the South who had enjoyed their region's postwar economic boom and whose children were now reaching adulthood. Indeed, during the late 1960s, the Assemblies of God upgraded their bible schools into accredited four-year colleges in hopes of enticing this tuition-paying demographic.<sup>46</sup> ORU's recruitment strategy targeted this same suburban Pentecostal subculture, but also reached far beyond it. A solid majority of ORU students actually came from non-Pentecostal backgrounds, with Baptists and Methodists each separately outnumbering Pentecostals on campus. In 1972, approximately 20 percent of ORU's student body attended Southern Hills Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist congregation in suburban Tulsa.<sup>47</sup> If denominational backgrounds and theological particulars did not unite ORU's student body, geography and cultural values certainly did. A majority of early ORU students had grown up in the American South (one ORU freshman expressed amazement at the "over abundance of southerners" on campus), and a significant subset commuted from their families' homes in the Tulsa area.<sup>48</sup> And many students resonated with Roberts's injunction to ORU's inaugural class in 1965 that "the world doesn't need more college students to wave flags, carry placards, halt traffic, and riot against law and order."<sup>49</sup> ORU found its stride not by highlighting its Charismatic credentials but by signaling that it was the antithesis to the counterculture of the 1960s.

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<sup>46</sup>James S. Tinney, "Pentecostals Refurbish the Upper Room," *Christianity Today*, April 1, 1966; Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 279–80.

<sup>47</sup>"Have a Question?," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, November 17, 1973); "Southern Hills Baptist Church," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, March 3, 1972).

<sup>48</sup>"What Were Your First Impressions of College Life?," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, November 17, 1967); Kristie Gordon, "Commuters: ORU's Misfits," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, February 15, 1974).

<sup>49</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 202.

ORU demonstrated its commitment to law and order on campus through its strict enforcement of a fastidious Code of Honor. The Code of Honor prohibited smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use, as well as gambling and profanity. Female students had to wear skirts or dresses to class, while male students donned a shirt and tie and could not grow beards.<sup>50</sup> Roberts personally crafted and vigorously championed the code, which channeled the austere mores of his Pentecostal background. Ironically, southern evangelicals had once mocked Pentecostals for their ascetic lifestyles, but at the height of campus protests during the late 1960s, these very customs now became part of ORU's pitch to the conservative parents of prospective non-Pentecostal students.<sup>51</sup> "When many college students are about two steps away from atheism," an impressed campus visitor remarked, "it is so refreshing to see the ORU students—so clean-cut, sparkling-eyed, enthusiastic, and not afraid to speak up for Christ."<sup>52</sup> Another visitor expressed relief that "the coeds at ORU dress like girls."<sup>53</sup> ORU addressed the concerns of parents who fretted about their children's exposure to Charismatic practices on campus by clarifying in its advertisements that the university was "not concerned with changing the church allegiance of its students."<sup>54</sup> Thus, parents could overlook their misgivings about Roberts's peculiar spirituality, especially after reading testimonies from students like Kenneth Malmin, who cheerfully averred, "I agree with my parents—there's no

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<sup>50</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 239–41.

<sup>51</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 122–26.

<sup>52</sup>"Publishing a Book Changed His Life," *Abundant Life* 21, no. 4 (April 1967): 7.

<sup>53</sup>Marilois Bach, "Newspaper Reprint," *Abundant Life* 36, no. 3 (March 1982): 12.

<sup>54</sup>"You Still Have Time to Enroll at Oral Roberts University...If You Act NOW!," *Abundant Life* 20, no. 7 (July 1966): 24.

generation gap with us.”<sup>55</sup> In an age of generational conflict and campus unrest, ORU’s Code of Honor was music to many parents’ ears.

Indeed, the extent to which ORU sought to demonstrate its counter-counterculture credentials was striking. When a *Tulsa Tribune* editorial gently satirized ORU as a “School for Squares” full of “neatly-jacketed and primly-skirted” students, Roberts’s *Abundant Life* magazine unironically reprinted the piece as a back-page promotional for the university.<sup>56</sup> “This ORU Student is a Rebel\*” read the asterisked headline of a 1968 university advertisement superimposed over an image of a young male student. “But,” the promotional clarified below in a smaller font, “Gary Sulander is a rebel with a cause. He could rebel in a negative way. He could burn his draft card, join the others and say, ‘All right, let’s protest.’ He could become a hippie or a dropout, or start a riot.” The accompanying image of Gary, clad in suit and tie, with combed hair and a resolute facial expression, offered assurance that his “rebellion” had followed a more conventional path—in this case, an ORU mission trip to Chile.<sup>57</sup> ORU’s well-marketed appeal to conformity and discretion harmonized well with the political messaging of Richard Nixon, who had ascended to the White House in 1968 on a similar call for a reprieve from the youth protest movements roiling America. In fact, Roberts cultivated a quiet relationship with Nixon, meeting with him twice in the lead-up to the 1972 election and confiding to close friends that he supported the California Republican.<sup>58</sup> ORU

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<sup>55</sup>Yvonne Nance, “I Am the Lord That Healeth Thee,” *Abundant Life* 24, no. 4 (April 1970): 16.

<sup>56</sup>“A School for Squares,” *Tulsa Tribune* (Tulsa, OK, April 4, 1967); “A School for Squares,” *Abundant Life* 21, no. 7 (July 1967): 24.

<sup>57</sup>“This ORU Student Is a Rebel\*,” *Abundant Life* 22, no. 2 (February 1968): 24.

<sup>58</sup>Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 301–302; Miller, *Rise of the Republican South*, 152; “Roberts Offers Nixon Invitation,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, September 15, 1972).

breathlessly belabored its identity as a collegiate refuge from the counterculture of the 1960s because it harmonized with nascent political overtones.

It would be a mistake to assume that ORU's recruiting schtick only appealed to parents, for, as Bruce Schulman has noted, a generational cohort of conservative Baby Boomers in the Sunbelt South were reaching adulthood in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Eugene Boyd of Dallas, who served as ORU's first student body president, spoke for many on campus when he prophesied that "ORU is going to lead" a "counterrevolution" against the "revolution going on now...toward atheism and a godless philosophy of life."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the most successful of these counterrevolutionaries was David Barton, a young Pentecostal who came to ORU in 1972 as a freshman from Aledo, Texas, an exurb of Fort Worth. In his later career as an amateur historian, Barton would become the nation's leading proselytizer for the providentialist narrative of "Christian America."

In fact, if ORU students were largely united in their love for Jesus, they were nearly as unanimous in their love for Nixon. A 1968 presidential straw poll found that Nixon carried 77 percent of the student body's votes, with third-party segregationist George Wallace running second with 14 percent and Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey receiving a paltry 5.7 percent. Four years later, Nixon took 81.3 percent of the vote among ORU students; his Democratic challenger George McGovern received just 9.3 percent support.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>"A Time for Titans," 12; "I Am Enjoying the Unique Privilege..." *Abundant Life* 20, no. 9 (September 1966): 23; Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 215; Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 189–90.

<sup>60</sup>"'Nixon's the One' at ORU," *Oracle* (October 25, 1968): 1; "Oracle Political Poll Shows Nixon Leading," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, October 27, 1972).

ORU also played up its hard-charging, businesslike atmosphere, which paralleled the embryonic emergence of free-market conservatism in the 1960s. “You’re part of a new generation not satisfied with the status quo,” proclaimed a 1967 ORU advert to prospective students, “[y]ou mean business about your education.”<sup>61</sup> Promotionals beckoned high schoolers to join ORU’s “elite corps of a thousand students, impatient with education’s traditional leisure because of their deadlines less than 4 years away.”<sup>62</sup> As historian Bethany Moreton has noted, this style of business-minded posturing was not endemic to ORU. Evangelical colleges and universities across the Sunbelt South struck similar poses in the 1970s as they raced to train business students to fill managerial positions in booming postindustrial metropolises like Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas.<sup>63</sup>

For all the ways his ideals and rhetoric paralleled emerging trends in American politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Roberts was not a political operative. Unlike Billy Graham, he rarely fraternized at the White House or hinted to ministry supporters who they should vote for. Roberts’s relationship to the postwar Right was much more subtle and complex. “Oral is not overly impressed by government officials,” his daughter-in-law would later write. “He would only consider those his peers who had ultimate power, and the ultimate power is spiritual power.”<sup>64</sup> He had no ambitions of installing Christian conservatives in the halls of government; he simply wanted his university to succeed. In the 1960s, Roberts perceptively intuited that the same set of

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<sup>61</sup>“We’ve Been Expecting You,” *Abundant Life* 21, no. 4 (April 1967): 24.

<sup>62</sup>“The Now Style!,” *Abundant Life* 24, no. 10 (October 1970): 24.

<sup>63</sup>Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 153.

<sup>64</sup>Patti Roberts and Sherry Andrews, *Ashes to Gold* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 91.

cultural touchstones that were just beginning to propel the rightward lurch of whites in the Sunbelt South toward the GOP could be harnessed for the benefit of ORU. He understood that ORU's path for sustained growth into a research university required emphasizing (besides its Christian commitment) a Sunbelt ethos of law, order, and free-market capitalism that would attract students and their tuition-paying parents. He acted accordingly.

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, Roberts executed another rhetorical shift for the benefit of his ministry as he temporarily pivoted away from his emphasis on faith-healing towards the promotion of sanctified strategies for financial prosperity.<sup>65</sup> It was one thing to offer a spiritual pat on the back to those who had become more affluent, as Roberts had done in the 1950s. It was entirely another to provide a how-to guide, as Roberts did when he introduced the concept of "Seed-Faith" in the November 1969 edition of *Abundant Life*. Here, Roberts outlined Seed-Faith's three simple principles, which he would repeat ad nauseum for the next two decades. First, God was each person's ultimate source for all things earthly and spiritual. Everything else—banks, creditors, donors—were mere instruments of God's bounty, not its actual source. Thus, to accept the economic principle of scarcity was to admit spiritual defeat prematurely, for God's abundance was infinite. Second, receiving what you desired from God required the sowing of seed (a metaphor for tithing), which God would then "multiply back in the form of your need." Third, out of a confidence in the abiding truth of the prior two principles, the victorious Christian could pray for anything and "expect a miracle."<sup>66</sup> As

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<sup>65</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 138.

Roberts succinctly summarized in 1972, “[g]ive God your best, and give it first. Then ask God for his best, and expect a miracle.”<sup>67</sup>

Seed-Faith was essentially a rebranded version of the New Thought-influenced theology that Roberts had first proclaimed in the 1950s, albeit reoriented from physical health to financial well-being. According to Roberts, God had first mentally conceived of the universe, believed in it, and then it was created; so too God had given humans the identical capacity through Seed-Faith to mentally conceive a goal, believe it to be achievable, and receive it out of the bountiful goodness of God. This theological schema abstractly located the human mind exceedingly close to the mind of God, but it had deeply pragmatic implications.<sup>68</sup> Seed-Faith was a catch-all principle that, according to Roberts, obtained “results” across all areas of life—not merely in finances, but in battles with sin, in health issues, and in repairing broken relationships. Nevertheless, the majority of the Seed-Faith testimonies that Roberts’s ministry publicized in the early 1970s were related to financial breakthroughs. In an early series of Seed-Faith testimonials published in *Abundant Life*, five of the nine stories described how Seed-Faith had opened doors into lucrative careers or brought unexpected financial windfalls.

Roberts’s shift in messaging was a strategic means for expanding his audience. Although some had responded favorably when he had preached in the 1950s that one only had to pray with the right kind of faith to receive physical healing, this message was

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<sup>66</sup>Oral Roberts, “The Blessing Pact: Jesus’ Higher Law of Faith to Meet Needs in Your Life,” *Abundant Life* 23, no. 11 (November 1969): 20; Oral Roberts, “The Salesman Who Couldn’t Sell,” *Abundant Life* 25, no. 9 (September 1971): 12–13.

<sup>67</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 146.

