

A.W. Tozer Reconsidered

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This is the first of several articles on A.W. Tozer, his life and teaching. It is part of a projected larger series of studies on several teachers of the last century or so who, however else they differ, have one thing in common: Devaluing of the Word of God and of the simplicity of the Gospel. To be sure, Tozer is right on the money in some of his assessments of the 20th (now 21st) century church. But we cannot simply ignore other harmful tenets to be seen in much of Tozer's works.

Someone has written me recently asking why I should feel it necessary to name names and "attack persons"? The answer is quite simply that these very names have become an impervious refuge for some of the most obstinate errors in our church. We are against error in principal, but are not always aware of it in particular. For instance, I could write generally against some of the errors of AW Tozer - without naming him - and get comments of agreement. But when I pin an author to these errors (see below) and give accurate quotes, I get defensive letters from some ... and enthusiastic Amens from others.

So this is why I "attack" Tozer. I don't hate the man. I love the Truth he himself - albeit unwittingly - attacks. Please consider this article if you are still unconvinced.

Introduction

I am sure I am not the only one here who has been much influenced by Aiden W. Tozer. His devotional writings have been praised by a wide spectrum of appreciative believers within Christendom, myself included. Recently however my praise for this writer has been replaced with a growing awareness of a tendency in his teaching, a major tendency, to turn his readers away from God-appointed means of sanctification. The Word of God is not only our *message* of salvation; it is also our *method* of salvation. Lastly, it is our *Man* of salvation - He is the Word of God, the God-Man Christ Jesus. In all of these - and in a few other areas, as well - Tozer comes up short, as we shall see.

A.W. Tozer is a revered authority for many, and to attack him almost seems to be an attack on sanctification and holiness itself. But, with him as well as ourselves, we need to always apply the *tests* of Scripture on the *teachers* of Scripture. None of us are immune from this necessary cross-examination. That is what these articles are about. *If you find that my lines here spark in you a desire to write back to me, well, great! But if you are all set to defend your man, don't shoot from the hip. Quote from the Book. I am certainly open to correction.*

Mystic Sidetracks

Our author's indebtedness to the Catholic mystics of the Middle Ages becomes apparent to anyone who studies Tozer. He often does not bother to divulge precisely where his quotes are from, though whether by design or intentional neglect is hard to ascertain. **Teresa of Avila**, **Nicholas of Cusa**, **Meister Eckhardt**, the anonymous penman of "*The Cloud of Unknowing*",

and several more, are called as testimonies for his pressing for the need for a closer walk with God.

But who would argue the need for this closer walk? Not us. What we disagree with is the calling in of these dubious authorities when the Scriptures are a much better means - in fact the only sure source - that we need to have Christ formed in us. "To the Word and to the testimony!", Isaiah warns us (Isa. 8:20) "*If they speak not according to this word there is no light in them.*" To this we can add Acts 17:11. Later in this article we will take a closer look at Tozer's favorite authorities, and see if they are to be trusted. Many do not know much about these mystics and monks that Tozer references. If they did, their respect for them - and for anyone who quotes them approvingly - would lessen considerably.

Tozer observes:

"That evangelism which draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of men is false to the Bible and cruel to the souls of its bearers. The faith of Christ does not parallel the world, it intersects it. In coming to Christ we do not bring our old life up onto a higher plane; we leave it at the cross. The corn of wheat must fall into the ground and die." - *A. W. Tozer, Man: The Dwelling Place Of God, 1946, Published 1966*

Yes, he has some good points, yet his approving quotes of mystics constitutes this same "friendly parallel between the ways of God ... and men". **Nicolas, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila** and many others of Tozer's "saints" were active supporters of the anti-Christian papal system, and of the works-related method of salvation. Are they considered holy just because they speak of sanctification, Christ and heaven? The Devil does as much. Tozer bemoaned the fact that these writers are virtually unknown in modern times. In this we agree - if they were more thoroughly known then Tozer's quotes can be shown for what they really are - passages taken largely out of context from a system that has much more of the Counter-Reformation than the Reformation. And his quoting of these mystics is more frequent than you might expect. In his slim volume, "Knowledge of the Holy", for instance, there are at least eighteen quotes that are to be found.

An "Open Secret" or a Second Work of Grace?

