

Tozer's Teaching: Dangerous Tenets

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A Conversation on his Teaching Examining especially chapter five of his "I Call it Heresy"

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

Please note first of all that "*Heresy*" is the word in Tozer's own title, not mine. The following is from an Internet discussion with a colleague on A.W. Tozer (name changed). His (B.R.'s) comments are in gray. *Tozer's are in green italics*. My comments are in blue, my older comments light blue.

Thank you, B.R, for taking the time in response to my post. I will take it in the spirit intended. I certainly am aware that I can take things personally, as in my being rebuffed both at the Highway and Mountain Retreat. I can't pretend that I am impervious to that. So, look you implied, I need to examine my critiques in the light of that. I also need to perhaps be clearer that it is not only Tozer that I am "attacking" but a wider, prevalent mindset of like-minded teachers (**Oswald Chambers, Selwyn Hughes, etc**).

On the other hand, I hope you will consider some of the things brought up below. I do believe that we see the importance of this issue differently, and perhaps we also differ on why this is important.

Most of this post has to do with the chapter in Tozer that you mentioned. I used that one since you brought it up. I thought I had read it (but under a different title, "*I Talk Back to the Devil*" Studies on 1 Peter), but I found it online and reread that chapter. Since it was one you recommended - with some reservations - I thought it would be a good source to bring out some of his beliefs using what is considered to be one of his better chapters.

But first the other comments. I had written:

> I plan to have a series of articles on A.W. Tozer, a writer whose
> credibility is greatly bolstered by Reformed writers who quote him
> but - apparently - don't read him. Looking beyond the pleasing
> quotes, we find considerably less than what we had come to expect
> in the actual teachings of Tozer. Yes, he has good comments on much
> of what the church needs.

B.R. answered:

"Reformed writers do recognise that Tozer wasn't reformed, just as they do recognise that John Wesley and D.L. Moody were not reformed. Yet like you said in your last sentence above, these latter do sometimes have "good comments on much of what the church needs"."

I respectfully differ on this. 1. Some Reformed writers view him as "almost Reformed". 2. Others view his stance as being irrelevant. Yet good comments on what the church needs *need to*

be followed up with Biblical solutions, else they only exacerbate the problem. By quoting Tozer, implied consent to Tozer's *solutions* is given. Yet Tozer's solutions for the problems of our church (see below) are not Biblical - since they marginalize the Bible - , and are in fact dangerous for the church.

"So just because Reformed writers quote Tozer does not mean that they endorse or approve his questionable theology. They simply want to give credit where credit is due in some of his views."

His theology is not only questionable. In many instances it is severely damaging. There are parallels between his theology and Pelagius. It is ironic that some today who speak so well of Augustine would at the same time make allowance for one whose theology was anathema to Augustine.

...

"Just because, Reformed Christians quote Tozer does not mean that they believe Christianity should be based on "sound bites". Quoting Christian writers, reformed or not, has never been seen as a substitute for sound theology."

> [Tozer articles:](#)

> [Tozer and Calvinism](#)

> : [Why is there this blind spot among so many Reformed writers](#)

> [concerning Tozer and Calvinism? Look past the quotes to the actual](#)

> [teachings of this "minor prophet"](#).

"Tom, I don't think there really is a "blind spot" regarding Tozer. Some Reformed Christians simply appreciate *some* of the things he has written and nothing more. I appreciate chapter 5 of his book, "I Call It Heresy!" where he defends Lordship salvation. Sure they are reformed writers who give a much better presentation of that topic (e.g. Kenneth Gentry and John MacArthur), but Tozer's book is a good tool for those in his theological camp to be taught that topic (who would otherwise shun reformed writers)."

The last sentence there makes it *seem* that *you* see Tozer as being somewhat Reformed, B.R. My understanding is that, there is no "otherwise" involved: Rather, those who read this fifth chapter, as I just did again, have had no exposure to Reformed theology.

BTW, those who want to check out the chapter that was referred to can read it, as well as the rest of "I Call It Heresy!" here:

www.theboc.com

I thought it might be good to take a closer look at this chapter. First Tozer writes about the authority of the Word of God, a good start:

"So, we are not forced to obey in the Christian life, but we are forced to make a choice at many points in our spiritual maturity.

We have that power within us to reject God's instruction - but where else shall we go? If we refuse His words, which way will we turn? If we turn away from the authority of God's Word, to whose authority do we yield? Our mistake is that we generally turn to some other human - a man with breath in his nostrils.

I am old-fashioned about the Word of God and its authority. I am committed to believe that if we ignore it or consider this commandment optional, we jeopardize our souls and earn for ourselves severe judgment to come."