<sup>68</sup>Oral Roberts, “Jesus Is God’s Covenant of Blessing to You,” *Abundant Life* 24, no. 1 (January 1970): 2–3.

off-putting to many others. Yet when he applied this same theology of faith towards securing financial prosperity, his ministry could be much more broadly well-received by those who had little patience for Charismatic practices. Seed-Faith was also an exceedingly personalized conceptualization of Christian spirituality, motivated by one's felt needs and exercised through one's internalized prayer life. Thus, it could penetrate congregational and theological contexts far afield from Roberts's Charismatic base.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Seed-Faith provided a logic for Roberts's appeals for donations, which were becoming more frequent and forceful as his ministry grew: the more that supporters tithed to God through his ministry, the more they would receive back Seed-Faith blessings.<sup>70</sup> For Roberts's purposes, Seed-Faith was a compelling (and convenient) rearticulation of the primitivist and pragmatist strands of his theology.

It is also hard to imagine a religious framework for reality that was better attuned than Seed-Faith to the economic and cultural life of the Sunbelt South in the 1960s and 1970s. Or to frame it another way, it would be difficult to imagine Roberts's clear-eyed proclamations of a name-it-and-claim-it worldview finding any purchase in the decaying cities of the industrial North, which by the early 1970s were in a state of brutal economic contraction as unions declined, manufacturing moved overseas, and large corporations migrated to warmer American regions with lower taxes.<sup>71</sup> The cosmos of the prosperity gospel proved most coherent and credible in the economically advantageous environs of

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<sup>69</sup>"A Way of Life for Needs to Be Met," *Abundant Life* 24, no. 1 (January 1970): 10–13; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 462.

<sup>70</sup>Wigger, *PTL*, 64–65.

<sup>71</sup>On the dramatic postwar shift in America's urban economic energy from the North to the Sunbelt, see Lisa Krissoff Boehm and Steven H. Corey, *America's Urban History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 300; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 1st ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 218.

postindustrial southern metropolises like Tulsa, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Atlanta. Seed-Faith also spiritualized the American South's long-standing regional antipathy towards government welfare. Roberts had long preached that God was one's best avenue out of poverty—"not the United States Government, not our state...but God."<sup>72</sup> If Seed-Faith's principles were efficacious, then governmental welfare was unnecessary (or even sinful), for the poor and dispossessed could simply rise out of poverty through conversion to Christ and right belief. Finally, Seed-Faith appropriated an agrarian idiom ("sowing seed") that was familiar to the millions like Roberts who had migrated out of the agrarian South, and then applied it to the white-collar suburban contexts—a new house, a new promotion, a new car—that they were now living in. For all these reasons, Seed-Faith proved attractive to evangelicals living in the American South during the region's whirlwind transformation between 1940 and 1990 from an agrarian socio-economy to an archipelago of postindustrial cities. A 1971 letter to Roberts from a ministry partner living in suburban Houston illustrated how Seed-Faith was spreading in that city. "That Seed-Faith is powerful," he testified. "We received your book on it and not only read it, we devoured it. Also we've got our neighbor on it now."<sup>73</sup>

Roberts's emphatic endorsement of Seed-Faith in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought the prosperity gospel firmly into the American evangelical mainstream. Historian

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<sup>72</sup>Oral Roberts, "We Need Christ for This Crisis," *Abundant Life* 16, no. 7 (July 1962): 6; Schulman, *Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 181–82.

<sup>73</sup>"On Television," *Abundant Life* 25, no. 6 (June 1971): 12. Between 1940 and 1990, the percentage of southerners employed in agriculture declined from 40 percent to 1 percent. Framed another way, between 1940 and 1980 the number of southerners living on farms dropped from 14 million to 1.5 million. See Shafer and Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*, 12; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 32–33.

Kate Bowler has been right to argue that the prosperity gospel has a pedigree that long precedes the 1960s.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, as I have argued in earlier chapters, Roberts was already preaching on financial prosperity as early as the 1940s. Yet in my assessment, Roberts's prioritization of Seed-Faith in the late 1960s was a pivotal juncture because he cultivated a new generation of preachers that would spread the prosperity gospel, in its explicit and implicit forms, to much larger audiences than in prior decades. In the 1960s and 1970s Roberts mentored Kenneth Hagin (1917–2003) and John Osteen (1921–1999), who cut their teeth on the FGBMFI seminar circuit before establishing their own prosperity gospel ministries in Tulsa and Houston, respectively. Kenneth Copeland (b. 1936) spent a year as an ORU student and Roberts's chauffeur in the late 1960s before leaving Tulsa to start a prosperity gospel ministry in Fort Worth. Even southern evangelicals beyond the Charismatic fold quickly absorbed and rearticulated the basic tenets of Seed-Faith. In 1974, Zig Ziglar (1926–2012), a Sunday school teacher at First Baptist Church Dallas, reached the *New York Times* bestseller list with *See You at the Top*, a spiritualized motivational treatise that riffed on Roberts's prosperity theology.<sup>75</sup> Roberts would shift his energies from prosperity preaching to the City of Faith project after 1975, but the legacy of his half-decade of emphasis on Seed-Faith lived on in the preachers who came under his influence during that period.

As Roberts began to preach on Seed-Faith, he also made forays into television that solidified his status as one of America's most prominent religious figures. Roberts

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<sup>74</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 11–59.

<sup>75</sup>William P. Sterne, "The Holy Spirit Is Breaking Down Denominational Barriers," *Abundant Life* 16, no. 10 (October 1962): 8–9; Bowler, *Blessed*, 73; Bill Sherman, "Tulsa Made Big Impact on the Copelands," *Tulsa World* (Tulsa, OK, July 3, 2004); Zig Ziglar, *See You at the Top* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1974).

had taken a television hiatus from 1965 to 1969 to give his full attention to expanding ORU. In 1969, however, he perceived that God was commanding him to return to the airwaves. In his characteristic capitalized rendering of divine speech, Roberts produced and publicized a transcript of his conversation with God: “‘GO INTO EVERY MAN’S WORLD.’ ‘HOW?’ ‘THROUGH RELEVANT WEEKLY AND QUARTERLY TELEVISION PROGRAMS.’”<sup>76</sup> Claiming obedience to God’s strikingly specific command, by 1969 Roberts had assembled a standout production team to ensure his return to television would catch the viewing public’s attention.

Teaming up with two associates of Billy Graham, Ralph Carmichael (b. 1927) and Dick Ross (1918–2009), Roberts began filming quarterly primetime network specials at NBC’s studios in Burbank, California. These specials supplemented his weekly Sunday broadcast produced back in Tulsa. Significantly modifying his prior television format, Roberts eliminated glossolalia and footage of electrifying healings. He replaced them with cutting-edge production values and elaborate song-and-dance routines from ORU’s World Action Singers. (Incidentally, television personality Kathie Lee Gifford, an ORU student at the time, got her start in show business as a member of this group). Quarterly specials were typically anchored by interviews with celebrity guests like Pat Boone (b. 1934), Anita Bryant (b. 1940), Johnny Cash (1932–2003), Jimmy Durante (1893–1980), and Mahalia Jackson (1911–1972). Roberts would always draw the televised spectacle to a close with an anodyne sermonette.<sup>77</sup> Although he chafed at some of the content

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<sup>76</sup>Oral Roberts, “You Have Seeded for Many Miracles...Now It’s Time to Tell the Devil to Take His Hands Off God’s Property,” *Abundant Life* 27, no. 3 (March 1973): 2.

<sup>77</sup>Evelyn Roberts, “My Thoughts for You This Christmas,” *Abundant Life* 23, no. 12 (December 1969): 22–23; Oral Roberts, “The Burning Pain in My Heart,” *Abundant Life* 24, no. 7 (July 1970): 2–3; “Spring Is Special,” *Abundant Life* 27, no. 3 (March 1973): 8–10; Roberts, *The Call*, 193–95; Harrell Jr.,

restrictions placed upon his specials by network executives, Roberts was willing to abide by them out of a conviction that primetime television was the best method to reach the lost. “We had taken Jesus’ commandment to go into all the world seriously,” he later reflected. “We had entered the world of secular entertainment and made it serve as a way of getting the attention of the unchurched.”<sup>78</sup>

Roberts prized television as the most efficient method of spreading the gospel, but the screen also proved, as it had in earlier eras of his ministry, to be the most intuitive way for some viewers to connect with God. Roberts’s commanding screen presence made the rest of the world fade into darkness in the entrancing glow of the television set. “In the old days on the sawdust circuit, Roberts was striking because of his hands,” a *New York Times* reporter observed in 1973. “Now it is his eyes. ...[H]e gives the impression that as far as he’s concerned, you’re the only other person on earth.”<sup>79</sup> The medium of television allowed Roberts to serve as his viewers’ personal chaplain, guiding them to God. “Each week Brother Roberts ministers to you and to your loved ones in the privacy of your own home,” an *Abundant Life* article declared, promising that “as you respond in faith, the God of miracles will bend low and perform the miraculous in your life.”<sup>80</sup> And an astounding number responded. Roberts’s quarterly primetime specials regularly scored a viewership in the tens of millions. As noted in the introduction, his 1973 Thanksgiving

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*Oral Roberts*, 270–72; Kathie Lee Gifford, *It’s Never Too Late: Make the Next Act of Your Life the Best Act of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 17.

<sup>78</sup>Roberts, *The Call*, 195; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 271–72.

<sup>79</sup>Fiske, “The Oral Roberts Empire.”

<sup>80</sup>Marion Craig Collins, “Something Good Is Going to Happen to You,” *Abundant Life* 23, no. 4 (April 1969): 19.

special garnered an audience of 37 million—nearly 18 percent of the American population at the time.<sup>81</sup>

The theological mechanics of this telecommunicated spirituality were difficult to pin down, but groundbreaking in their implications. Roberts proclaimed that God was “saturating the television series with His presence,” but it was difficult to discern exactly how.<sup>82</sup> Was the Holy Spirit working in the set? The camera? The viewer’s television? The broadcast tape? Roberts simply asserted that he felt the nearness of God during the taping of a special and claimed without elaboration that his audiences would feel this same supernatural immanency in the privacy of their living rooms when the special aired months later. His most fleshed-out explanation came in an April 1972 article:

I've been thinking of what I see when I look at the camera. I see a person, a person with a need; I reach out to him with my heart and hands and suddenly I feel God is there with His healing power. I feel it. I feel it all over me, all through me. The distance has been closed. ...Jesus is a Person to me. He sits where I sit; He feels what I feel. And this is what comes through the camera. People constantly write me of how they feel God's presence like electricity going through them, and how tears often fill their eyes as I share Jesus THE MAN with them. I have this same Jesus-closeness when I answer a letter. It just seems to burst within me and I feel like I'm reaching out across the miles and Jesus is extending His hands through mine.<sup>83</sup>

Through his revamped television ministry, Roberts once more demonstrated his ability to manufacture sacred contexts far beyond the church sanctuary. In the 1950s, his metropolitan megarevivals had subverted the spatial and temporal particularities of congregational worship. Now, in the 1970s, his primetime specials evaporated space and

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<sup>81</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 270.

<sup>82</sup>Collins, “Something Good Is Going to Happen to You,” 17.

<sup>83</sup>Oral Roberts, “Turn Loose! Turn Loose! Pray for All Kinds of Miracles,” *Abundant Life* 26, no. 4 (April 1972): 2.

time altogether into the depthless surfaces of television screens and the dissociated temporalities of taped broadcasts. To some, experiencing this dimensional collapse revitalized their spiritual life. Paul Westberg, a ministry supporter, testified in 1973 that he and his wife Marlene, though active in their church, had “compartmentalized” their faith and had “really lost track of a real personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” After the Westbergs discovered Roberts’s television program, the evangelist had “zeroed in on” them and drawn them back to God. For some, Roberts’s daring elision of sacred time and sacred space triggered breakthroughs in their faith, earning their lionizing admiration.<sup>84</sup>

The meteoric success of Roberts’s return to televangelism fortified his position as the head of a quasi-congregation as nebulous as it was diverse and diffuse. Through the 1960s he had placed his fingers in many ecclesial pies, and by the early 1970s he could now speak with the voice of a fellow traveler into the television rooms of neo-evangelicals, United Methodists, and Charismatic Catholics. Yet Roberts was keenly aware that his television ministry primarily attracted the religiously disenfranchised. He blithely admitted that “the majority” of his supporters “don’t enter church at all.”<sup>85</sup> Roberts’s television programs were his new followers’ most common point of entry into his ministry, and his ministry cultivated their support by answering 10,000 letters from them a day. An *Abundant Life* subscription was the next logical step of commitment for supporters. Indeed, after Roberts’s primetime specials began in 1969, subscriptions climbed from 700,000 to over one million. Through *Abundant Life*, an endless avalanche of Roberts’s books and tracts were available to order. A touristy pilgrimage to ORU’s

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<sup>84</sup>Paul Westberg and Billye Morris, “Our Whole Family Has Experienced Life-Changing Miracles,” *Abundant Life* 27, no. 4 (April 1973): 8–9.

