

A.W. Tozer

A Legacy of Light, Part 2

Acts 2:21; Colossians 3:1

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter stood and delivered the sermon that would effectively launch the New Testament church.

He delivered an invitation – the first of its kind to be applied to New Testament Christianity. It was a quote from the prophet Joel that said, “***And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.***” (*Acts 2:21*)

We aren’t given the full manuscript of Peter’s sermon – in fact, Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, simply says that with many other words, Peter kept on exhorting his audience to be saved – literally – ***be rescued – from this perverse/unbelieving generation.*** (*Acts 2:40*).

Luke goes on to add that 3,000 people believed the gospel bound up and delivered in this sermon – that the man they’d crucified had resurrected from the dead and was none other than the ***anointed, sovereign Lord*** (*Acts 2:36*).

Thousands believed – they accepted the invitation and effectively called upon the name of the Lord and were saved.

That same invitation would be acted upon some 1,900 years later in the heart and life of a farm boy named Aiden Wilson Tozer.

Aiden was born in 1897 in a small farming community in western Pennsylvania. His family was extremely poor and struggled to make ends meet.

When he was 15 years old, the Tozer family moved to Akron, Ohio and landed jobs in the automobile tire industry. One afternoon in 1912, as Aiden was walking home from his job at Goodyear, he overheard a street preacher exhorting a crowd to call on the Lord in order to be saved.

Tozer knew enough of the gospel – and at that moment, the Spirit of God convicted his heart. He went home and immediately climbed up into the attic where he fell to his knees and called upon God to save him.

He knew immediately that he was different. In fact, he knew, intuitively, that Christians were different than everyone else. He would later write, “Are you willing to live with the fact that you as a Christian are an odd number? You feel love for One you’ve never met; you talk every day to Someone you can’t see and expect to go to heaven because of what Someone else has already for you!” How different can you be?¹

And so A. W. Tozer’s Christian life began . . . in fact, he would not only be out of step with his world, he would be out of step with the opinions and the lifestyles of the Christian world at large.

His ministry as a prophetic voice began in earnest.

Seven years later, at the age of 22 and without any formal training, he began 44 years of pastoral ministry.

He struggled with weak lungs and a voice, he said himself, had a nasal quality to it that he felt needed improving. His biographer, James Snyder writes, “Typical of Tozer, he went to a bookstore and purchased a volume on voice training to learn all he could about voice control. In his office was a large copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Tozer would place it on a music stand borrowed from the sanctuary and read it aloud. He would end up reading the book 4 times in order to strengthen his voice and gain better control. He even carried

balloons in his briefcase and blew them up to help strengthen his lungs.”ⁱⁱ

It wasn’t vanity at all . . . it was deep rooted passion to be the best spokesman for God that he could possibly be.

Frankly, he didn’t care what people thought about him – he simply wanted to preach the truth, no matter what it meant.

In Warren Wiersbe’s biographical comments on Tozer, he wrote, “I heard Tozer preach many times – and it was about as safe as opening the door of a furnace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Tozer would preach anywhere . . . denominations meant nothing to him – instead, he would look for what he called the fellowship of burning hearts.

And he was blatantly critical of Christian authors as well; for instance, he once read a Christian book, after which he commented that it had as much spiritual benefit as shaving with a banana.

The author never quite forgave him for that.

30 of his years would be in Chicago at Southside Alliance Church – a church that then grew from 80 people to nearly 1,000. He was later elected editor of the Missionary and Alliance magazine –then called the Alliance Weekly, and his first article appeared on June 3rd, 1950.

These articles immediately challenged the status quo within the evangelical church. In fact, in that first editorial, Tozer wrote, “It will cost something to walk slow in the parade of the ages while excited men of time rush about confusing motion with progress.”^{iv}

Throughout Tozer’s 44 years of ministry, he consistently called the Christian and the church to a new reformation. He constantly warned the church of her spiritual decline.

For instance, he wrote, “Until we have a reformation, all our books and all our schools and our magazines are only the working of bacteria in the decaying church.”