Tozer goes on to describe of the need for holiness. Describing it in a Biblical way at first ... but then veering off elsewhere. He goes on to describe this holiness as that *"special quality and mysterious Presence [which] is morally right and walking in all the holy ways of God"*.

The problem is how he exemplifies this:

"By way of illustration, remember that Moses possessed these marks and qualities when he came down from the mount. He had been there with God 40 days and 40 nights - and when he came back everyone could tell where he had been. The lightning still played over his countenance, the glory of the Presence remained. This strange something which men cannot pin down or identify was there."

"I lament that this mysterious quality of holy Presence has all but forsaken the earth in our day."

Now I ask you, is this an accurate assessment for him to make? If you would read the large body of Tozer's works you would know that those who most exemplify that "numinous" "holy presence" and "mysterious fire" - in Tozer's thinking - are none other than the RCC mystics! These are the ones he refers to 15- 16 times in "Knowledge of the Holy" alone. So when Tozer refers to "holiness" he is not referring ultimately to *Biblical* holiness. He only uses that definition to set up his own specialized definition.

Sure, he is big on Lordship. So was **Pelagius** - to such an extent, and writing so sweetly of our need for God's grace, that even **Augustine** was at first taken in. That Irish monk (**Pelagius**) when he arrived in Rome, was rightly incensed at the moral laxity and - outright wickedness, in some cases - of many who claimed to be saints. Though his diagnosis was good, his cure was deadly. There is a parallel here, to some degree at least.

There is a subtle distinction in the holiness writings of people like Tozer (to this we can add devotionalists like **Oswald Chambers**, **Selwyn Hughes**, just to name a few):

1. Teachers of the Reformation like **Calvin**, **Luther**, etc. wrote overpoweringly about the holiness of God - and kept the focus on God Himself. Good for them! Thus our faith and hope is on God. We are constantly made to feel small in the presence, say, of **Calvin's** or **Owen's** God.
2. Tozer (and others mentioned, lest anyone think I am bashing one person) writes about the holiness of God as a quality or commodity that we need to have (which is true!). Yet he

inevitably brings the focus on the *quality itself*. He points to the experience - and not (as in Calvin) - to the Person. And this is why he finds such validating resonance in the testimony of RCC mystics: Their experience echoes his own.

Back to Tozer:

“Theologians long ago referred to it as the numinous, meaning that overplus of something that is more than righteous, but is righteous in a fearful, awe inspiring, wondrous, heavenly sense. It is as though it is marked with a brightness, glowing with a mysterious fire.”

Later on he describes this numinous presence as the Shekinah glory and as the manifestation at Pentecost. Once again Tozer mistakes the evidence: emphasizing the “it” over the “Him” (but this is in line with his deeper life holiness influences).

“Then it came down again at Pentecost - that same fire sitting upon each of them - and it rested upon them with an invisible visibility. If there had been cameras, I do not think those tongues of fire could have been photographed - but they were there. It was the sense of being in or surrounded by this holy element, and so strong was it that in Jerusalem when the Christians gathered on Solomon’s porch, the people stood off from them as wolves will stand away from a bright camp fire. They looked on, but the Bible says “no one else dared join them” (Acts 5:13a).”

They did not stay away from the saints “as wolves ... from a bright camp fire”. They stayed away because Almighty God, the Knower of hearts, killed the phonies (Ananias and Sapphira) from their midst! Tozer plays up the “it” again. Luke glorifies our God! Tozer merely zeroes in on experience.

“They stood away from Solomon’s porch because they had sensed a holy quality, a mysterious and holy Presence within this company of believers.”

Where do we see *any of this* in the Bible? We don’t. It is a crowning mark of both mystics and deeper life advocates that they emphasize experience supposedly from God over the Person and actual teaching (doctrine) of God. Tozer is true to both of these camps. He makes no mention of the judgment of God in killing two pretenders. “God is known by His judgments” (Psalm 9:16). He doesn’t mention it here, because it would interfere with his point that God would be known *if only his saints would manifest His numinous mysterious presence* - for which there is no verse.

“Later, when Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians to explain the mysterious fullness of the Holy Spirit of God, he said: “Some of you, when you meet together and you hear and obey God, know there is such a sense of God’s presence that the unbelievers fall on their faces and then go out and report that God is with you indeed.”“

“Now, that kind of Presence emanates from God as all holiness emanates from God.”

Once again Tozer runs roughshod over the context. He quotes 1 Cor. 14:25 and, if the reader had not read the context, vs. 19-25, he might grant Tozer his point. That context, however, is all about the usefulness of Biblical instruction, “prophesying” being used here in its more general sense of “forth-telling” (= “building up”). This is not about sharing a mysterious fire, but about sharing what God has taught from His Word! A point Tozer misses entirely.