An additional problem with his views on sanctification is that he downplays doctrine. This is from his "Root of the Righteous":

"Bible Taught or Spirit Taught?

It may shock some readers to suggest that there is a difference between being Bible taught and being Spirit taught. Nevertheless it is so."

Although Tozer's point - especially the very next paragraph - is valid, there is indeed a false dichotomy being set up here. It is not Bible taught or Spirit taught. The Spirit of Christ unlocks, teaches and applies the Word of Christ to us. "They shall all be taught of God" (John 6:45) assumes this very growth in knowledge. The Holy Spirit will not teach of things other than Christ. He is "the way, the truth, and the life".

Tozer goes on:

“It is altogether possible to be instructed in the rudiments of the faith and still have no real understanding of the whole thing. And it is possible to go on to become expert in Bible doctrine and not have spiritual illumination, with the result that a veil remains over the mind, preventing it from apprehending the truth in its spiritual essence.”

This is all true, yet, this is not the whole story. Also I believe we should instinctively distrust when someone who is quick to use the word “doctrine” in a limitedly pejorative sense, as Tozer often does throughout his works. This should become obvious as we look further into Tozer’s words.

“I am a Bible Christian and if an archangel with a wingspread as broad as a constellation shining like the sun were to come and offer me some new truth, I’d ask him for a reference. If he could not show me where it is found in the Bible, I would bow out and say, I’m awfully sorry, you don’t bring any references with you.”

But the problem is not with the readily identifiable archangel. It is with those subjective experiences. This is where we must unflinchingly apply the standard of God’s Word. It is also with our choice of spiritual teachers. Tozer did not ask for spiritual references when he effusively praised the ecstatic utterances of **Julian of Norwich**, nor of the “insights” of that “master of the inner life” (his words), **Evelyn Underhill**, the ecumenicist mystic. If he would have asked for proper Scriptural backing from them, and found them wanting, he would have saved himself much confusion - and the church much polluting error that is now hard to eradicate.

When I first decided to write on Tozer I wondered if I wasn’t just being bitter and overly fault-finding. But the more I study him, the more I see him as a clear danger for Christianity. His influence is wide and he is accepted by a broad spectrum of religionists (including, but not restricted to, Christians). His doctrine and practice are so often overlooked by many other wise astute Bereans who cry “Wolf!” at the same infractions in more recognizable enemies.

Tozer and the Word

Perhaps the best single mark to judge someone’s teaching is their pronouncements on the importance of the Word of God. If a writer is strongly committed to holding the Word of God as being central, then we already have a hopeful indication of orthodoxy in that teacher. At the very least we can hold that writer to his own professed adherence to Scripture.

However Tozer is somewhat hard to pin down here because he is not consistent on this central topic. In some places (like in the first quotation below) he seems to hold a high regard for the Bible, yet in others (the very next quote) he all but negates this. So, on the issue of the Word of Life, Tozer speaks against Tozer.

Two passages (emphases added) from his “The Pursuit of God” are particularly helpful in illustrating this; the first from the preface, the second from the very first chapter:

“Sound Bible exposition is an imperative in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.”

The first statement is the best. It is basically a restatement of what the Word itself asserts about itself. And - if we did not know where Tozer will be going with the arguments - we wouldn't find fault either with the Bible being referred elliptically as “mere words” or that it “is not an end in itself”. After all, the church of our time, just as in Tozer's, suffers greatly in many quarters from a lifeless literalism that clutches to the killing letter of mechanical compliances. While David taught that God “desires truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51) many followers settle into mere superficial sanctity (that is, false). Tozer deserves high marks for diagnosing the disease. It is his cure that is the cause of concern. That brings us to his second passage, from the first chapter entitled “Following Hard After God”. Again, emphasis is mine. I also numbered these five paragraphs for ease of reference. Special attention is drawn to the first and last paragraph:

1. *“If we would find God amid all the religious externals we must first determine to find Him, and then proceed in the way of simplicity. Now as always God discovers Himself to “babes” and hides Himself in thick darkness from the wise and the prudent. We must simplify our approach to Him. We must strip down to essentials (and they will be found to be blessedly few). We must put away all effort to impress, and come with the guileless candor of childhood. If we do this, without doubt God will quickly respond.*