If you could summarize the ministry passion of A.W. Tozer, the verse he quoted at the beginning of one of his most famous books serves as his life verse. Paul is writing to the *Colossians 3:1-3*. ***Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth; for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is***

revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

To see Christ exalted – seated – sovereign; to see God as majestic and glorified.

That would become A.W. Tozer’s driving passion.

He wrote in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, “so necessary to the church is a lofty concept of God that when that concept in any measure declines, the church with her worship and her moral standards declines along with it. The first step down for any church is taken when it surrenders its high opinion of God. And we do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undimmed and undiminished that noble concept of God.”^v

He would sell several million copies of his books, by the way, and give all the money away. That created problems for his family – and I’ll talk about that in a moment, but Tozer obviously and passionately believed in this exalted vision of Christ to whom every believer is to surrender.

Tozer was often offensive to anyone who fell short of that vision.

He would write that so much of what passes for New Testament Christianity is little more than truth sweetened with music, made palatable by religious entertainment.

He once offended a Holiness church he’d been asked to speak at one Sunday morning. Before he spoke, the service was filled with, in his view nothing less than silly music and other forms of entertainment. When his turn came to preach, he got up and without any warmth or introduction said, “Whatever happened to the holiness of God to you holiness people?” He then set his sermon aside and proceeded to preach on the holiness of God.^{vi}

Keep in mind that Tozer was challenging the church of the last generation – imagine what he’d say to our generation.

To a world of Christians 50 years ago Tozer wrote – “The church has sold out to carnal methods, carnal philosophies, carnal viewpoints, carnal gadgets and have lost the glory of God in our midst. We are a starved generation that has never seen the glory of God.”

If that wasn’t painful enough to hear – Tozer’s criticism could become even sharper as they found their mark – he would write, “The church today is limping from one gimmick to another like so many drunks in a fog.”

No wonder, as an older man, Tozer would say to a friend that he had preached himself off every platform in the country.

But he wasn't all criticism . . . Tozer preached and wrote of biblical solutions.

He would write his generation and to ours – and I quote these powerful words, “To regain her lost power, the church must have a transforming vision of God – not the utilitarian God who is having a run of popularity today, whose chief claim to men's attention is His ability to bring them success; the God we must learn to know is the Majesty in the heavens; He it is that sits upon the circle of the earth who stretches out the heavens as a curtain; who brings out His starry host by number and calls them all by names through the greatness of His power.”^{vii}

I don't know about you, but this is one of perhaps Tozer's lasting legacies to the church . . .

Again – he lived to see Paul's challenge to the Colossians become a reality – to see Christ become the priority of our desires as exalted Lord.

In fact, as I tried to summarize his legacy – which is effectively impossible – there are at least three aspects of Tozer's ministry that continue to demand another hearing . . . another challenge and evaluation of the church in *our* generation.

One relates to the matter of preaching and teaching the Bible and I found this challenging and encouraging.

Tozer wrote that the lack of genuine exposition of scripture is often times nothing more than the preacher's unwillingness to get himself into trouble.

But Tozer would remind us all, when he wrote that preachers were not diplomats delivering compromises – they were prophets delivering ultimatums.

And that's because – he noted – the purpose of genuine exposition is application – biblical preaching desires nothing less than moral and theological reform.

He would write – and I quote – “No one is better [off, by] simply knowing that God in the beginning created the heavens and the earth. The devil knows that, and so did Ahab and Judas Iscariot. No one is better for knowing that God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son to die for their redemption. In hell there are millions that know that. The purpose behind all doctrine – [and the preaching of it] – is to secure moral action.”^{viii}

It wasn't just biblical knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

In fact, Tozer once shocked his world by writing it this way – quote – “The Devil is a better theologian than any of us, yet he remains the Devil.”

In other words, all the knowledge the Devil has, which would be incredible, has made him still the Devil.

As I read through pages and pages of Tozer's comments on Tozer's attitude toward the pulpit and the pastorate, it became obvious that he would have little patience with the contemporary preaching of our generation that skips from one verse to another, platitude to platitude, avoiding the hard passages, avoiding anything doctrinally divisive; effectively encouraging the Biblical illiteracy of the church; applauding knowledge without action and change and conviction and purity.