<sup>85</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 285–86, 420–21.

campus, either to enroll their college-aged children in classes or to attend a seminar or conference, was the highest expression of fidelity.<sup>86</sup> Others soon replicated Roberts's television-driven ministry template. In 1974, Charismatic televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker moved to Charlotte, North Carolina to form PTL Satellite Network, which drew many of its earliest employees from ORU. By the 1980s, PTL rivalled Roberts's evangelical empire in size and its campus had morphed into a Christian theme park. From the Sunbelt South's eastern tip to its western edge, these quasi-congregations jockeyed for position in an emerging evangelical megaministry marketplace.<sup>87</sup>

The breadth and brawn of Roberts's ministry by the 1970s testified to the businesslike mentality that he had been applying to evangelistic work since he had moved to Tulsa in the 1940s. Roberts's righthand man Al Bush, who engineered the expansion of his ministry through its boom years in the late 1960s, grew increasingly concerned that Roberts's theology was becoming, as he later put it, "so pragmatic." Fittingly, when Bush left the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association in 1972, he quickly found work in the corporate world as the president of a medical equipment company.<sup>88</sup> Bush's criticism of his boss was accurate, for Roberts relentlessly cycled through tactics and initiatives, discarding what failed and investing in what worked. One constant held Roberts's ministry together through the countless transitions and innovations: the individual's intimate, cathartic encounter with God. This felt experience had always stood at the heart of the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, but by the 1970s Roberts had refashioned it by

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<sup>86</sup>Fiske, "The Oral Roberts Empire"; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 275.

<sup>87</sup>Wigger, *PTL*, 43–56; Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 232–33.

<sup>88</sup> Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 277, 439.

decisively distancing it from any inherent congregational or denominational connection.<sup>89</sup> His ministry had become a post-ecclesial network united around his appealing persona, a collective yearning for the ineffable presence of God, and a shared mantra: “expect a miracle.” Roberts had fought to disentangle himself from the strictures of denomination and tradition. Having loosed himself from both, he now encouraged Christians to do the same through his ministry.

As the 1970s progressed, polls revealed that Charismatics were heeding Roberts’s implicit encouragement to pull away from congregational life and denominational affiliation. At the end of the decade, 94 percent of non-Charismatic American evangelicals were members of a church, 83 percent attended services at least weekly, and 80 percent volunteered in some capacity in their congregations. By contrast, only 77 percent of Charismatics (of any tradition) were members of a church, a mere 49 percent of them attended services at least weekly, and just 55 percent volunteered in their congregations. Participants in the Charismatic Renewal were reconsidering their relationships with traditional patterns of church involvement. As a prominent figure among Charismatics, Roberts’s role in inducing this shift should not be underestimated.<sup>90</sup>

In 1973, Edward Fiske of the *New York Times* described Oral Roberts as “still very much a figure in transition.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Roberts had been in metamorphosis since his tent revivals had waned in the early 1960s. ORU’s stunning success was proof that this transformation had borne fruit. ORU progressed from provisional to full accreditation in

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<sup>89</sup> Roberts, *The Call*, 130.

<sup>90</sup>Kenneth S. Kantzer, “The Charismatics Among Us,” *Christianity Today*, February 22, 1980.

<sup>91</sup>Fiske, “The Oral Roberts Empire.”

1971. Although ORU raised tuition to the highest levels in Oklahoma, its student body continued to grow by hundreds each year, proving that Roberts's university had found a stable demographic niche of affluent evangelicals. As Seed-Faith tithes poured in, the university campus, which in 1962 had consisted of a couple of spartan tent-structures at the outskirts of Tulsa, became by 1975 a \$150-million, gleaming-gold built environment set within new upper-middle class suburbs on Tulsa's south side. ORU's Cinderella run to the Elite Eight of the 1974 NCAA Division 1 Men's Basketball Tournament captivated the nation and seemed to prove that Roberts and his form of Sunbelt spirituality could compete in the American cultural mainstream.<sup>92</sup> In the years since founding ORU in 1962, Roberts had shed his Pentecostal sectarianism and assembled a coalition in the Charismatic stream of American Christianity that was friendly with neo-evangelicalism and notionally affiliated with the Protestant mainline. His brand was not so much theologically coherent as culturally compelling. Roberts blended appeals to law, order, and Seed-Faith prosperity in a way that tapped into the broadly conservative mentality of the ascendant Sunbelt, where white residents were beginning to coalesce in opposition to the liberalizing trends of the 1960s. Fifteen years after his poolside pact with Raymond Corvin, Roberts stood on the cusp of beginning the grand experiment that could bring healing—the kind of miraculous divine healing that had forever altered his life in the sepia-tone days of 1935—from the revival tent to hospital corridors. Having burned his

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<sup>92</sup>“ORU Achieves Academic Status,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, April 1, 1971); “ORU Tuition Increases Reflect Spiraling Costs,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, November 22, 1974); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 360; Margaret M. Grubiak, “An Architecture for the Electronic Church: Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma,” *Technology and Culture* 57, no. 2 (2016): 381–83; “...Yet So Far Away!,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, March 22, 1974).

bridges with Corvin, however, Roberts needed a new associate, an able administrator who could take Bill Reed's theories of Christian healthcare and create a medical school.

One Saturday morning in the summer of 1972, Dr. James Winslow, a 37-year-old orthopedic surgeon from Tulsa, dropped by Oral Roberts's house on a whim. Winslow was a nominal Methodist who had come to know Roberts after his wife had experienced healing at an ORU seminar a few years prior while battling cancer. Although they had played golf together many times at Southern Hills Country Club, Winslow had long been suspicious of Roberts's faith healing. Yet on this Saturday morning, he came with searching questions, and they spoke into the afternoon, then into the evening, and then into the night. Finally, around 10 p.m., Winslow ascended a spiritual plateau. He began speaking in tongues. Believing that God had chosen Winslow for a special purpose, Roberts elevated him to the ORU Board of Regents a few months later in January 1973. He then placed him at the head of a subcommittee assessing the feasibility of founding a medical school. On April 27, 1975, upon receiving Winslow's report, the regents approved the formation of the medical school. The next day, Winslow flanked Roberts at a press conference as the faith-healing televangelist announced his plans to charter graduate schools at ORU in medicine, law, dentistry, business, and theology by 1980.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>“Oral Roberts, Dr. Jim Winslow, and Dr. Robert G. Hansen Discuss ORU's Medical and Dental Schools,” *Abundant Life* 30, no. 3 (March 1976): 10–15; “Med, Law Schools to Be Added to Grad Program,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, April 30, 1975); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 374–75.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Prophet Without Honor: Roberts as Visionary, 1975-1990<sup>1</sup>

February 1977 was an extremely difficult month for Oral Roberts. Hurdles and setbacks had plagued him in the preceding twenty-two months since he had announced his plans to transform ORU into a graduate-level research university. The most pressing matter was the reluctance on the part of Tulsa's hospitals, out of fear of strained relations with Oklahoma's two existing medical schools, to sign on as clinical partners for Roberts's proposed Oral Roberts University School of Medicine (ORUSM). Without a hospital affiliation, ORUSM would never receive accreditation, and as talks stalled in the winter of 1976-1977, undergraduates joined Roberts in a week-long session of prayer and fasting for a breakthrough in negotiations.<sup>2</sup> Then, on February 11, 1977, Roberts's daughter Rebecca and son-in-law Marshall Nash died in a small-engine airplane crash in Kansas. Broken and grieving, Oral and his wife gathered the strength to tape a solemn telecast five days later. "This is one of the most difficult times of our lives," Roberts told the camera. Yet he managed to muster something of the positive tone that had always characterized his ministry. "Evelyn, my darling wife, and I want to say to you, we still believe it, something good is going to happen to you and there will be a breakthrough from heaven in '77."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter builds off of my previously published journal article, Benjamin J. Young, "Holy Healthcare: Oral Roberts and the Rise and Fall of the City of Faith, 1960-1990," *ARCHIVE: An Undergraduate Journal of History* 23 (2020): 10–37; that journal article, in turn, was an augmented version of an essay that I completed for Philip Jenkins's "United States Since 1975" course in the spring of 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Cathy Sanco, "The Year in Review: Hopes, Fears, Laughter," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, April 22, 1977); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 318.

Roberts's own heavenly breakthrough came quickly. After the taping, Oral and Evelyn decamped to Palm Springs, California for respite and reflection, and while sitting in his hotel room, Oral received a vision. "You must build a new and different medical center for Me," God told him. "The healing streams of prayer must merge through what I will have you build. Every physician, every nurse, every person praying, must be in harmony with My calling to you in the healing ministry."<sup>4</sup> According to Roberts, God also specified that he not only construct this medical center without going into debt, but that he also build it all at once rather than in stages. Roberts returned at once to Tulsa and, in collaboration with James Winslow and an architectural firm from Atlanta, began developing plans for "City of Faith." They sketched three glass-paneled skyscrapers: a twenty-story research lab, a thirty-story hospital with 777 beds (the biblical number of perfection), and a sixty-story medical clinic that was poised to be the tallest medical building ever built—indeed, so tall that Roberts would have to negotiate with the Federal Aviation Administration to alter standard flight paths into Tulsa. Winslow calculated that City of Faith would comprise 1.6 million square feet of floor area, cost between \$100 million and \$200 million to build, and have the capacity to serve over a million patients a year. "This is the completion of my life's dream for the healing and health of people," Roberts proclaimed when he revealed the project to the public in September 1977.<sup>5</sup>

But the genesis of City of Faith might not have been as divinely inspired as Roberts suggested. A former employee of Roberts later alleged his boss was in fact

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<sup>3</sup>"In Loving Memorial," *Abundant Life* 31, no. 4 (April 1977): 2–5.

<sup>4</sup>Oral Roberts, "I Will Rain Upon Your Desert!," *Abundant Life* 31, no. 10 (October 1977): 5.

<sup>5</sup>Rick Barney, "ORU Pioneers \$100 Million Medical Complex," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, September 9, 1977); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 334.

already meeting with associates to plan out the City of Faith in January 1977, a month before his vision in Palm Springs. In fact, a week before the deaths of his daughter and son-in-law, Roberts mused in ORU chapel services that he dreamed of “those hundred acres across the street, for a great medical center to be erected.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, James Winslow was already beating back rumors that Roberts was planning to construct a hospital when Roberts left for Palm Springs.<sup>7</sup> Thus, critics charged that Roberts had concocted his vision to bequeath a veneer of divine authority to his preexisting ambitions to build a medical center. Their criticisms have merit, as the available evidence does suggest that Roberts had at least the faintest outlines of a medical center in mind before he left for Palm Springs. Yet this does not preclude the possibility that under the weight of stress and grief, Roberts perceived a vivid divine command to build City of Faith. Indeed, if the vision was entirely Roberts’s own conscious invention, it is difficult to explain why he would willingly place the arduous restrictions upon himself of building City of Faith debt-free and all at once.

