

Tozer and the Order of Salvation

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

One of the more popular of Tozer's writings is a short chapter from "*The Pursuit of God*" entitled "*The Speaking Voice*" (hereafter TSV). In this piece a distinction is set up between the written Word and the spoken Word of God. This distinction is not a Biblical one, but a necessary one for him to make. A study of Tozer's background and influences is helpful to understand his interest in making much of this assumed dichotomy between a *speaking* and a *written* voice. But that is not the focus of this article. The issue to examine here is Tozer's perceived order of salvation (*Ordo Salutis*).¹ Well, you might ask, who cares? Really, you should. This seemingly technical issue is actually quite loaded with implications that have a direct bearing on our understanding of man, the nature of God, and His means of saving us.

There are two erroneous assumption that Tozer makes in TSV. Actually there are more than two but these two have the most to do with the subject of this article.

1. The first assumption is one that is common to many Christians today, that Christ's atonement was provisionally universal,² that Christ died for everyone and not just, as the Reformed believer affirms, for the elect.
2. The second assumption is that God is speaking in the same way to everyone and anyone is able – if he only wills to – listen to the "voice of God". But this is contrary to John 10. Only God's sheep hear.

Tozer's "The Speaking Voice", then, postulates two "universals"; 1. a provisional universal atonement and 2. a "universal voice" (and ability to hear that voice). And this is where Tozer fails in his order of salvation; he has the wrong foundation, the assumption that everyone is hearing this "universal voice". To be sure everyone does hear the "voice" (if we can take this from Psa. 19) of natural revelation. But not everyone can hear the voice of the *Shepherd*. "My sheep hear My voice." John 10:27. The context of John 10 tacitly assumes that there are some who *just cannot hear the Shepherd*. But this has no room in Tozer's soteriology, as we see in two paragraphs of TSV especially.

¹ *Ordo Salutis* ("order of salvation") has to do with which step in salvation came first, and, more importantly, it has to do with who made the first move in our salvation. The wide spectrum of modern Christianity insists that any and every saved person had to make that first move: He needed to reach out in faith to God. Reformed theology, by contrast, maintains that that the first move is God's (Eph. 1:5, 11; John 1:13; 15:5; 1 John 4:19). This issue of *Ordo Salutis* is not a mere tedious technicality like the riddle "Which came first: The chicken or the egg?" It actually answers the question "To whom do we give the glory for our salvation: God or ourselves?"

² "*Provisional universal atonement*", is the modern soteriological tenet that is directly opposed to the Biblical "particular atonement" (John 17:6- 10) but it is not to be confused with the outright heretical universalism, the belief that everyone will eventually be saved.

Says Tozer:

Whoever will listen will hear the speaking Heaven. This is definitely not the hour when men take kindly to an exhortation to listen, for listening is not today a part of popular religion. We are at the opposite end of the pole from there. Religion has accepted the monstrous heresy that noise, size, activity and bluster make a man dear to God. But we may take heart. To a people caught in the tempest of the last great conflict God says, "Be still, and know that I am God," and still He says it, as if He means to tell us that our strength and safety lie not in noise but in silence.

By the way, It is not surprising that Tozer plucks this particular phrase out of its context and makes its say what it really doesn't. The original context of **Psalm 46:10** from whence this is taken is to "cease striving (KJV "be still") and know that I am God." The "striving" is not of a person who is at odds with himself, or who just needs to have a quiet time. The striving here, according to the context (see verses 8 and 9), is active enmity against God and His people. So, in the verse Tozer uses, the call is not for a quiet time – but *surrender. Quit warring against God.*

Matthew Henry paraphrases and expounds on verse ten thus:

"Let his enemies be still, and threaten no more, but know it, to their terror, that he is God, one infinitely above them, and that will certainly be too hard for them; let them rage no more, for it is all in vain"

But Tozer stands by his misinterpretation of **Psalm 46:10** because it fits his foundation: *that we can prepare for God to save us*. It is important for Tozer to have this be about preparative quietude because he is an admitted synergist when it comes to salvation. He needs to make room for – and find authorizing verses for – preparatory cooperation on the part of the willing would-be Christian.