Tozer would issue this warning to the believer; “We must not select a few favorite passages to the exclusion of all others; nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.”

Another lasting legacy was Tozer's attitude toward the value of music.

Now you don't automatically view A.W. Tozer as a lover of sacred music, but he was passionate about its value.

While he decried the entertainment aspects that he felt had entangled the church, he loved the worship of God through corporate music.

But he wanted music that exalted Christ; he would often counsel young people to get a hymnbook, but don't get one, he'd caution, that is less than 100 years old.^{ix}

Throughout his ministry, Tozer risked offending those within his denomination by refusing to use the Missionary and Alliance hymnal, choosing instead to stack his church pews with an old version of a Brethren Hymnal because it contained – he said “those great hymns of the faith.”^x

Tozer simply understood, like the Reformers of old, the value of theologically sound music. He would put it this way; “Let any new Christian spend a year meditating on the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley and he will become a fine Christian.”^{xi}

He would be referring to hymns like, And Can it Be That I Should Gain or When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.

This was more than just advice.

He collected hymnals and was often seen on his way to an appointment, with his face buried in a hymnal.

He would spend hours on his knees with his Bible and his hymnal. In fact, Tozer would wear pants with reinforced material at the knees, so that he wouldn't wear holes in his pants as he spent so much time on his knees, with his hymnal and his Bible.

He would offer this profound advice – and I quote, “Sometimes our hearts are strangely stubborn and will not soften or grow tender no matter how much praying we do. It is often found that the reading or singing of a good hymn will melt the ice jam and start the inward affections flowing once again. I say it without qualification; after the sacred scriptures, the next best companion for the soul is sacred music.”^{xii}

One final legacy – and without a doubt, the most critical contribution of A.W. Tozer – was his exalted view of Christ; his ability to write in such a way that your vision of God was transformed and taken to new heights.

In fact, Tozer's opening line in his classic book on the attributes of God declared, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”^{xiii}

Which is one of the reasons I'm so grateful that Tozer was willing to put in the hard labor to write so that our thoughts about God could be elevated and improved.

On one occasion he spent all night awake as the train he was on traveled from Chicago to Texas. He had asked the porter for a small table in his room, and there in his little compartment he began writing away.

Eventually, the porter became worried that the light was on, but Tozer hadn't come to supper; he knocked on his door and asked, “Friend, would you like me to bring you something to eat?” Tozer never looked up but just mumbled, “Yes, bring me some toast and tea.”

At the end of the train ride, Tozer walked into the station with a rough draft under his arm entitled, “The Pursuit of God.” It would sell more than a million copies. But more importantly, it would reveal the nature of God that was being lost in his generation.

In there, he would write, “God is never surprised. He is never amazed. He never wonders about

anything; He doesn't need information, unless He is drawing it out of someone as He did with Adam in the garden when He asked, “Adam, where are you?”^{xiv}

“God has never learned from anyone. God cannot learn. Could God at any time or in any manner receive into His mind knowledge that He did not possess and had not possessed from eternity, He would be less than Himself. To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher, even though that teacher be an archangel, is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of heaven and earth. God knows effortlessly all matters, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all feelings, all desires, every unuttered secret. God never discovers anything!”^{xv}

Now I could put a period here and we might wonder at how amazing A.W. Tozer was – a man who obviously lived on the mountain tops of intimacy with God.

The truth is, like any reader of biography, the more you learn about someone, the more you discover what ought to be emulated and what ought to be forgotten.

Even the Apostle Paul would write, “*Be imitators of me – as I imitate Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 11:1)

In other words, “don't just follow me for the sake of imitating me – imitate me insofar as you see me following after and imitating Jesus Christ.

No Christian from the past or present should be shown as perfect; all the warts and bumps airbrushed away and the halo always straight and shiny.

The truth is, Tozer would never want accolades or tributes. He was well aware of his shortcomings – and not aware of other shortcomings.