Roberts’s City of Faith vision merits the extended attention provided above because its contested ambiguity set the mood for the final era of his ministry from 1975 to 1990. Roberts’s entrepreneurial spirit manifested itself in a tenacious drive to erect City of Faith as a monument for his healing ministry among the skyscrapers of the Sunbelt South that acted as architectural testaments to the region’s postwar economic rebirth. But by grasping for divine legitimacy in the form of visions and revelations that

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<sup>6</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 334; Jerry Sholes, *Give Me That Prime-Time Religion: An Insider’s Report on the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1979), 191–94.

<sup>7</sup>Kathlyn Auten and Rick Barney, “Med School Hangs On Hospital,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, February 18, 1977).

had marked his Pentecostal roots, Roberts undermined the cultural legitimacy he had worked so hard to cultivate since moving to Tulsa in 1947. The unpredictable elements of his primitivist spirituality tarnished his image of businesslike competence and brought the downfall of City of Faith and his ministry.

When Roberts set upon the monumental task of building City of Faith in 1977, he had the fortunate timing to align with the auspicious currents of evangelicalism's broader reemergence in American society. The year prior, in recognition of Jimmy Carter's self-identification as a "born-again" Christian during his presidential campaign, *Newsweek* had christened 1976 as the "Year of the Evangelical." To outside observers, American evangelicals seemed to be coming out of the woodwork in the late 1970s, organizing at the political grassroots on abortion, gay rights, and other social issues. Pollsters awakened to the sheer number of self-identified evangelicals in America's midst, particularly Charismatics like Roberts. In 1980, a Gallup-*Christianity Today* poll found that 19 percent of Americans, approximately 29 million people, considered themselves Charismatic. Obviously, these "born-again" Christians did not materialize out of nowhere. As the previous chapters of this thesis have shown, evangelicals like Roberts were hard at work in the first three decades after World War II. Yet it is hard to contest that evangelicals were becoming a more self-aware subculture and more assertive political voting bloc in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Their resurgence extended beyond politics into other arenas of culture like higher education as Christian colleges followed ORU's lead in

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Novak, "Born Again!," *Newsweek*, October 25, 1976; Kantzer, "The Charismatics Among Us"; Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 83–85; Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 29–51.

pivoting to serve this burgeoning demographic.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Roberts and his associates hoped City of Faith would stir a hunger among the American faithful for Christian medicine. His old friend Bill Reed staked City of Faith's future success on the belief that "America is beginning to insist upon Christian care and Christian physicians and nurses. Hundreds of thousands of charismatic and evangelical Christians across America are beginning to request compassionate Christian care."<sup>10</sup>

The reassertion of evangelical influence across American society in the 1970s built upon broader historical trends that had long been transforming the largest cities of the so-called Bible Belt into the nation's centers of economic influence and demographic brawn. By the end of the decade, it seemed conservative Christian leaders were sprouting out of every Sunbelt city. Fundraising for City of Faith out of his Tulsa headquarters, Roberts was the top televangelist in America in the late 1970s, drawing an average weekly audience of 2.1 million.<sup>11</sup> Pentecostal televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, with their television network and sprawling Christian theme park in Charlotte, anchored the Sunbelt South's sacred canopy at its eastern end. A coterie of lesser-known telegenic Charismatic preachers made names for themselves in the cities in between, including Earl Paulk in suburban Atlanta, John Osteen in Houston, and Kenneth Copeland in Fort Worth. Meanwhile, Independent Baptist minister Jerry Falwell raced across the southern United States attempting to marshal conservative Christians into the ranks of the Moral Majority. And when a Houston judge named Paul Pressler and a

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<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Briggs, "Evangelical Colleges Reborn," *New York Times*, December 14, 1980.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 459.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Applebome, "Troubled Times for Pioneer TV Preacher's Empire," *New York Times*, June 23, 1986; "Why We Are Building the City of Faith," 1977, Oral Roberts University Collection, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=cof>.

Dallas theologian named Paige Patterson set out in 1979 to remake the Southern Baptist Convention in their own theologically and culturally conservative image, they tapped like-minded metropolitan megachurch pastors Bailey Smith (Oklahoma City), James Draper (Dallas-Fort Worth), and Charles Stanley (Atlanta) to serve as denominational presidents.<sup>12</sup> As noted earlier, in the late 1960s Roberts had anticipated the cultural touchstones of the Sunbelt spirituality these figures represented—a distaste for “bureaucracy” both in denominations and in government, a suburbanized sacralization of the home and family, a resolute patriotism, and a reinterpretation of wealth as a sign of Christian virtue. As Roberts watched other southern evangelical leaders trod the path he had blazed, it became clear that now was the time to gather enthusiasm and financial capital for his City of Faith project.

Indeed, Roberts would need to harness popular enthusiasm for his City of Faith project if he had any hope of overcoming the fierce opposition that it met from Tulsa hospitals and governmental regulators. Opponents offered a straightforward argument against City of Faith’s regulatory approval: Tulsa hospitals already struggled to fill beds with patients, and thus the addition of 777 beds to the region’s saturated healthcare market would have catastrophic effects. On these grounds, Tulsa physicians largely united against City of Faith, with 78 percent voicing opposition to its construction. Roberts and Winslow defended City of Faith by arguing its patient population would come primarily from Roberts’s vast nationwide network of seven to ten million supporters, not from Tulsa. “We’re not trying to meet the needs of a specific geographic

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<sup>12</sup>Wigger, *PTL*, 76–78; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159–86. On the SBC Conservative Resurgence, see Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

location,” Winslow explained during a televised debate on City of Faith. “We’re trying to meet the needs of a constituency of people.”<sup>13</sup>

In December 1977, ORU submitted its application for City of Faith’s certification of need to Oklahoma’s two health regulatory bodies, the Oklahoma Health Systems Agency (OHSA) and the Oklahoma Health Planning Commission (OHPC). In an audacious expression of confidence that the application would prevail, Roberts ceremonially broke ground on City of Faith on January 24, 1978 (his sixtieth birthday), even though initial hearings were still weeks away. As he understood it, City of Faith’s concrete foundation and steel girders were expressions of Seed-Faith, sown into the ground with the expectation that God would provide.<sup>14</sup> With time, however, his groundbreaking ceremony began to appear presumptuous. On February 16, 1978, after spirited public hearings, OHSA sided with the Tulsa Hospital Council and voted nineteen to six against City of Faith’s certification of need. OHSA then passed their recommendation on to OHPC, which would give the final verdict on ORU’s application.

Roberts’s associates sprang into action to save City of Faith. James Winslow had a close relationship with Lloyd Rader, one of OHPC’s three commissioners, and critics alleged that Winslow, through Rader, influenced OHPC’s initial decision to send OHSA’s recommendation back for reconsideration. After OHSA reiterated to OHPC on March 16 that City of Faith should not receive regulatory approval, figures in Roberts’s

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<sup>13</sup>“Channel 8 Interview About the City of Faith with Dr. C.T. Thompson and Dr. James Winslow,” January 30, 1978, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cof>; “City of Faith Still on Hold,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, February 17, 1978), 1.

<sup>14</sup>Lisa A. Hampton, “ORU Applies for Med Center Certificate,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, December 9, 1977); David Westerfield, “Drafts Precede Digging in Raising City of Faith,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, October 21, 1977); “City of Faith: The Vision Is Becoming A Reality...and God Is Going to Do It!,” *Abundant Life* 32, no. 3 (March 1978): 8–11.

circle then convinced Rader to postpone OHPC's certification hearing on City of Faith from early April to the end of the month. This strategic delay allowed time for Roberts to rally his followers. The ploy worked—in the following weeks, Roberts's ministry partners flooded OHPC's offices with a deluge of 400,000 letters.<sup>15</sup> At OHPC's hearing on April 26, 1978, an attorney for the Tulsa Hospital Council called Roberts's lobbying efforts "an emotional, irrational, religiously oriented campaign the likes of which the United States has probably never witnessed." The commission nevertheless approved City of Faith's certification of need. Construction resumed that same day.<sup>16</sup>

Roberts scored a major victory with City of Faith's certification of need, but roadblocks remained. Until City of Faith was completed and could serve as a clinical partner, ORUSM could not open as an accredited medical school without an affiliation with another Tulsa hospital. Smarting from their wounds from the City of Faith fight, Tulsa's medical centers closed ranks and stood icily distant as ORUSM's inaugural semester in the fall of 1978 approached. Only at the last moment, at the start of the semester in September 1978, did St. John's Hospital relent and sign a cooperative agreement, paving the way for ORUSM's speedy accreditation in February 1979.<sup>17</sup> But as ORUSM opened its doors and City of Faith's sleek form rose slowly into the sky, the Tulsa Hospital Council appealed to Oklahoma governor George Nigh (b. 1927) and state courts to overturn OHPC's ruling. Health regulators at the federal Department of Health,

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<sup>15</sup>Robin Tignor, "City of Faith Application Gets Thumbs Down," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, March 3, 1978); Sholes, *Prime-Time Religion*, 196–204; Helen Parmley, "Oral Roberts' Medical School: God's Will vs. Tulsa's," *Dallas Morning News*, August 6, 1978.

<sup>16</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 385; "City of Faith Approved by the Oklahoma State Health Planning Commission," *Abundant Life* 32, no. 6 (June 1978): 6.

<sup>17</sup>Parmley, "Oral Roberts' Medical School"; "St. John Says Yes," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, October 6, 1978); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 379.

Education, and Welfare intervened as well, calling on Nigh to rescind City of Faith's certification of need.<sup>18</sup> In response, Roberts reached out to President Carter, who had spoken at ORU during his 1976 presidential campaign and whose sister Ruth Carter Stapleton was a faith healer. After Roberts spoke with Carter at the White House, Carter ordered federal regulators to back off their pressure campaign. Without federal backing, the Tulsa Hospital Council's efforts to quash City of Faith collapsed and Roberts emerged victorious.<sup>19</sup>

In light of his actions during the fight to secure City of Faith's regulatory approval, Roberts's indignant claim to reporters that he was "probably the most naïve person politically and of that nature that you've ever met" seemed, on the surface, to be an abject lie.<sup>20</sup> Yet there was a measure of truth behind it. Roberts eschewed the partisan politicking of the Moral Majority and similar organizations in the late 1970s that sought to usher evangelicals into the GOP and "win back" America.<sup>21</sup> Roberts was savvy enough to harness the political fervor rising among evangelicals at the time to achieve his own goal: pressuring regulators to approve City of Faith. In this regard he mirrored the decidedly non-political Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, who selectively dipped into

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<sup>18</sup>"ORU Lawyers Speak in State Supreme Court," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, January 12, 1979); Mark Barden, "Roberts Asks for Prayers as HEW Meets with Nighs," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, March 9, 1979); "City of Faith Approval Contested by Attorneys," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, April 27, 1979).

<sup>19</sup>Oral Roberts, interview by John Erling, August 11, 2009, Voices of Oklahoma, <http://www.voiceofoklahoma.com/interview/roberts-oral/>; Michael Warner, "Carter Makes Stand on Government Policies," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, February 6, 1976); "President's Sis' to Speak," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, November 10, 1978); Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 350; James Winslow, "Oklahoma State Supreme Court Rules in Favor of the City of Faith," *Abundant Life* 35, no. 5 (May 1981): 2–5.

<sup>20</sup>"ABC Channel 8 Interview: Oral Roberts Answers Questions on the City of Faith," March 14, 1978, Oral Roberts University Collection, accessed February 26, 2019, <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=cof>.

<sup>21</sup>Roberts and Andrews, *Ashes to Gold*, 91.

conservative rhetoric against “bureaucracy” in their own fight against another governmental regulatory body, the Federal Communications Commission.<sup>22</sup>

Undergirding and animating Roberts’s shrewd political machinations was his indefatigable conviction that God had ordered him to complete his medical complex not only as the crowning triumph of his healing ministry, but as a pivotal moment in salvation history. In building ORUSM, Roberts claimed he finally knew “what God originally had in mind for my ministry in the healing of people.”<sup>23</sup> He prophesied that the medical complex was part of “a master plan that will operate during my lifetime and far beyond it until the second coming of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Revealing once again his theological debt to New Thought, Roberts described City of Faith as an “atmosphere charged with faith and hope” that, like his revival tent of yesteryear, could serve as the spatial locus for the transformative power of human minds united in faithful prayer with the mind of God.<sup>25</sup> In traditional Pentecostal fashion, Roberts derived the certitude of his predictions from his direct experience with God. “I know the God who spoke to my heart,” Roberts told ORU students. “We’re going to obey God. We’re going to build the City of Faith.”<sup>26</sup> This primitivist faith steeled his entrepreneurial resolve despite City of Faith’s mounting odds.

