DR. ALVA J. McCLAIN

HERALD OF GRACE

THE RUNNER • THE NEW MAN • THE DEFINER • THE TEACHER • THE GIANT • THE HERALD

by ANDREW JONES (BA 11)
THE RUNNER

The story of Grace College and Theological Seminary begins, not with an inspiration, but a collision. Not with a theologian, but an athlete.

In 1909, Alva Jay McClain — known by close friends as “Mick” — was a swift-swinging batter and a particularly fast runner. When he began college classes at the University of Washington, nearly 200 miles from his home in Sunnyside, Wash., he didn’t care much for studying. He joined the football team, became quarterback, scored big. All things considered, his future was made.

Until the collision. One day “Mick” was on the cusp of sliding into first base for a close single. But something went wrong. Dust flew, bodies slammed, and in a fraction of a moment, McClain’s sports career was over. A spike on the first baseman’s cleat had done severe damage to the young runner’s shinbone. He went to the hospital. A type of blood poisoning developed, one of the first signs of a lifelong physical weakness.

When the leg healed, he dropped out of college and began working in the orchard business with his father. It seemed to be his only option. He was only 20.

THE NEW MAN

Only God can take an athletic 20-year-old with no clear path ahead of him and change him into a seminary president. McClain is now celebrated for the things that came to fruition because of his devotion to God’s grace and truth. But it was not always that way.

His pursuit of that idea began later in life than one might expect of such a man. He didn’t claim faith in Christ until two years after the baseball accident and subsequent illness.

It was a prophecy conference at his home church (led by Louis S. Bauman who would later become McClain’s mentor and colleague at Ashland College) that led McClain to Christ and ultimately a career in biblical studies and teaching. In quick succession he attended The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Xenia Theological Seminary in Xenia, Ohio, as well as Occidental College in L.A. In fourteen years he had earned his B.A. and his Th.M., and in 1918 he was ordained. He served at First Brethren Church of Philadelphia as senior pastor, joining the faculty of Ashland College as a professor of theology soon after.
posterity suffer because no one had taken to
task the sloppy modernism that he believed
was creeping into Ashland’s values.

So he fought. Long and hard. Throwing
tactical punches made of ironclad
systematic reasoning, biting the Brethren’s
bullet where he believed he needed to, like
on the day he was fired from Ashland.

After the fight, a group of men sat in
conference at a table on the top floor of
the Free Methodist Publishing House, now
Grace’s Mount Memorial Hall, praying
that God would do a mighty work through
Grace Theological Seminary. Among them
was McClain: Sore and weakened from the
contention, but a hero of Truth.

THE
TEACHER

Ron Henry (BA 58, BD 62), one of McClain’s
students, remembers the classes with him.
He would come in after all the students
had gathered and sit down quietly. Then
he would open his mouth. And everything
would be silent but for the impassioned
words of Dr. McClain. He moved skillfully
from point to point, taking the most
complex of theological matters and turning
them into clear, beautiful pictures of what it
meant to be saved by grace.

McClain served the fledgling institution
as president for 25 years (1937-62) never
backing down on his allegiance to Jesus, his
Lord. Students seeking to get a glimpse of

FIRST-FRUITS / The students and faculty at the opening of Grace Theological Seminary in the fall of 1937 at Akron,
Ohio’s First Brethren Church.
THE HERALD

McClain wrote prolifically as he grew older, though he published very little. His magnum opus, “The Greatness of the Kingdom,” is one of those books where it’s hard to see the author in your head. The writer speaks of a universal plan, a massive God, a victorious King and a great Kingdom on history’s horizon. You would never have guessed that a man, wheelchair-bound, cringing at that old baseball wound, would have seen life as being so grand and glorious in light of its Creator.

“Nothing like this has ever happened before,” he said in his last chapel sermon at the school he had founded. “In all the ages of human history past, no age was ever like the one in which we live today. Grace — the grace of God in Christ — is on the throne!”

THE GIANT

One day in 1967, McClain (now almost 80 years old) expressed a disappointment to his friend Lester Pifer (ThDip 47, BTh 50, DD 74), then the leader of Grace Brethren Home Missions and a close friend of McClain’s. “He was very concerned because he couldn’t drive anymore,” remembers Pifer, “and he wanted to go up to Chicago for the dedication of the New Scofield Bible ... [because] he was one of the editors.”

Pifer, moved at his aging mentor’s plight, offered to drive him to the big city.

“You know I’ll have to take my wheelchair?” McClain told Pifer.

“I’ll take care of that, Dr. McClain,” was Pifer’s response. He went to the retired Grace College & Seminary president’s house, loaded the wheelchair into the trunk and carried the elderly man to his car. Pifer and his wife along with Mrs. Josephine McClain all drove to Chicago that day.

During a prayer meeting, Pifer, inspired by the gravity of the moment, took the only picture taken at that prestigious assembly. In the photograph, gathered among other great men who had given their lives and minds to the study and preaching of God’s word, “Mick,” a slender, elderly gentleman, sits in his wheelchair. “It was shortly after that he passed away,” says Pifer, ending his narrative with a simple, “I loved Dr. McClain.”

The diminutive and frail founder of Grace College and Theological Seminary used to say to his classes, “It is too bad that just when a man gets to the place where he knows a few things, he grows weak and dies.” Ironic for a man who knew and did so much. Ironic because, by the time he died in 1968, that sickly theologian was undoubtedly a giant of the faith.
THE EXAMPLE

McClain historian, history professor and dean of Grace’s School of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Mark Norris (C 04) wrote a chapter in “The Activist Impulse” on McClain’s influence in the crosshatching of evangelicalism and the Anabaptist tradition. Norris continues to research Grace’s first president and the lasting effects he had on the school and on Christianity in America.

“When I saw the human side of Alva J. McClain, I began to relate to him more. The same man who loved baseball as a youth also developed a new systematized theology for the Brethren. He was a brilliant, resolute man and a remarkable progressive given his context. He once wrote that the new statement of faith he composed for the seminary could never be changed, stern stuff for a man whose background did not even claim a specific foundational creed.

“Because he and his generation were so focused in purpose, they were able to open Grace Theological Seminary during one of the worst times in U.S. history, and they did this without even charging tuition.

“Though a quiet, reserved, sickly man of diminutive stature, McClain commanded respect when he walked into a room, and his students still remember him fondly for his ability to sift through complicated biblical passages, presenting them with clarity and conviction. I value his example as much as I was fascinated by his role in evangelical history.”