

New ORU President Focused on Equipping Spirit-Empowered Leaders

Dr. William M. Wilson—better known as Billy—was inaugurated Friday as the fourth president of Oral Roberts University. I had the privilege of enjoying the pomp and ceremony, and of being reminded of the special vision that birthed this great educational institution.

What does this new administration mean for the future of ORU and even Pentecostal/charismatic colleges and universities in general, since many look to ORU as a trendsetter? What, if anything, does this mean for the future of higher Christian education—a cause for which I'm passionate? These were the questions I had when I flew to Tulsa.

As a young teen, I remember when ORU started in 1963. The fact that Billy Graham gave the opening address sent shock waves through the Christian community—the reason being that the gap between Pentecostals (the term *charismatic* hadn't been coined back then) and the wider Christian community was much wider than it is now. In his lifetime, Oral Roberts went a long way toward bridging that gap. Even inviting Billy Graham was an example of this.

The fact that Graham accepted was monumental. A clip from Graham's address was shown at Wilson's inauguration. In it, Graham pronounced blessings on the fledgling institution. But, he said, if it ever drifted from its Christian values, he pronounced a curse!

Even though I never attended ORU, a few years after it was founded I visited my cousin, who was in one of the first graduating classes. It wasn't until 1980 that I personally met Oral Roberts. In the next nearly 30 years, he had a huge

impact on my life as I interacted with him many times and in many ways, becoming very familiar with ORU in the process.

A few years ago, ORU nearly went under financially after a series of problems prompted the second president, Richard Roberts, to step down. The Green family that owns Hobby Lobby in nearby Oklahoma City came to the rescue by pumping tens of millions of dollars into the university to pay off its debt and fix its aging properties. Four years ago, I attended the inauguration of Mark Rutland as ORU's third president. Oral Roberts was there. It was the last time I saw him, and it was his last time to visit the ORU campus.

Now a man I consider a personal friend is taking the helm. And while I have very close ties to several Christian universities, I wanted to attend to show my support and to find out what we can expect out of Billy Wilson as the university's president. Wilson comes from a small denomination and, while he's enjoyed success, he's never undertaken such a huge task.

I've known Wilson since he headed up the Azusa Street centennial celebration that drew 50,000 to Los Angeles in 2006. He has a reputation as a humble man who inspires confidence in those he leads, and he has a global vision for the Pentecostal movement. He helped found Empowered21 as a way to emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in the 21st century.

Wilson helped coin the term "Holy Spirit empowered" because a lot of the other terms, like "Spirit-filled" or "Full Gospel" carry some baggage that prevents people from relating to or experiencing it. Interestingly, Empowered 21 was launched at ORU in 2008 partly because its location was central in the nation, but mainly because of the way ORU has been central in promoting the message of the Holy Spirit.

Last weekend's inauguration ceremony, while elegant, was also simple, emphasizing themes I feel represent what's important

to Wilson. The first was his humility in the way he knelt so that members of the board of trustees could lay hands on him and pray for him.

There also was an impressive parade of flags carried in by students, emphasizing the global vision of ORU in a Wilson administration.

The message Wilson articulated in his inaugural address was not his own. It was to continue Oral Roberts' mandate to "build a university on God's authority and the Holy Spirit."

This inaugural message centered around three napkins. The first was Roberts' simple vision—written on a napkin in 1960—in God's words to "raise up your students to hear My voice, to go where My light is dim, where My voice is heard small, and My healing power is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased."

The second napkin was one Wilson wrote on to explain the gospel to a Chinese tour guide who then accepted Jesus as Savior. The third was the napkin folded separately from the other grave clothes in the garden tomb when Jesus rose from the dead.

I believe Wilson will emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that Roberts would approve of. He will carry on the mission "to build Holy Spirit-empowered leaders through whole person education to impact the world with God's healing."

That's important because so many of the other Pentecostal/charismatic institutions look to ORU as a trendsetter. ORU was the first Pentecostal institution to become a university. It also emphasized the whole person in a way most Christian colleges do today. It also emphasized excellence in an era when Pentecostals seemed content with mediocrity as long the spiritual aspects were emphasized. ORU has done both, and I believe under Billy Wilson, it will

continue to emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit and excellence in academics.

What do you think? Give us your comments on Billy Wilson becoming president, on your opinion of ORU and on the role of Christian higher education.

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