

Time for a Reality Check

God has prepared and anointed a new generation to carry His message.

✖ 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 The term conjures up outdated images of either (1) slick-haired, Bible-thumping preachers who spew saliva on the unfortunate souls seated in the first three pews or (2) scowling women with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 away visitors with glossolalia.

Say goodbye to worn-out stereotypes. Back in May I saw the future of the Pentecostal movement when my wife and I attended the 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 was a refreshing reminder that God has raised up a new generation of young people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

There were no spitting preachers on the stage that day. And the most unique hairstyle in the audience was the one sported by my future son-in-law, Sven, who graduated with my second daughter, Meredith. Besides Sven’s dreadlocks (a style he adopted three years ago as an act of consecration to God), other things about Emmanuel’s graduation ceremony made it obvious that our movement is experiencing an extreme makeover:

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

•**It offers authenticity.** I've had several opportunities to address students at Emmanuel during the five years that my two oldest daughters attended there. I've eaten meals with them and just hung out in their dorms. And what I've seen is that young Christians today aren't interested in three-step formulas or money-focused "claim your blessing" sermons.

Today's Christian college students are nauseated by blow-dried evangelists, manipulative offerings, faked healings, goofy buzzwords and all forms of religious hype. 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 beyond the confines of church walls. 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 God when He is at the center of their lives.

•**It inspires 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 an oncoming truck. Her death shook the campus—but her brief life also inspired her peers.

At a memorial service held four days before graduation, students were reminded that Brittani spent her last semester on the mission field in South Africa. She had planned to move to Bangladesh to work with orphans. Her dream was that Emmanuel would one day sponsor a 24-hour ministry center.

So many young people today have Brittani's fervor—and a reckless passion to challenge injustice. They know Christian ministry isn't just sermons and prayer meetings; it involves rescuing exploited girls, digging wells and helping kids learn English. And today's emerging church leaders are willing to forfeit the suburban house and three-car garage for a chance to change the world.

Watching Meredith, Sven and their classmates graduate reminded me that while the gospel is timeless, our movement needs a regular reality check so we can stay updated and genuine. I'm thankful that God has prepared and anointed a new generation to carry His message to a love-starved world.

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