As bureaucratic challenges faded, Roberts’s financial burdens took centerstage. City of Faith ascended into the sky with fits and starts, constrained by Roberts’s steadfast

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<sup>22</sup>Wigger, *PTL*, 98–99; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 430.

<sup>23</sup>Oral Roberts, “I Believe the Cure for Cancer Has a Spiritual Origin,” *Abundant Life* 31, no. 1 (January 1977): 3.

<sup>24</sup>Oral Roberts, “The Master Plan God Has Given Me,” *Abundant Life* 31, no. 11 (November 1977): 2.

<sup>25</sup>Roberts, “I Will Rain Upon Your Desert!,” 5–7.

<sup>26</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 388.

refusal to take out loans to fund the project. Even though 1.2 million ministry supporters had donated a collective \$50 million to City of Faith's construction by January 1979, by the summer of 1979 the stream of philanthropic capital had largely dried up. Roberts responded by making more overt requests for donations in *Abundant Life*, raising tuition at ORU by 22 percent, and returning to the crusade circuit after a decade-long absence to make direct appeals to supporters.<sup>27</sup> He also tapped his network of Charismatic contacts across the metropolitan South. Kenneth Hagin, John Osteen, and Kenneth Copeland united behind the City of Faith project in July 1979 and encouraged their own followers to give to Roberts's construction efforts. In January 1980, Roberts travelled to Charlotte to appear on *The PTL Club* with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and pitch City of Faith to their audience. Later that year, Billy Graham appeared on Roberts's telecast, encouraging viewers to give generously to City of Faith's construction. Such strategies jumpstarted donation totals and kept City of Faith's construction on track.<sup>28</sup>

Although the medical school and City of Faith took up the bulk of his attention, Roberts was also hard at work completing the other components of his envisioned research university. A business school and dental school quietly opened in 1978. The O.W. Coburn School of Law, opening under provisional accreditation in 1979, proved much more controversial. The American Bar Association (ABA) twice refused to grant the law school full accreditation, balking at ORU's requirement that faculty and students sign a statement of faith. After a federal court ruled that the ABA could not withhold

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<sup>27</sup>Oral Roberts, "What Am I Gonna Do?," *Abundant Life* 33, no. 8 (August 1979): 4–5; "Tuition to Increase Next Year," *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, August 31, 1979); Lynwood Wells, "The Great City of New York Needed Help...and They Got It!," *Abundant Life* 33, no. 9 (September 1979): 8–11.

<sup>28</sup>Oral Roberts, "The Night I Found That God Hadn't Forgotten Me in Our Struggle," *Abundant Life* 33, no. 10 (October 1979): 6–13; Richard Roberts, "The Battle Is the Lord's," *Abundant Life* 34, no. 1 (January 1980): 8; "March 1981," *Abundant Life* 35, no. 1 (January 1981).

accreditation solely because of ORU's religious affiliation, delegates narrowly approved the law school's accreditation at the ABA's annual convention in 1981, persuaded in part by strong floor speeches from future US Attorney General John Ashcroft (b. 1942).<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the late 1970s and early 1980s found Roberts courting controversy not just with his law school but on multiple fronts, including within his family. In March 1979, Oral's son Richard, the heir apparent to the ministry, divorced his wife Patti. Richard remarried just ten months later in January 1980, this time to an ORU law student named Lindsay Salem. His son's divorce, quick remarriage, and continued involvement in the ministry shocked many of Oral's most conservative supporters, who cut their ties and withheld their donations.<sup>30</sup>

Oral Roberts's first major vision concerning the City of Faith had occurred shortly after the tragic death of his sister and son-in-law; curiously, the second occurred during the lingering turmoil stemming from Richard's divorce and remarriage. Shortly before sunset on May 25, 1980, Oral was strolling near the City of Faith complex. By now the outer shells of the three buildings were complete, but their inner structures remained unfinished and unfunded. Suddenly, Roberts saw Jesus, standing "at least 900 feet tall" beside City of Faith. This gigantic manifestation of Christ purportedly leaned over and hoisted the entire City of Faith complex out of the ground and into the sky before Roberts's eyes. "See how easy it is for Me to lift it?" he asked Roberts.<sup>31</sup> Roberts widely publicized his vision, interpreting it as a reaffirmation of God's purposes for City of

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<sup>29</sup>"God Answers Prayer," *Abundant Life* 35, no. 9 (September 1981); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 370–73.

<sup>30</sup>Roberts and Andrews, *Ashes to Gold*, 19–22; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 343–46.

<sup>31</sup>Oral Roberts, "My Journey Into Healing for Millions," *Abundant Life* 34, no. 8 (September 1980): 10.

Faith. Many interpreted it otherwise. Satirical posters displaying City of Faith next to a “900 ft. Jesus X-ing” traffic sign sold well in Tulsa. Several bishops in the United Methodist Church, long cordially quiet about Roberts, forcefully condemned his remarks and distanced their denomination from him. Concerns about the vision rose from within Roberts’s ministry as well, compelling James Winslow to dispel nervous queries from some physicians hired to staff City of Faith.<sup>32</sup> Roberts was used to outside criticism, but he did not respond kindly to those within his ministry questioning his sincerity or mental wellness. Unleashing a tirade at an ORU chapel service, he charged that the university harbored “a bunch of wolves” in its midst.<sup>33</sup> His nine-hundred-foot-Jesus vision dissolved many of the strategic alliances he had worked hard to create in the 1960s. Yet while disillusioning many potential allies, the vision animated Roberts’s true believers. In the short-term, rather than reducing their donations, the vision galvanized them, bringing in \$88 million and making 1980 Roberts’s most successful fundraising year yet.

Roberts’s financial support came in part from the small-scale donations of ministry partners, but without wealthy megadonors, City of Faith’s construction could not have succeeded. “It was a fact of life,” a family member noted of Oral, “that he could tap more financial and political capital for the ministry during one golf game at [Tulsa’s] Southern Hills Country Club than he could in a week of Partners’ meetings.”<sup>34</sup> By the time he began fundraising for City of Faith, Roberts could convincingly point potential megadonors to his life story. His upward journey out of harsh childhood poverty was not

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<sup>32</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 415–20.

<sup>33</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 380.

<sup>34</sup>Roberts and Andrews, *Ashes to Gold*, 108.

only a testimony of God’s faithfulness but a vindication of the American Dream. Roberts successfully won over Amway founder Rich DeVos (1926–2018), who served as ORU’s commencement speaker in 1976 and received an honorary doctorate. Despite their vast theological differences (DeVos came from a staunch Dutch Reformed background), the two found common ground in their support for free enterprise and conviction that Christians should participate in the public square. In the years to come, Roberts would court other business titans by honoring them as commencement speakers. Among them was Robert Parker, a Tulsa native, Methodist, and the president of the largest independent oil drilling company in the United States, who served as commencement speaker in 1977. Roberts also struck deals with the executive leadership of several hundred American companies to match their employees’ donations to his ministry.<sup>35</sup> Roberts’s success at raising hundreds of millions of dollars for City of Faith’s construction rested on his ability to nurture relationships with America’s wealthiest evangelicals.

When City of Faith’s three skyscrapers reached triumphant completion in the fall of 1981 after four years of tribulations, it was cause for celebration. Roberts sent invitations to ministry supporters across the country to come to Tulsa to celebrate the facility’s grand opening. On November 1, 1981, 13,000 people filled ORU’s basketball arena to the brim. On the court, evangelical luminaries like Pat Robertson (b. 1931) lined the stage alongside a cadre of politicians, among them Tulsa Mayor Jim Inhofe (b. 1934), Oklahoma Governor George Nigh, and Congressman James R. Jones (b. 1939) of Oklahoma’s 1st congressional district. In the climactic moment of the ceremony, Jones

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<sup>35</sup>“Will My Employer Really Match My Gift to ORU?,” *Abundant Life* 32, no. 10 (November 1978): 9; “’76 Graduation Speakers Announced,” *Oracle* (Tulsa, OK, April 2, 1976); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 306, 421–22; “Nation’s Largest Independent Driller Encourages ORU Class of ’77 to Protect America’s System of Free Enterprise,” *Abundant Life* 31, no. 7 (July 1977): 21–22.

presented Roberts with a congratulatory framed letter from President Reagan. The arena quieted as Roberts received the letter and struggled for words. Finally, tearing up, he told the audience, “I’m no longer the little boy from Tulsa.” Roberts’s long-time supporter Lee Braxton (who would pass away the following year) approached him after the ceremony. “Oral, my work is finished,” Braxton told him. Together, they had come a long way from their first meeting in Roberts’s cluttered home office in 1947.<sup>36</sup>

The ceremony was a cathartic moment and perhaps the most joyous of Roberts’s life, for it seemed to tie together the loose ends from a lifetime of ministry. As the breathtaking centerpiece of ORU’s campus, City of Faith made sense of Roberts’s unexpected deviation from the revival tent into higher education in the 1960s. Against his critics, who for decades had variously excluded, dismissed, or trivialized him, the glinted steel-and-glass facade of City of Faith seemed to demonstrate that his brand of spirituality belonged in the America coming of age in the late-twentieth century. City of Faith’s improbable rise in spite of the putative constraints of governmental regulation and financial obstacles appeared to vindicate Roberts’s doctrine of Seed-Faith and his mantra to “expect a miracle.” Most poignantly for Roberts, City of Faith’s completion made sense of the losses of his daughter Rebecca and son-in-law Marshall, recasting their deaths as the crucible that had wrought his greatest achievement for the cause of Christ.

City of Faith, however, quickly fell from the soaring heights of expectation in 1982, declining so fast that it threatened to bring the medical school down with it. That year, the complex averaged just fifty patients a day and operated at an astonishing \$26-

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<sup>36</sup>Oral Roberts, “This Is a New Beginning for the Human Race,” *Abundant Life* 35, no. 14 (December 1981): 7–13; Oral Roberts, “One of the Greatest Laymen of This Century,” *Abundant Life* 37, no. 2 (February 1983): 28–30; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 389–90.

million loss as Roberts and Winslow quickly realized that the millions of faith-filled clients that they had envisioned did not materialize.<sup>37</sup> What lay behind the dearth of patients? One observer surmised that City of Faith's theorized nationwide patient base saw little need to travel long distances to Tulsa for routine treatments. When these same potential patients developed more serious ailments, few elected to leave behind loved ones in order to come to City of Faith. Oklahoma residents made up close to 60 percent of the patients that City of Faith did serve in 1982 (and increasing percentages in later years), evincing that this apparent catch-22 was the source of its patient shortage.<sup>38</sup> Mostly limited to treating a local population that preexisting hospitals in Tulsa already served, patient recruitment became City of Faith's most pressing objective, for without a sufficient population to serve in its affiliate hospital, ORUSM risked losing accreditation.

Roberts implemented several strategies to convince patients to visit City of Faith. At first, the promotional materials that his ministry put out to supporters took the tone of gentle chiding. "I must confess to you my greatest disappointment," James Winslow wrote in *Abundant Life*, "that so many of you who have sent money, planting your seeds of faith in the City of Faith, have not come for your health care needs."<sup>39</sup> Roberts's ministry later placed a full-page ad for City of Faith in the *Saturday Evening Post* and sent out mailers (with "an enclosed personal medical profile" to be returned) to its full list of donors. City of Faith even dispatched chaplains to advertise the hospital in churches.

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<sup>37</sup>Michael Kerrigan and Mary Hargrove, "Born in Battle - Roberts Fought Medical Community, State to Build Hospital," *Tulsa World*, September 14, 1989; Bernadette Pruitt, "Controversy Plagued Center from Conception," *Tulsa World*, September 14, 1989.