For that matter, this entire book of Tozer’s, though it is said to be based on 1 Peter, is actually a loosely constructed exposition of Tozer’s method of holiness - using isolated texts from 1 Peter as suggestive illustration. He did the very same with the verse above from Exodus, Acts and 1 Corinthians.

Quoting further down in this chapter 5 still, Tozer, as he almost always does, drops the other shoe:

“I have met a few of God’s saints who appeared to have this holy brightness upon them, but they did not know it because of their humility and gentleness of spirit. I do not hesitate to confess that my fellowship with them has meant more to me than all of the teaching I have ever received. I do stand deeply indebted to every Bible teacher I have had through the years, but they did little but instruct my head. The brethren I have known who had this strange and mysterious quality and awareness of God’s Person and Presence instructed my heart.”

Here he downplays the Word of God. He says of “every Bible teacher” he has had - no exception - that they have essentially failed him! “Indebted”, yes, but “educated” (or, should we say, “initiated”) in the true sense, no. The ones who truly taught him - and (implied) should be teaching us - are “God’s saints who appeared to have this holy brightness upon them”. Elsewhere he makes clear who these “saints are: **Teresa of Avila, Richard Rolle, Nicholas of Cusa**, etc. a demonstrable “Who’s Who” of inveterate enemies of the true church (more on this in another post).

But notice what credentials Tozer looks for to prove that these saints should be followed: It is not “to the Word and to the Testimony (Isa. 8:20 - read the whole passage), not Acts 17:11. No. It is that they have a “holy brightness”. Hmm, I seem to remember that somewhere (2 Cor. 11:14 - no mention of “holiness”, but it passes for that among those whose standard for it is not Bible-based).

“So, Peter reminds us that it is the Lord who has said: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).”

“First, bring your life into line morally so that God can make it holy; then bring your spiritual life into line that God may settle upon you with the Holy Ghost - with that quality of the Wonderful and the Mysterious and the Divine.”

I know that you agree with me, B.R., but I will say it for the benefit of others: This is backwards salvation. Essentially: “Be holy so that God can make us holy”. Of course Tozer would say I am misquoting him; by his “holiness” he means “deeper life”, “inner life”, etc. However, any Christian should know that we cannot “bring our life into line morally” (a phrase worthy of both

Erasmus and Pelagius) without God first moving in us, opening our eyes (John 3:3), opening our ears (John 10:27), opening our hearts (Acts 16:14), “opening” our wills (John 1:13, Psalm 110:3).

Tozer misses all of this. His calls fall, not on *deaf*, but on *dead*, ears. He asks for those dead in sin to prepare themselves for God to save them - and chastens those who don't respond. This is like berating a corpse for being dead.

So much for this book. Back to your comments, B.R:

“But I support your efforts to critique Tozer's Arminian views. Just don't undermine it by second guessing Reformed Christians who like to quote him. Don't read too much into their absence of any serious qualifications about their Tozer Quotes (which they likely have).”

This is good advice. Thanks! That shouldn't be the issue at all.

“It's probable that they think that there are simply much bigger fish to fry when it comes to opposing serious error (e.g. Dave Hunt or Rick Warren, etc).”

Yet Tozer is getting to be a bigger and bigger fish than perhaps you realize. His appeal and credibility is across the board and he is being taught and alluded to more and more as the years pass by. And marketed: There is now available a “Works of A.W. Tozer” CD out with all of his writings and sermons. I think you underestimate this.

“So in regards to reformed Christians who do quote Tozer with approval, you need to analyze that on each particular case of why they do that, rather than by a sweeping generalization, or by an unsupported presumption that they have a “blind spot”. ”

Granted.

“Also, I think you might be careful not to overstate your concerns about Tozer. If his theology is really as dangerous as you seem to think, then wouldn't that have already been clearly point out by other reformed Christians years ago? Surely you cannot believe that you are the only one who is immune from having any “blind spots”?”

I am not responsible for what others see - or don't see. I am responsible for speaking up for what I see. I know that that sounds pious and perhaps arrogant, but I think you understand what I mean. If I am wrong on Tozer and his type of theology, and if I am wrong in seeing it as a major danger, then let someone show me this from Scripture.

There is a name for that type of argument that you employ in that last sentence but I forget what it was. Anyhow, it is a logical fallacy. On the one hand, we are to respect and listen to our peers on these issues. On the other, we are not to stifle what we believe is a legitimate - and nagging - perception.

BTW, I have already had several emails from people who have thanked me, and quite agreed with the assessment. One of them even said that he wondered if he “was the only one” who saw things wrong with Tozer, and that no one seems to be writing against him.

Well, maybe no one writes against him because ... well, *no one writes against him.*

Herd mentality works for sheep too.

Source: <http://asterisktom.xanga.com/533965151/tozers-teaching-dangerous-tenets/>