2. *When religion has said its last word, there is little that we need other than God Himself. The evil habit of seeking God-and effectively prevents us from finding God in full revelation. In the “and” lies our great woe. If we omit the “and” we shall soon find God, and in Him we shall find that for which we have all our lives been secretly longing.*

3. *We need not fear that in seeking God only we may narrow our lives or restrict the motions of our expanding hearts. The opposite is true. We can well afford to make God our All, to concentrate, to sacrifice the many for the One.*

4. *The author of the quaint old English classic, The Cloud of Unknowing, teaches us how to do this. [Not the Bible? Hmmm] “Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods. And thereto, look thee loath to think on aught but God Himself. So that nought work in thy wit, nor in thy will, but only God Himself. This is the work of the soul that most pleaseth God.”*

5. *Again, he recommends that in prayer we practice a further stripping down of everything, even of our theology. “For it sufficeth enough, a naked intent direct unto God without any other cause than Himself.” Yet underneath all his thinking lay the broad foundation of New Testament truth, for he explains that by “Himself” he means “God that made thee, and bought thee, and that*

graciously called thee to thy degree.” *And he is all for simplicity: If we would have religion “lapped and folden in one word, for that thou shouldst have better hold thereupon, take thee but a little word of one syllable: for so it is better than of two, for even the shorter it is the better it accordeth with the work of the Spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE.* ““

The entire passage of five paragraphs has been kept intact so that none might accuse me of selectively making my case by cherry-picking quotes out of context. In paragraph 1 we read of the need of simplifying our approach to God, and of “stripping down to essentials”. Now according to Tozer’s *first* quote, in the introduction, the Word of God *is* an essential, yet now the whole issue is in doubt as we read the last paragraph 5: We must, so teaches our guide (the nameless mystic writer of “Cloud of Unknowing”), strip away from ourselves ... “*even of our theology*”!

“Well”, you might caution me, “he only refers to superfluous or bad theology. Let’s not overreact.”

I wish that were so. Let’s continue. God “is all for simplicity”. What kind of simplicity? Why none other than monosyllabic simplicity: The word “God” and the word “Love”. Do you see what is going on here?

Contrast with this single-word simplicity the inspired word of God:

For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Acts 20:27

Paul tells the Ephesians that he taught them all of Scripture. Nowhere does he even *hint* at the hocus-pocus theology of Tozer’s.

With Tozer doctrine is being subtly, but with deadly effect, devalued. The theology we are to strip away, or at least to put at arms length when we *pray*, is the very Word that we need to approach Him *as* we pray. We need to always be aware of *who God is* - and that is theology, the knowledge of God in the form of words that He has revealed to us. What does Scripture say?

“I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also”, 1 Cor. 14:15.

By the way, Tozer is being true to his mystical roots, especially those mystics who came after the Roman Catholic Counter-reformation, when he so emphasizes God-knowledge as a wholly (not “holy”) *separate* way of approaching Him than through that Word which God Himself gave us for that very purpose. He is being true to them, but false to the Word of God. The same God who said, “I am the Way, the Truth, the Life,” also said “Thy *Word* is truth.” Consider these passages as well:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 2 Tim. 3:15

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 2 Tim. 3:16

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. Mark 12:30.

Jesus answered the would-be mystic, the proto-Mariolater who cried out, “*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you!*” with “*Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it.*” (Luke 11:27- 28)

Our love and devotion to God is always to be according to the Word of God, as well as corrected and strengthened by the Word of God.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.: Mark 12:30.

In this passage above the Word of God is being set below the Word of men. Who is the writer of “*The Cloud of Unknowing*”? We don’t really know. Neither does it matter. Yet in a chapter about following after God Tozer *puts this writer above the Bible!* Nowhere in this whole chapter is there a single passage pointing to the Word of God as our means of knowing God, of growing in Him and, yes, of praying to Him.

We grow in grace as we use the *means* of grace. Our main means of grace, day in and day out, are the Scriptures which can make us wise unto salvation. The Word is our lamp, our bread, our armor, our weapon of righteousness, our mirror and the sword that pierces us (Heb. 4:12) much deeper than we are comfortable with. All of this is missing in Tozer’s instruction of how to approach God.

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