One author said that Tozer battled depression. I wonder if it was something more akin to struggling with a deep sense of introspection. He often seemed muddled in a painfully silent fog.^{xvi}

It wasn't unusual for him to come to the family dinner table and not say a word – with everyone else at the table awkwardly afraid to do so.

After church services, Tozer often attempted to avoid people by shunning conversations and often slipped into the church nursery room until everyone left.

While he commended his wife's gift of hospitality, he disliked having people over to their home and even refused to allow his wife's family to visit their home – a decision that brought a great deal

of hurt and frustration to his wife and their extended family.^{xvii}

All but one of his six children, his youngest daughter, never felt close to him and grew estranged from him over the years.

Even though Tozer brought in thousands of dollars from book sales, he never explained why he refused to make his family's life – and his wife's demands – more bearable by purchasing a family car. Instead, they all – including Tozer – were forced to use busses and trains and borrowed rides from other people.

And he made sure they lived near enough to the church so they could all walk to church.

You can only imagine how terribly difficult their home life was – and the extra difficulties his wife had to endure by his demanding frugality.

Three years after accepting a church in Canada – on the agreement that all he would have to do was preach – he suddenly died of a heart attack. He was 66 years old.

It was only after his death that his wife would discover he had refused to purchase a pension. She also learned that he'd given half his paycheck back to the churches he pastored and had taken no royalties from the millions of books sold, which he had authored.

Tozer was proof that while it was possible to see God in a fresh and intimate ways, it was possible to miss seeing other people around him – even his own family.

The old adage, the cobbler's wife has no shoes, is too often true – in some ways it was true, even in the life of someone like A.W. Tozer.

He was a man who's mind and affections were so set on Christ above, that he missed some things that needed attention on earth below.

The truth is, we're all like that more than we will ever realize.

But A.W. Tozer's advice and perspective still rings true – and I fear that for the average Christian, the opposite is true – so much of our affection and attention is based on the things of earth, that the things of Christ are never pursued with passion and singularity.

Not many of us will err on the side of Tozer . . . think about it – how many of us would give thousands of dollars away and be forced to ride bus with your kids in tow?

Don't misunderstand – I think he should have bought a car. In fact, a Chevy Pickup would have been perfect.

But, as Warren Wiersbe wrote of him, Tozer was in so many ways a man who walked to the beat of a different drummer.^{xviii}

He simply wanted God more than anything else. And he was never content with where he was in his pursuit of the glory of God.

Listen to a prayer he composed . . . it goes like this:

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully aware of my need for further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, that so I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/29/2013 by Stephen Davey.
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i Adapted from, Charles R. Swindoll, The Practical Life of Purity (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 9

ii James L. Snyder, The Life of A.W. Tozer (Regal, 2009), p. 109

iii Warren W. Wiersbe, 50 People Every Christian Should Know (Baker Books, 2009), p. 352

iv www.eastwallingfordbaptist.com/a_w_tozer.html

v A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy (Harper/San Francisco, 1961), p. 6.

vi Retold by James L. Snyder in his introduction to A.W. Tozer, Reclaiming Christianity (Regal, 2005), p. 8

vii Steven Lawson, Heaven Help Us! (Navpress, 1995), p. 22

viii From A.W. Tozer's, Exposition Must Have Application, Chapter 7 from Of God and Men (Harrisburg, Penn, Christian Publications, 1960)

ix www.awtozerclassics.com/articles/article/4891846/86017.html

x Ibid

xi Ibid

xii Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), p. 465

xiii A.W. Tozer, The Attributes of God (HarperOne reprint, 2009), p. 1

xiv Quoted by Charles Swindoll, Living Beyond the Daily Grind, Part 2 (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 359

xv James Boice, Psalms: Volume 3 (Baker Books, 1998), p. 1202

xvi Adapted from www.ceruleansanctum.com/2008/05/review-a-passion-for-god-of-a-w-tozer.html

xvii Adapted from challies.com February 17/2011

xviii Warren W. Wiersbe, A Treasury of Tozer (Baker Book House, 1980), p. 7