

Tozer and Calvinism

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This is the second of several articles on A.W. Tozer, his life and teaching.

It is mildly surprising that the writings of A.W. Tozer are featured in Reformed publications and websites. I say “mildly” because I can partly understand the attraction for using his words:

1. He accurately states several of the crying needs of the modern church: The need for superficial, mediocre, robotic believers to *rediscover* – or should I say *find for the first time* -the authentic pulse of *true worship*.

2. He taps into the conscientious Christian’s nagging suspicion that his/her walk with God is not what it should be.

3. He often has a way to state concisely – and without Latin! – his main points – a talent that often eludes Reformed writers!

Here are some of his pithy gems:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

“The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him”.

These are some of the reasons that Reformed authors like **J.I. Packer, Montgomery Boice** and others; and many Reformed websites have called on Tozer to hammer down their own points. I also have used a quote of his on my site (but have since excised it). So Tozer is useful to many because he is eminently quotable.

However I believe that if his writings were more closely examined he would not seem so readily serviceable to Reformed Christianity.

He often gets the credit of being “*somewhat Reformed*”, but this too bears closer consideration. And for this we can do no better than to quote his own words, letting the reader make his or her own appraisal. The sentences above are sparkingly orthodox and perfectly useful. The fault in Tozer lies not primarily in these gems, but in the matrix from which they come – from the rest of Tozer’s writings. These reveal a different belief-set than perhaps many who quote shorter passages of Tozer’s are aware of.

Free-will Presuppositions

Tozer is a thoroughgoing advocate of the free-will of man in choosing God. His last published book, “*The Knowledge of the Holy*”, has a second-to-last chapter entitled “*The Sovereignty of God*”. What better place for us to find out where he stands on the doctrines of grace? Halfway through the chapter we have the following:

“Another real problem created by the doctrine of the divine sovereignty has to do with the will of man. If God rules His universe by His sovereign decrees, how is it possible for man to exercise free choice? And if he can not exercise freedom of choice, how can he be held responsible for his conduct? Is he not a mere puppet whose actions are determined by a behind-the-scenes God who pulls the strings as it pleases Him?”

This is largely the same sort of response of, say, **Norman Geisler** or **Dave Hunt**. These are not so much questions as they are almost credal self-evident statements, basic Arminian suppositions. These basic presuppositions, held in common by Geisler, Hunt and Tozer, are:

1. Mankind, of course, has a native ability to choose God and salvation (free-will), and
2. Moral responsibility necessarily implies freedom of choice (This is the battleground of such books as Luther’s *“Freedom of the Will”*).
3. Hindering of this free-will on the part of God means, not that God is sovereign, but that man is a mere puppet, or “robot” (Geisler).

Has Tozer risen above the usual level of mainstream free-will Arminianism? So far, not at all. Continuing:

*“The attempt to answer these questions [those three questions raised in the passage above] has divided the Christian church neatly into two camps which have borne the names of two distinguished theologians, **Jacobus Arminius** and **John Calvin**. Most Christians are content to get into one camp or the other and deny either sovereignty to God or free will to man. It appears possible, however, to reconcile these two positions without doing violence to either, although the effort that follows may prove deficient to partisans of one camp or the other.”*

Here is, so far, the clearest testimony of Tozer’s view of what is the *heart* of our Reformation truth: *It is mere “partisan” theology.* We Calvinists are in one camp.

*They (Arminius, along with his followers) are in the other. Then Tozer follows that worn path of argument, assumed disinterestedness: He distances himself as being removed from both parties – when actually he speaks and reasons from well within the Arminian camp. This tact is the very same one that **Erasmus** took against **Luther** and, to bring it down to our times, Hunt and Geisler took against James White. They all, like Tozer here, attempt to “rescue” God’s sovereignty while keeping man’s sovereignty intact.*

But there is not enough room in the universe for two sovereignties!

Tozer continues, explaining how, in his mind, God’s sovereignty can be reconciled to man’s free-will:

Here is my view: God sovereignly decreed that man should be free to exercise moral choice, and man from the beginning has fulfilled that decree by making his choice between good and evil. When he chooses to do evil, he does not thereby countervail the sovereign will of God but fulfills

it, inasmuch as the eternal decree decided not which choice the man should make but that he should be free to make it. If in His absolute freedom God has willed to give man limited freedom, who is there to stay His hand or say, "What doest thou?" Man's will is free because God is sovereign. A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so.

Reading this, it is astonishing that any Reformed teacher would see any kindred credibility in him. The Bible is quite clear that man has no ability nor desire to choose good over evil.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." – **Jer. 13:23**

"There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God." – **Romans 3:11**

Tozer, like Erasmus before him, seems to sense the immensity of the problem before him, so he argues merely that man has "limited freedom". But, as Luther pointed out to Erasmus, this does not solve his problem, but exacerbates it.

Back to Tozer:

Perhaps a homely illustration might help us to understand. An ocean liner leaves New York bound for Liverpool. Its destination has been determined by proper authorities. Nothing can change it. This is at least a faint picture of sovereignty.

On board the liner are several scores of passengers. These are not in chains, neither are their activities determined for them by decree. They are completely free to move about as they will. They eat, sleep, play, lounge about on the deck, read, talk, altogether as they please; but all the while the great liner is carrying them steadily onward toward a predetermined port.

Both freedom and sovereignty are present here and they do not contradict each other. So it is, I believe, with man's freedom and the sovereignty of God. The mighty liner of God's sovereign design keeps its steady course over the sea of history. God moves undisturbed and unhindered toward the fulfilment of those eternal purposes which He purposed in Christ Jesus before the world began. We do not know all that is included in those purposes, but enough has been disclosed to furnish us with a broad outline of things to come and to give us good hope and firm assurance of future well-being.

But this is an inadequate illustration. Surely the most important truth of history is totally absent here: There are, after all, *two* destinations, not one. If we *must* use such a metaphor, than there ought to be two ships. Although Tozer's metaphor of one destination *does* fit the theology of *some* of his inner life mentors, I cannot believe that was Tozer's view. I find it disturbing that his illustration does not include any place for those who end up in Hell. This is not a minor detail. An illustration that attempts to set forth God's purpose for mankind cannot pass over that.

Some of the details of his scenario are wrong, as well. We *are* in chains. In fact – *until the Captain speaks words of life to us (John 6:63, 66; Eze. 16:6; 37:10) – we are corpses in chains.*

Our actions *are* determined by decrees – though we are still responsible for our actions chosen. Yes, we are free to do those things Tozer mentioned by Tozer: Eat, sleep, play, talk (or, as Luther says, marry a wife, milk a cow). But we are not able to talk to our Captain, let alone learn from him where we are going ... or really care. In other words, we are able to pursue mundane practices of this life – and call that freedom – and all the while be oblivious to that whole other world that gives life to this one.

It's not a coincidence that those who seek to reconcile sovereignty with free-will resort to illustrations. It is because the Bible, aside from the superficial aid of the "whoever" verses, offers no encouragement to their doctrine at all. Scripture in fact is quite unequivocal:

"Without Me you can do nothing." – **John 15:5**

"Unless you are born again, you cannot even see the Kingdom of God." – **John 3:3**

"Salvation is of the Lord." – **Jonah 2:9**

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