



*DR. ALVA J.* HERALD OF GRACE  
*McCLAIN*

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

*by ANDREW JONES (BA 11)*

## THE RUNNER

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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

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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.



**THE ATHLETE** / Alva J. McClain swings for the fences.

**McCLAIN** *Herald of Grace*

All this time he maintained a reputation for being quiet and calm in his everyday mannerisms. Unlike the days of his youth, nothing really riled him anymore. Nothing, that is, barring a mishandling of the Truth.

He was impatient with mystery. He was impatient with messiness. He was impatient with ambiguity. He was impatient with a lack of boundaries. He wanted things to be defined.

Few things could bring out the fighter in McClain like an opportunity to uphold and defend God's Word.

**THE DEFINER**

On April 24, 1930, McClain made the following proposition to a Brethren think tank: "[The ministers of the Brethren Church] should be confirmed in [their]

beliefs and so fortified that they will be able to propagate them in competition with those of an opposite belief. This can be done only in our own seminary."

In his days as a Bible teacher at Ashland, McClain had got his wish for a seminary. History never tells us whether he regretted the idea or not, but the torrent of dissension that surrounded that school for Brethren ministers was certainly unprecedented.

There can hardly be a discussion of McClain's seminary and its split from Ashland that does not involve a sense of confusion, frustration and near despair. Nobody could agree on how the school was to be run, and both sides of the argument made considerable blunders. But the simple fact stands: McClain refused to compromise on matters of biblical truth. And he refused to let

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.

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JANUARY 30, 1948

Gandhi assassinated  
in New Delhi

MAY 14, 1948

U.S. recognizes Israel

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JUNE 25, 1950

Korean War begins

the big picture that McClain lived in every day studied and even served the school under him. It became the epitome of the place he had wanted it to be: a haven for the Truth and a training ground for the eager. The school had its inevitable winters; conflicts, disagreements, foibles and the like. But McClain always believed in God's ability to complete a good work in that which He had started.

## 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.



**NEW SCOFIELD BIBLE** / Dr. Alva J. McClain (bottom right) with the editorial committee of The New Scofield Reference Bible.

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 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!" \*

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SEPTEMBER 7, 1948

Grace College is founded. Four majors  
offered: English, History, Greek and Bible



**JANUARY 20, 1953**  
Dwight D. Eisenhower becomes the 34th President of the United States

**MARCH 26, 1953**  
Jonas Salk announces a successful polio vaccination

**JANUARY 20, 1961**  
John F. Kennedy becomes the 35th President of the United States

**AUGUST 13, 1961**  
East Germany begins construction on Berlin Wall

**McCLAIN** *Herald of Grace*



## *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."

**AUGUST 30, 1951**  
Dedication of McClain Hall

**APRIL 8, 1958**  
Dedication of Philathea Hall and Lancer Gym