

Pentecostalism, Version 20.09

At my second daughter's college graduation this weekend I saw the future of our movement.

Some people twitch or roll their eyes when you say the word *Pentecostal*. The term conjures up outdated images of either (1) slick-haired, Bible-thumping preachers who spew saliva on the unfortunate souls seated in the first three pews, or (2) scowling women with their hair in buns who know how to scare you with glossolalia.

Say goodbye to the worn-out stereotypes. Last weekend I saw the future of the Pentecostal movement when my wife and I attended a graduation ceremony at Emmanuel College, the liberal arts school in northeast Georgia that was founded 90 years ago by the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. What we witnessed on Saturday was a refreshing reminder that God has raised up a new generation of young people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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There wasn't a slick-haired preacher on the stage that day, and you would be hard-pressed to find a lady with her hair in a bun anywhere in the auditorium. The most unique hairstyle in the audience was probably the one sported by my future son-in-law, Sven, who graduated on Saturday with my second daughter, Meredith. Sven wears dreadlocks—a style he adopted three years ago as a prophetic act of consecration to God.

Sven is not a Rastafarian—he is a radical Christian who earned his Bachelor of Science degree in worship and music ministry. Along with his unique hair, other things about Emmanuel's

graduation ceremony made it obvious that Pentecostalism is experiencing an extreme makeover:

*** It is racially diverse.** Although Pentecostalism in this country began in the racially mixed Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, the walls of religious segregation have been pretty thick until recently. I was so glad to see African-American, Asian and Hispanic students getting their diplomas at Emmanuel on Saturday. Students graduating from college today have the greatest opportunity ever to dismantle racist structures.

*** It offers authenticity and relevance.** I've had several opportunities to address the students at Emmanuel during the five years that my two oldest daughters attended there. I've eaten meals with them, played Frisbee with them and just hung out in their dorms. And what I've seen is that young Christians today aren't interested in the three-step formulas or the money-focused messages they got from their parent's Pentecostalism.

Today's Christian college students are nauseated by any kind of religious hype: blow-dried evangelists, insincere appeals for offerings, faked healings, goofy buzzwords or schmaltzy Christian pop music. What they crave is reality—honest relationships, healthy mentoring, passionate worship and daring faith that is reflected through brave actions, not just words.

*** It aims to impact the culture.** The speaker at Emmanuel's graduation ceremony was way outside the traditional Pentecostal box. Bonnie Wurzbacher, a senior vice president at The Coca-Cola Company, used examples from her own life as a female executive in corporate America to challenge the students to blaze a new trail. She reminded them that whatever their chosen careers—in education, business, government, law, the arts or full-time ministry—all are sanctified ways to serve and glorify God when He is at the center of their lives.

*** It inspires selfless sacrifice.** Just a few days before Emmanuel's graduation, a 22-year-old senior named Brittani Panozzo died in a car crash. She was supposed to have graduated with Meredith and Sven, but Brittani's life ended abruptly when she accidentally swerved into the path of a pickup truck on Highway 29 near the school. Her death shook the campus—but her brief life also inspired her peers.

At a memorial service for Brittani held four days before graduation, students were reminded that she spent her last semester as an intern on the mission field in South Africa. She had planned to move to Bangladesh after graduation so she could work with orphans and serve churches there. Her dream, according to campus pastor Chris Maxwell, was that Emmanuel would one day sponsor a 24-hour prayer house that would also meet the needs of the poor in the local community.

I see Brittani's fervor in so many young people today. They have a reckless passion to rid the world of injustice. They know that Christian ministry is not just limited to preaching sermons or having prayer meetings; they also want to rescue exploited girls, dig wells to provide clean water and help kids learn English. And they're willing to forfeit the suburban house with the three-car garage for a chance to change the world.

I smiled as I watched Meredith, Sven and their classmates march out of that auditorium on Saturday. They reminded me that while the gospel is timeless, our movements and institutions need regular updating so we can stay relevant and genuine. Amid the huge challenges we face in this crucial hour, God has prepared and anointed a new generation to carry His message to a love-starved world.

J. Lee Grady is editor of *Charisma*. You can follow him on Twitter: @LeeGrady. Below is a photo of his daughter, Meredith, and her fiancé, Sven, at their graduation last Saturday in Franklin Springs, Ga. For more information about

Emmanuel College, [click here](#).