<sup>38</sup>"Fiasco on 81st Street - Miscalculations Doomed Oral Roberts' City of Faith," *Tulsa Tribune*, October 2, 1989; Chris Adams, "City of Faith: A Promise Unfulfilled - National Patient Lure Failed," *Tulsa World*, September 30, 1989.

<sup>39</sup>James E. Winslow, "We Are Two Years Old!," *Abundant Life* 37, no. 11 (November 1983): 17.

Eventually, the ministry offered free American Airlines tickets to patients coming from outside Oklahoma. Finally, Roberts enlisted other televangelists as model patients, flying Tammy Faye Bakker out to Tulsa for well-publicized treatment.<sup>40</sup> None of these tactics managed to nurse the size of City of Faith's patient population to full strength.

For the patients that did show up, the staff at City of Faith and the medical students at ORUSM worked hard to enact the seamless integration of healthcare and spirituality that Roberts had hoped for and that they themselves believed in. *Abundant Life* regaled Roberts's supporters with profiles of "Spirit-filled physician[s]" like Patricia Lindsay. After determining "there was nothing more I could do medically" to help an elderly male patient with pneumonia, Dr. Lindsay summoned two nurses, three doctors, and several chaplains in a circle around his bed to lay hands on him and pray for his healing. He recovered.<sup>41</sup> Pharmacists at City of Faith, as a matter of routine, prayed for all medications as they prepared them for shipping. One surgeon later reminisced that during operations "you'd hear 'amens' and 'hallelujas.' People would raise their hands in prayer."<sup>42</sup> In a staff meeting shortly after City of Faith opened, Roberts even entertained the question of whether there should be instructions for exorcisms in the medical center's protocols. "I'd say there should be," he mused, "but I don't think we've arrived at that place yet." (Winslow quickly stepped in and clarified that medical staff should leave the

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<sup>40</sup>"Major COF Marketing Thrust Begins," *Lifeline: People and Events of the City of Faith Medical and Research Center* 1, no. 1 (October 1982): 1–10; Tammy Faye Bakker, "Praise the Lord for the City of Faith," *Abundant Life* 36, no. 7 (July 1982): 19; Kerrigan and Hargrove, "Born in Battle."

<sup>41</sup>Ray Smith, "I Might Be Dead If It Weren't for the City of Faith," *Abundant Life* 36, no. 2 (February 1982).

<sup>42</sup>"Pharmacists Pray and Believe," *Lifeline: People and Events of the City of Faith Medical and Research Center* 2, no. 4 (April 1985): 1–2; Mary Ellen Matava, "Doctors Find Peace with God Assisting," *Tulsa World*, January 1, 1995.

treatment of demonic possession to chaplains).<sup>43</sup> In a difficult opening year, this robust sense of mission among the staff produced optimism that if only City of Faith could boost its patient population and climb out of its financial deficit, then the future of Christian healthcare was bright.

Yet for Roberts, another family tragedy compounded City of Faith's calamitous opening year: the suicide of his son Ronnie in June 1982. After Ronnie's crisis of faith at Stanford, he had dropped out and drifted for several years, serving a stint in Vietnam, taking linguistics courses, and starting an antiques business in Tulsa. Ronnie's scruffy appearance and membership in Tulsa's Unitarian congregation had ensured that his father kept him far from the ministry's limelight. Shortly before taking his own life, rumors had circulated around Tulsa that Ronnie was not well, stirred up by newspapers reporting that his wife had divorced him and that he had been arrested for forging prescriptions to service his drug addiction. (In recent years, his Stanford classmates and some members of the Roberts family have alleged that Ronnie was a closeted homosexual and that this was the main cause of the rift between Oral and his son).<sup>44</sup> Ronnie's suicide weighed heavily on Oral, who retreated once again to Palm Springs. As with the death of his daughter and with his son Richard's divorce, his period of grieving coincided with the announcement of another divine revelation—God would cure cancer at City of Faith.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 454.

<sup>44</sup>Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 337–40; On recent claims that Ronnie Roberts was homosexual, see Randy R. Potts, "Gay, Closeted and Buried in History: My Uncle's Life Was Erased. Mine Won't Be," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/13/oral-roberts-oklahoma-gay-culture-closeted>; Kiera Feldman, "Prodigal Prince: Richard Roberts and the Decline of the Oral Roberts Dynasty," *Longreads*, last modified September 2014, <https://longreads.com/2014/09/16/oral-roberts-family-history/>.

<sup>45</sup>Bart Ziegler, "\$5 Million Sent to Fight Cancer," *The Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK, May 28, 1983); Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 340.

In prior years, Roberts had floated the idea that City of Faith’s research center would play a crucial role in achieving a comprehensive cure for cancer, but in the months after his son’s death, he elevated this desire to a prophetic certainty and made it the singular rallying point for his ministry. Reflecting his pedigree in New Thought, Roberts described cancer as “a disease that has a spiritual origin with a physical manifestation in the body,” and claimed that only in a dynamic spiritual atmosphere like City of Faith, where the minds of God and researcher could commune, could scientists locate cancer’s cure. As James Winslow put it, City of Faith would only hire researchers “who believe that their spirit and God’s spirit can communicate.”<sup>46</sup> Roberts’s bold appeals gained traction with donors, who gave \$5 million to the research center, \$1.4 million of which purchased one of the first MRI units ever developed. In some respects, Roberts’s renewed interest in cancer research represented his attempt to instrumentalize the volatile essence of his Charismatic faith. As historian Donald Meyer phrased it while editorializing about Roberts in 1980, Charismatics “had to remember their evangelical duty: they must convey their word, in the best, most persuasive language possible. What language could be more powerful and persuasive than that of science itself?”<sup>47</sup> Success in the medical laboratory, Roberts hoped, would legitimate his brand of faith-filled healthcare in a public square that was uneasy about its implications.

Roberts’s cancer prophecies actually had the opposite effect. They failed to persuade the mainstream medical community and heightened growing tensions both within his ministry and with former allies across the religious landscape. As the national

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<sup>46</sup>Oral Roberts, “A Breakthrough for Cancer Is Coming,” *Abundant Life* 37, no. 2 (February 1983): 3–8; Ziegler, “\$5 Million Sent to Fight Cancer.”

<sup>47</sup>Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, 355–56.

news media amplified Roberts's promises for a cure for cancer, established medical organizations spoke up to denounce them. "What they're dealing with is religious beliefs," a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society said of City of Faith. "We're dealing with science."<sup>48</sup> Friction rose at ORU over Roberts's increasingly bold prophecies about City of Faith, particularly among faculty outside the medical school who were irritated at how the medical complex siphoned money from the rest of the university. Jim Buskirk (1933–2020), the Methodist dean of ORU's College of Theology and Ministry and Roberts's strongest remaining tie to the United Methodist Church, departed in 1984. Roberts left Boston Avenue Methodist Church that same year and began attending a non-denominational church in Tulsa, immersing himself in the more mercurial world of independent Charismatics. His once-strong ties with neo-evangelicals were also revealed as threadbare. Billy Graham no longer appeared as a guest on Roberts's specials. *Christianity Today* published scathing articles critical of Roberts's visions. Bill Bright (1921–2003), founder of Campus Crusade for Christ and a one-time collaborator with Roberts in medical missions, also distanced himself from ORU.<sup>49</sup>

As Roberts reaped the consequences of his cancer revelations, tragedy struck his family yet again. On January 18, 1984, Oral's first grandson, Richard Oral Roberts, died just thirty-six hours after birth. A few months later, Roberts reported that Jesus had appeared to him at his hospital room at City of Faith while he rested from nasal polyp surgery. Jesus purportedly sent an angel to gather the poor to come to City of Faith, and

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<sup>48</sup>Ziegler, "\$5 Million Sent to Fight Cancer."

<sup>49</sup>Roger Olson, e-mail message to author, March 19, 2019; Harrell Jr., *Oral Roberts*, 424–27; "Citing Another Vision from God, Roberts Opens His Medical Complex to the Poor," *Christianity Today*, September 21, 1984.

Roberts dutifully responded to his vision by opening City of Faith in the fall of 1984 for those who could not pay for treatment.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond its altruistic aims, City of Faith's indigent program had the added benefit of boosting patient population to a peak of 148, guaranteeing that ORUSM's students had enough clients to treat in order to remain accredited. Nevertheless, Roberts's stream of visionary consciousness was attracting smaller television audiences and diminishing fundraising returns by the mid-1980s. Such realities forced Roberts to make drastic financial cuts to keep City of Faith afloat. *Abundant Life* switched to a cheaper bimonthly publishing schedule beginning with the September 1985 issue. Roberts invested in real estate around Tulsa. ORU closed its dental school in May 1985 and transferred its law school to Pat Robertson's CBN University later that year. "We draw the line," Roberts insisted shortly after the transfer. "All the rest of the graduate schools stay intact. I draw a line around ORU."<sup>51</sup> Finally, with a band of ministry leaders that read like a *Who's Who* of global Charismatic Christianity, Roberts established a loose-knit network called Charismatic Bible Ministries at a meeting at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport in April 1986 with an expressed aim of drawing an international patient stream to City of Faith. Combined with steep budget cuts and layoffs, these measures were effective. By the end of 1986, the hospital was operating in the black for the first time.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Richard Roberts, "The Time Has Come to Renew Our Vows and Faith," *Abundant Life* 38, no. 3 (March 1984): 16–17; Oral Roberts, "Oral Roberts, Open My City of Faith to the Poor and Needy," *Abundant Life* 38, no. 8 (September 1984): 2–6.

<sup>51</sup>Kerrigan and Hargrove, "Born in Battle"; Oral Roberts, "Oral Roberts University Transfers O.W. Coburn Law School to CBN University," *Abundant Life* 40, no. 1 (February 1986): 7–9.

<sup>52</sup>Cathy Milam, "Roberts Hurt by Faltering Donations," *Tulsa World*, April 2, 1989; "Charismatic Bible Ministries," *Abundant Life* 40, no. 2 (April 1986): 10–13; Pruitt, "Controversy Plagued Center from Conception."

Despite achieving a faint sense of financial stability by 1986, Roberts still grappled with his declining audiences and growing unpopularity. That his ministry was now on a downward trajectory was undeniable. In 1985, his ministry had pulled in \$58 million in donations, a decline of \$30 million from 1980. By June 1986, his average weekly television audience had diminished to 1.2 million, dropping him to third place in viewership among televangelists.<sup>53</sup> Roberts had spent his career working tirelessly to make himself as convenient and accessible as possible to his audience and their struggles. Yet when Roberts came upon struggles of his own, his audience did not reciprocate. “I want you to bear my burdens,” a disillusioned ministry supporter wrote Roberts in 1984, “I’m not interested in bearing yours.”<sup>54</sup> Having endeared himself to millions of Americans through television, millions opted to change the channel when Roberts’s pleas for donations became too insistent and his revelations seemed too outlandish.

The vision that pushed Roberts’s ministry to the brink came in 1986. In March, God appeared to Roberts as he mulled over a troubling predicament at ORUSM: many students hoped to serve as medical missionaries after graduation, but their student loan obligations kept them from the mission field. Roberts reported that God had commanded him to solve the issue by raising \$8 million to provide full-tuition scholarships to all medical students at ORU who pledged to serve as medical missionaries for four years after graduation. God’s directive came with a condition, however. God warned Roberts that if he failed to raise the \$8 million in one calendar year (by March 1987), he would

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<sup>53</sup>Applebome, “Troubled Times.”

<sup>54</sup>“Oral Roberts Live from Tulsa,” *Abundant Life* 38, no. 3 (March 1984): 5.