Back to Tozer's second paragraph:

It is important that we get still to wait on God. And it is best that we get alone, preferably with our Bible outspread before us. Then if we will we may draw near to God and begin to hear Him speak to us in our hearts. I think for the average person the progression will be something like this: First a sound as of a Presence walking in the garden. Then a voice, more intelligible, but still far from clear. Then the happy moment when the Spirit begins to illuminate the Scriptures, and that which had been only a sound, or at best a voice, now becomes an intelligible word, warm and intimate and clear as the word of a dear friend. Then will come life and light, and best of all, ability to see and rest in and embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and All.

So here is the order of salvation per Tozer:

First of all – and this is an important detail – he is referring to an unsaved person here. His “*average person*” is an unsaved one. If an unsaved person just follows these prescribed steps, so he assures us, he will do well.

1. Getting still (a misuse of Scripture already – see above)

2. “*If we will*” – but of course, we know that God works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. And we know that “no one seeks God” (= no one is willing). So already Tozer is describing a creature who doesn’t exist.

3. “*Sound of a presence in the garden*”? This is subjective in the extreme. How does this work out in shoe leather? When we are describing our salvation we cannot afford to be poetic or vague. The Biblical allusion is to an historical event for Adam and Eve, but it communicates nothing to us.

4. Then a more intelligible voice – This idea of progressive awareness of God is common with mystics but it is not in the Word of God. But more on this later.

5. “*Then the happy moment when the Spirit begins to illuminate the Scriptures*”...and...”*an intelligible word*”.

6. “*Then will come life and light, and best of all, ability to see and rest in and embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord*”. – So, in light of this last step, where do we place, say, **John 3:3?**

“*Except a man be born again he cannot even see the Kingdom of God.*”

In other words, unless we have sight (Tozer’s step 6) we cannot even see (and move toward) God (step 3- 5). Thus #6 is a prerequisite for 3- 5. **It is all out of order.**

This whole notion of progressive revelation – on a *personal* scale – is largely foreign to Scripture. God opened Lydia’s heart to listen to Paul’s preaching. Many times, in fact, salvation in Scripture is quite abrupt. In no place is it the way Tozer imagines.

So his advice on how to approach God is bad.

The saved do not need it.

The unsaved cannot put it into practice.

The Word of God versus the Voice of God

On the face of it Tozer's "Speaking Voice" seems to lift up the Word of God, but it is actually the *voice* of God – something different altogether – that he puts front and center. The danger of this is not immediately apparent, perhaps, but it is a real one.

Some people will read this Tozer article in a charitable half-light and will thus make these words mean what they prefer for him to have written. But anyone who reads impartially is left with an alarming conclusion: Tozer is encouraging trust in something other than the Word of God.

In TSV Tozer speaks of two types of "word": the Word of God and the "speaking voice". The speaking voice, says Tozer, gives meaning and life to the written word, the Bible.

This is true, yet it is not the whole story. In this article Tozer builds up a contrast between these two "words", in order to emphasize the second one, the speaking voice. This is the voice that we need to listen to attentively, insists our author. But here is the problem – and the very great danger: That "speaking voice" is a subjective one. It has to be. How can anyone be assured that the "voice" they are "hearing" at any one time is from God, from Satan, from self, or from the other side of thin apartment walls? He can't.

But here is the good news: Though Tozer says we are to strain ("be still") to hear this "inner voice", God says, by way of contrast, we are to read His Word, believe it, teach it, live it. If we do this, we will do well. We don't have to worry about whether this is God's Word. We *know* that it is. We don't have to strain over subjective "voices". We have the blessed objective Word of Life! And we don't have to agonize over it's meaning. Much of the Bible is quite clear. As we obey what we know, God opens up our understanding to know more, obey more, love Him more (John 7:17; Heb. 5:14).

Tozer's prescription for holiness, by comparison – *were it taken to logical conclusion* – would create self-centered, spiritually starved holier-than-thou mystics. This is inevitable since the trend of his teaching, not just in this article but throughout his works, is to denigrate the objective Word – the only Bread and Meat that gives us Life, John 6:51- 57, 63- 68 – and to train his adherents to be experience seekers. Yet if we lose connection to the Head we starve to death spiritually, Col. 2:18- 19.

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