“call you home.”<sup>55</sup> If Roberts was to be believed, he was in the fundraising fight for his life, and by January 1987 he was losing badly, still \$4.5 million short of his goal. His pleas for donations became, understandably, increasingly vehement. When national media outlets picked up the story, Roberts doubled down on his claims.<sup>56</sup>

In February 1987, as Roberts’s do-or-die fundraising campaign dragged on, the *New York Times* dispatched a reporter to ORU’s campus to ask students the question on the minds of the newspaper’s readership: was Roberts of sound mind? “No one was surprised by what Oral said—we were surprised by the controversy about it,” claimed senior Mike Jeffries. “Almost everything that happens around here is at some level supernatural. It’s difficult to find a day when God’s overwhelming presence is not obvious.”<sup>57</sup> Jeffries’s defense alluded to the dilemma inhibiting Roberts from full societal acceptance. Outsiders questioned how a practitioner of such a (putatively) unmodern spirituality could legitimately lay claim to a research university, a medical school, and that architectural emblem of American modernity, a glistening high-rise skyscraper. During his life Roberts had exchanged the log cabin for the suburban villa, the strictures of sectarian Pentecostalism for the liberty of commanding an independent Charismatic ministry, and the anarchic healing of the revival tent for the more routinized therapies of the medical center. Yet even as he and his staunch supporters embraced the

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<sup>55</sup>Oral Roberts, “It’s Time We Came Into Agreement,” *Abundant Life* 41, no. 1 (February 1987): 3; Oral Roberts, “God’s Mandate for Change in Healing and Missions...Now!,” *Abundant Life* 40, no. 4 (August 1986): 3–7.

<sup>56</sup>Randy Frame, “Did Oral Roberts Go Too Far,” *Christianity Today*, February 20, 1987; “Son Says Oral Roberts Told Truth About Chance of Dying,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1987; “Track Owner Pledges \$1.3 Million to Roberts,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1987.

<sup>57</sup>Peter Applebome, “At Oral Roberts U., Evangelist’s Divine Plea Causes No Alarm,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1987.3/19/21 5:55:00 PM

accoutrements of late-twentieth-century American life, they maintained a Charismatic construal of the cosmos that seemed at odds with established, empirical conceptions of time, space, and matter. The implicit question lingering behind Roberts's obsessive efforts to sustain City of Faith was whether his brand of reformulated Pentecostal spirituality could truly coexist and collaborate with the instincts of instrumentality, mechanization, and standardization that had transformed the postwar South into an economic juggernaut.

Thanks to a last-minute \$1.3 million donation from a dog-racing track owner from Florida ("I did it in order to save the guy from going to heaven in a hurry," the donor told reporters), Roberts reached his \$8 million threshold on April 1, 1987 with his life intact. Roberts's public image, however, had irreparably shattered, especially because after he announced at a press conference that he had met his fundraising goal, he segued into asking the public for another \$8 million.<sup>58</sup> Beginning with Roberts's fundraising fiasco, 1987 snowballed into a truly disastrous year for television ministries as sexual and financial indiscretions marred two other preeminent televangelists, Jimmy Swaggart (b. 1935) and Jim Bakker. The cumulative effect of these scandals turned public opinion against televangelism. By 1988, polls reported that 53 percent of Americans believed giving to televangelists was an unworthy cause. Roberts's approval rating dropped to a dismal 27 percent that same year. "To be perfectly frank with you, the PTL scandal has hit us like a freight train," Roberts admitted to supporters in September 1987, after his ministry's average monthly donations had declined from \$5 million to \$2.7 million over

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<sup>58</sup>"Track Owner Pledges \$1.3 Million to Roberts"; "Oral Roberts Vigil Ends in New Plea for Funds," *New York Times*, April 1, 1987.

the span of a few months.<sup>59</sup> The ORU community's respect for Roberts suffered a major blow in February 1988 when a memo to medical students disclosed that the \$8 million that Roberts had so elaborately raised in the previous year had been diverted from their promised scholarships to operating costs. Unexpectedly saddled with \$60,000 in student loan debt each, several medical students transferred, others prepared to sue Roberts to recoup their losses, and multiple faculty members resigned in protest.<sup>60</sup>

A special visit from accreditors in the summer of 1988 laid bare the issues plaguing ORUSM and City of Faith: plunging morale among students and faculty, an epidemic of empty beds at City of Faith, high staff turnover, inconsistent funding streams, and managerial dysfunction. Such dysfunction was on full display in September 1988 when City of Faith hired Bernard Zumpano, a Florida neurosurgeon with fourteen pending malpractice lawsuits, including one for a fatal botched surgery that a member of the Florida Board of Medical Examiners described as "homicidal." (Writers at *Abundant Life* defended the hire, describing Zumpano as "very good in diagnosis. ...[H]e takes his expertise to the patient as a Holy Spirit-filled physician.")<sup>61</sup> Financially, the medical complex was in dire straits, with its total debt by early 1989 having accumulated to \$25 million. Matters came to a head over the course of a few days in March 1989. Seventeen physicians at City of Faith wrote a letter to the ORU Board of Regents calling for

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<sup>59</sup>Oral Roberts, "The Media Said God Said He Would Kill Oral Roberts If He Didn't Raise \$8 Million, But..." , *Abundant Life* 41, no. 5 (October 1987): 8; Mary Hargrove, "Richard Roberts Says Ministry in Jeopardy," *Tulsa Tribune*, March 28, 1989; Wigger, *PTL*, 276–77, 300.

<sup>60</sup>Randy Frame, "\$8 Million Worth of Unanswered Questions," *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1988; Julia Duin, "Roberts' Latest Goal: \$8 Million for School," *Houston Chronicle*, June 11, 1988.

<sup>61</sup>"A Neurosurgeon Joins the Staff of Spirit-Filled Physician at the City of Faith," *Abundant Life* 43, no. 1 (February 1989): 17; Rosemary Goudreau, "Embattled MD Hired by Oral Roberts," *Miami Herald*, September 1, 1988; Cathy Milam, "Doctors Say ORU School in Trouble," *Tulsa World*, July 23, 1989.

sweeping management reforms at the same time that Roberts launched a last-ditch donation drive to raise \$11 million by ORU's graduation ceremonies in May in order to prevent creditors from repossessing the university.<sup>62</sup> The City of Faith doctors failed to achieve reform as administrators doubled down, laying off or securing the resignations of ten out of the seventeen within a few months. Roberts, however, met his fundraising goals, taking in \$5 million in donations in the closing days before graduation. The physicians' revolt had failed, but ORU, the medical school, and City of Faith would stay open for the time being.<sup>63</sup>

Roberts's all-or-nothing fundraising drive in the spring of 1989 would be his last successful one. Giving remained abysmally low across the following summer. Internal data revealed that just half of Roberts's donors from 1985 were still giving to the ministry, and among those who still gave, "a significant percentage" were septuagenarians or older.<sup>64</sup> Operations at ORUSM and City of Faith downsized as Roberts slashed residency programs and faculty decamped to positions at other hospitals. In the fall of 1986, an incoming class of forty-eight medical students had entered ORUSM; by July 1989, a year before their graduation date, that cohort had shriveled to just twenty-seven.<sup>65</sup> Seeing the writing on the wall with increasing clarity, the ORU

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<sup>62</sup>Chris Adams, "ORU Took Mortgages in '88 to Pay Bills?," *Tulsa World*, March 29, 1989; Chris Adams, "Medical School Gets Doctors' Complaints," *Tulsa World*, March 29, 1989; Gil Broyles, "Roberts Ministry Needs \$11 Million, Roberts Says," *Tulsa World*, March 28, 1989.

<sup>63</sup>Chris Adams, "ORU: Departures in Med School - Some Faculty, Students Cite Frustrations," *Tulsa World*, July 17, 1989; Janet Pearson, "Roberts Says Goal Met - More Funds to Be Sought," *Tulsa World*, May 17, 1989.

<sup>64</sup>Milam, "Roberts Hurt by Faltering Donations"; Chris Adams, "Roberts Cuts Staff by 10 Percent," *Tulsa World*, August 3, 1989.

<sup>65</sup>Adams, "ORU: Departures in Med School."

Board of Regents scheduled a meeting for September 12, 1989 to consider the future of both ORUSM and City of Faith. Roberts nevertheless held out hope that God would intervene to save the medical complex. The last chance at salvation came at 11 p.m. on September 11, when Roberts received a phone call from a longtime donor to the ministry who was contemplating giving \$50 million to service all of ORU's debt and start a permanent endowment for the medical school and City of Faith. During their discussion, however, the donor (who remained anonymous in available accounts) backed away and reneged the offer. The next morning, the ORU Board of Regents voted to close City of Faith permanently and to shut down ORUSM at the conclusion of the 1989-1990 school year. Thirty years after he had first conceived of the idea of a medical school and teaching hospital, Roberts's dream collapsed.

An audible gasp went through the crowd when Roberts broke the news to the ORU community at a chapel service the following day. In this sobering moment, he urged his audience toward realism. "We've got to take the religious blinders off our eyes and end our holier-than-thou attitude and realize that we live in a human world and that it takes money to survive," he said. "However spiritual one is, you cannot do anything without money."<sup>66</sup> A certain irony pervaded his comments. The pragmatic realism that Roberts exhorted his followers toward had actually typified his ministry from the beginning. Yet in Roberts this entrepreneurial, ceaselessly innovative drive, as I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, never operated alone. Within his psyche and his ministry, it had always coexisted with the instinctual, disorderly spirituality that he had inherited

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<sup>66</sup>Cathy Milam, "Med School Was Ministry's Soul," *Tulsa World*, September 17, 1989; Chris Adams, "Debt Defeats Roberts' Dream - City of Faith, Medical School Sacrificed to Bolster ORU," *Tulsa World*, September 14, 1989.

from his Pentecostal roots. As a faith-healing skyscraper hospital, City of Faith was a gargantuan project that required ample helpings of both. And thus it was in City of Faith that Roberts's blend of primitivism and pragmatism, which had propelled him to the heights of American religious life, proved too unstable a foundation for his ministry. His primitivism undermined his pragmatism and triggered his downfall.

Yet with his characteristic hopefulness, Roberts could not help but wonder aloud at that somber chapel service whether God might have had a greater purpose behind City of Faith's demise. "I hope we can look back at this and say this wasn't a failure. I don't think it's as bad a day as it seems," he mused. "The thinking has changed, and I consider that to be a reward. We have done something no one else has done. Maybe we were ahead of our time—who knows?" Scattered amens emanated from the solemn audience. "But I believe the idea will never die," Roberts continued. "It will only grow."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Adams, "Debt Defeats Roberts' Dream."

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

Oral Roberts's ministry did not end at that fateful chapel service in September 1989, but that day began his transition out of the public eye. After the closures of City of Faith and ORUSM, Roberts sold the complex to real estate investors in 1992. With Oral's blessing, Richard Roberts became head of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association and assumed the presidency of ORU upon his father's retirement in 1993. Decamping to California, Oral stayed quiet in his later years, preaching intermittently and penning a memoir. His health gradually declined as he suffered two heart attacks in the 1990s and broke his hip in 2006. In 2007, Oral briefly returned to Tulsa to serve ceremonially as "co-president" of ORU after Richard resigned over charges of financial mismanagement and claims that his wife had had inappropriate relationships with male undergraduates. That same year the Green family, owners of Hobby Lobby, donated \$62 million to the university in return for management reforms, saving it from financial extinction. On December 15, 2009, Oral Roberts passed away in California. He was ninety-one.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his life and ministry, Roberts manifested the primitivistic and pragmatic qualities that characterized his early Pentecostal upbringing but did so in ways finetuned for an emerging postwar America. Challenging the notion that a remote God

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<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Dees, "City of Faith Complex Sold - Amount of Sale Undisclosed," *Tulsa World* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, March 20, 1992); Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998); John W. Kennedy, "Healing ORU," *Christianity Today*, September 3, 2008, accessed December 23, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/8.76.html>; Keith Schneider, "Oral Roberts, Fiery Preacher, Dies at 91," *New York Times* (December 15, 2009); Christopher Reed, "Oral Roberts Obituary," *The Guardian* (December 15, 2009).

stood suspended above the closed system of a mechanistic universe, Roberts used principles of New Thought to construct a worldview in which the Holy Spirit, conceived as the Mind of God, came palpably near to the human mind attuned in prayerful faith toward the divine. In Roberts's cosmos, the alignment of the minds of God and of man dissolved the perceived barriers between the natural and supernatural as demons departed, bodies received healing, and financial prosperity came. The progression of Roberts's ministry consisted in his creation of ever more suitable localities in which the individual's psychic connection with God could unlock the transformative power of the Spirit, whether that be the portable revival tent, the living room with a television set, or City of Faith's sacred atmosphere of Spirit-filled medicine.

Yet if Roberts's head was in the clouds of the Spirit, his feet strode confidently across the ground of the American marketplace. He disentangled himself from his denomination to run his ministry like a business. He held himself to an exacting efficiency, cycled through methods to attract the largest audiences, breathlessly belabored himself to please his consumers, and forged strategic partnerships across theological lines. Even his ministry buildings, from the Abundant Life Building in the 1950s to City of Faith in the 1980s, aped contemporary trends in corporate architecture. Early on, Roberts had perceived the arena of gospel ministry as a marketplace. By the time of his retirement in 1993, the latent substructures of American evangelicalism, with its burgeoning consumer subculture, seeker-sensitive churches, and non-denominational parachurch ministries, had absorbed that outlook as well. Roberts's success, tempered as it was by the collapse of City of Faith, proved Grant Wacker's claim that Pentecostalism's combination of primitivism and pragmatism could not have been "better

suiting for a civilization wracked with timeless spiritual needs, yet rapidly opening to the unprecedented possibilities of technological and information-age prosperity.”<sup>2</sup>

My account of Oral Roberts’s life and ministry is, by necessity, limited. I glossed over his life before his move to Tulsa in 1947. The gendered dynamics of his “darling wife” Evelyn’s role in the ministry could merit a chapter in their own right. I did not write much of his place in the rapid international expansion of Pentecostalism that has transformed global Christianity since 1950. Moreover, although my account of ORU focused primarily on the medical school and City of Faith, its short-lived law school was quite influential too. O.W. Coburn School of Law was a key context in which the theocratic principles of Christian Reconstructionism, once isolated to the far-right fringe of Reformed Protestantism, crossed over into the Charismatic movement and became reimagined as Dominionism. Much remains to be written on the full impact and significance of Roberts’s life.

Yet I hope my account, selective as it is, has provided enough context and details to locate Roberts in the broader history of evangelicalism from its origins in the eighteenth century to the present. Charles Taylor, building on the thought of Jurgen Habermas, has spoken of the advent of modernity as the eighteenth-century emergence of a social consciousness in the North Atlantic World. Taylor has called this social consciousness the “public sphere,” which he defined as a collectively-imagined common space of discourse untethered from specific geographical proximities.<sup>3</sup> Drawing from Taylor’s thesis, Bruce Hindmarsh has contended that the birth of the evangelical

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<sup>2</sup>Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 268.

<sup>3</sup>Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 185–87, 194–95.

movement stemmed from the emergence of this public sphere. Organized not by physical proximity but by the links of letters, pamphlets, and printed sermons, Protestants on both sides of the North Atlantic became evangelicals as they perceived a singular work of God, a single revival, uniting their geographically dispersed spiritual experiences.<sup>4</sup>

This translocal dimension of evangelicalism characterized the movement throughout modernity and into Roberts's own era. As Randall Stephens has noted, Southern holiness folk of the late nineteenth century—Roberts's spiritual and genealogical ancestors—demonstrated “a strong sense of fellowship where no physical community existed,” for “through the pages of their books and newspapers...[they] entered an imagined community which united them even as they were apart.”<sup>5</sup> Holiness churches throughout the American South, linked by grapevines of discourse like religious periodicals, newspapers, and books, were easy kindling for the fiery Pentecostal revival that radiated outward from Azusa in the early twentieth century. Roberts's parents, who converted from Methodism to the Pentecostal Holiness Church in 1915, were two testimonies among millions that underlined the felt reality of this imagined community.

Oral Roberts pioneered a new iteration in this long tradition of translocal evangelical spirituality by recalibrating the movement for the technological developments that were sweeping twentieth-century America and compressing sociocultural perceptions of space and time. His midcentury tent revivals were portable sacred canopies that he could easily pitch at metropolitan fairgrounds and integrate seamlessly into the disaggregated, automobile-oriented landscapes of postwar suburbia. Using radio and

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<sup>4</sup>Bruce D. Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: True Religion in a Modern World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 49–60.

<sup>5</sup>Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 126.

television, he delivered divine healing at a hypervelocity so quick as to loose the anarchic power and presence of the Holy Spirit from the strictures of space and time.

Moreover, Roberts adapted his gospel message to match the more ephemeral ministry contexts in which he now operated. Influenced by New Thought, Roberts taught that faith was not primarily one's propositional adherence to the tenets of the Bible, as confirmed in one's confession of a creed or attested by one's involvement in congregational life. Rather, faith was an inner psychic power, an instrumental tool for tapping into God and achieving needs. Roberts's redefinition of faith allowed individuals to approach and grow in God without any required ministerial mediation from the church or the spatiotemporal necessity of gathered congregations. By virtue of its elastic essence, Roberts's definition of faith had an appeal even to those far from his Pentecostal roots, whether they be Charismatic Catholics, United Methodists, or neo-evangelicals.

The postwar emergence of the Sunbelt South served as the incubator of Roberts's rise and the source of his style and self-fashioned image. After World War II, millions of southern evangelicals joined Roberts in migrating from rural regions to suburbanizing metropolises, dusting off generations of agrarian poverty to join the middle and upper-middle classes. Under Roberts, entrepreneurialism replaced austerity as Christian virtue. Devout southerners witnessed in his embrace of a comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle the permission for them to live a little more indulgently after generations of spiritualized restraint. Even if some disagreed with Roberts's theological particulars, they resonated with his defense of their way of life, his keenly crafted cultural message of law and order, free enterprise, and colorblind conservatism wrapped under the bow of "traditional values." Imbibing this vague but compelling religio-cultural identity, Sunbelt

evangelicals fashioned an imagined community—a “Moral Majority,” as it were—as they grappled with the quickening pulse of late twentieth-century American society.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the postwar religious evolution of the American South did not stay within the region’s increasingly nebulous borders but instead had implications for the trajectory of the entire country. In the decades after World War II, as demographic weight and economic brawn shifted away from the Northeast and Midwest toward southern cities, as the Protestant Mainline receded from American cultural life, and, in turn, American evangelicalism’s posture as an interdenominational movement gave way to a consumer-oriented marketplace of megachurches and parachurch ministries, the Sunbelt’s God increasingly became America’s God. Roberts was certainly not the only figure involved in this paradigm shift in American religion, but no one affected and embodied it more than him.

In fact, the thirty years that have elapsed since City of Faith’s inglorious closure have, paradoxically, shown the enduring imprint that Roberts has left on Christianity both in the United States and worldwide. No religious figure since Roberts has quite matched his potent but unstable blend of businesslike pragmatism and ecstatic primitivism. Yet as Charismatics regrouped after the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s, diverging segments of the movement would channel discrete aspects of Roberts’s legacy.

Some successors copied Roberts’s prosperity gospel message and business-friendly ethos but dialed back his unpredictable Charismatic fervor. Among those in this

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<sup>6</sup>Perhaps it is no coincidence that Latin America, a region where Charismatic Christianity experienced rapid growth during the late twentieth century, was, like the Sunbelt South, undergoing a similar (but more dramatic) leap from a rural, agrarian economy to urbanized postindustrialism. See Bernice Martin, “From Pre- to Postmodernity in Latin America: The Case of Pentecostalism,” in *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 102–146.

camp, none has achieved more fame than former ORU student Joel Osteen (b. 1963). At Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, America's largest megachurch, the faith-healings, fanciful prophecies, and speaking in tongues that marked Roberts's ministry are absent. Yet with his suave, businesslike demeanor, Osteen replicates Roberts's therapeutic orientation, positive thinking, and promises of prosperity. Osteen's message not only resonates with Houston's boosterish corporate climate but also channels the therapeutic spirit of "Well-Marketed Comforting" that historian Gil Troy has argued became a pervasive and lasting theme in American popular culture during the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Roberts's pragmatic posture has lived on in those prominent Charismatics who adapted it for their own ministries while distancing themselves from his ecstatic primitivism.

Meanwhile, Sunbelt cities like Dallas and Atlanta, which had once played host to Roberts's national circuit of tent revivals, have in the last three decades become nodes in a worldwide circuit of primitivistic Charismatic events that happen to correspond with the webs of capital circulation in this globalized era. To take one example, a loose-knit group of itinerant evangelists and faith healers hopped via airplane from the "Toronto Blessing" in 1994, to Charismatic healing services at Holy Trinity Brompton in London in 1995, to the Brownsville Revival in Florida in the mid- to late-1990s, and finally to Benny Hinn's global headquarters in the Dallas suburb of Grapevine, Texas in the early 2000s.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Roberts, these peripatetic figures have little interest in building institutions. Instead, they focus on exercising influence and catalyzing the work of the

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<sup>7</sup>Bowler, *Blessed*, 78, 110; Gil Troy, *The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 7–8.

<sup>8</sup>On the Toronto Blessing and globalized Charismatic Christianity, see David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Faith in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 97–119. On the Brownsville Revival, see Yvette Garcia, "Revivalism and Restorationism: The Brownsville Revival and Its Leaders' Paradoxical Defense" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2019).

Spirit through impromptu conferences, seminars, and streaming webinars, thereby replicating the electrifying format of Roberts's tent revivals for the globalized Internet age of the twenty-first century. Their seemingly spontaneous revivals exude the chaotic, effusive elements of Roberts's spirituality that more polished Charismatic ministries like Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church avoid.

If these two recent movements in contemporary religion have channeled Oral Roberts's multifaceted legacy in differing ways, they nevertheless share the same structural DNA as examples of "Independent Network Charismatic" (INC) Christianity. As sociologists Brad Christerson and Richard Flory have observed, INC Christianity, made up of the nebulous "networks of cooperation" among Charismatic congregations, conference organizers, and parachurch ministries, now constitutes the "fastest-growing edge of Protestantism."<sup>9</sup> Following in the lineage of Roberts, purveyors of INC Christianity make heavy use of technology to disseminate their Charismatic spirituality. Indeed, these Spirit-filled ministry entrepreneurs pioneered the use of the Internet as a worship medium, inaugurating a trend that by 2020 had seeped into nearly all quarters of American Christianity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, although Roberts's ministry severely contracted in size and prominence after the fall of City of Faith, his legacy continues to exert dramatic influence on the contemporary religious landscape. The dispersive, decentralized expressions of Charismatic Christianity that Roberts first introduced in the mid to late twentieth century have now taken centerstage in the era of technologically mediated globalization that characterizes the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>9</sup>Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8, 14.

Roberts's detractors castigated him as an archaic holdout of holy-roller religion, a vestige of premodern irrationality, and the figurehead of an anomalous Pentecostal phenomenon that would dissipate as American society grew more mechanized, rationalized, and economically advanced. These dismissive assessments of Roberts, however, were fundamentally mistaken. Roberts's faith-healing ministry captured the religious affections of millions of Americans in the postwar era. He rose to prominence not in spite of, but because of the fact that he seemingly generated ruptures in the taut fabric of the laws of nature and because he unsettled the supposedly settled understandings of God and the universe. Roberts boldly proclaimed a world where wonder-working spiritual power was at work in the ever-compressing times and spaces of twentieth-century American life. He saw himself as the servant of an Almighty God who dwelled in the metropolitan revival tent, crackled from the ethereal frequencies of the radio, emanated from the depthless surfaces of the television set, and floated in the consecrated atmosphere of City of Faith's hospital rooms.

Roberts's most prominent successors in the Charismatic movement, Joel Osteen and Benny Hinn, may have modulated his influence in varying ways, but they, like Roberts, both appear to be most at home in the suburbanized metropolises of the American South. In these cities the furnace of a postindustrial, globalized economy, fueled by the ethic of the market and stoked by the telecommunications revolution, seems to liquify, but not evaporate, the granited verities of the South's old-time religion. Critics called Roberts a relic of the Christian past, but perhaps, in reimagining his Pentecostal spirituality for a changing world, he was a harbinger of the Christian future.

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