

## Tozer on Worshipping God

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For thirty-one years A. W. Tozer was pastor of Southside Alliance Church in Chicago. Few preachers then, much less today, were more penetrating in what they had to say, to both unbelievers and believers. Indeed, those who have read any of Tozer's more than forty books often do so because they learn truths from him that they don't hear from anyone else.

Prior to his death in 1963, Tozer declared his belief that "worship acceptable to God is the missing crown jewel in evangelical Christianity." He intended to write one last book, a book focusing on attitudes, beliefs, and practices in Christian worship. He did not have the opportunity to write that book, but in 1962 he preached a series of messages entitled, "Worship, the Chief End of Man." He was very concerned about the fact that the "war" had been lost, a reference to the invasion of the world into the church. His use of the word "war" in this context was almost prophetic to what would be, decades later, termed the "worship wars." Tozer strongly believed that in the early 1960s in America's churches, "Christianity has been watered down until the solution is so weak that if it were poison it would not hurt anyone, and if it were medicine it would not cure anyone!" Because Tozer died in 1963, he did not live to see the rise of seeker-sensitive worship services, but he did live long enough to observe the beginnings of an emphasis on "entertainment" and "self-centered" worship, and the danger of worshipping a god who is not God.

Of course, this problem has significantly increased since Tozer's day. For example, the title of Steven J. Lawson's book echos Tozer's warning: *Made in Our Image: What Shall We Do with a "User-Friendly" god?* (Multnomah, 2000), as does that of a book edited by D. Brent Laytham: *God is not...Religious, Nice, "One of Us," an American, a Capitalist* (Brazos, 2004). However, even though such books have been around for many years, most people in the church think man-centered worship and theology is someone else's problem, not their's, and few of these books sell very well.

Always known for his frank and straightforward preaching, Tozer referred to such worship as "irresponsible, amusement-made, paganized pseudo-religion which passes today for the faith of Christ and which is being spread all over the world by unspiritual men employing unscriptural methods to achieve their ends" (Tozer, *The Root of Righteousness*, 110).

Tozer's insights and warnings from his writings and sermons about worship practices that have been increasingly popular since the early 1960s have been helpfully compiled and edited into two books: *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment* (WingSpread Publishers, 2006), compiled by James L. Snyder, and *Whatever Happened to Worship: A Call to True Worship* (WingSpread Publishers, 2006), compiled and edited by Gerald B. Smith. Every pastor, associate pastor, youth pastor, and worship leader who reads these two books will, without question, feel like he or she has been under a penetrating light of revelation and judgment. But, given how far modern evangelicals have moved away from biblical worship, our tendency is to easily push aside Tozer's warnings and condemnations and argue they are dated. Even so, it is embarrassing to explain why modern evangelical worship has so much in common with pagan worship, and ignores clear biblical teaching on how the God of the Bible should be worshiped.

In his writings and sermons, A.W. Tozer repeatedly emphasizes that many people in the church today "worship" God and are satisfied with that worship, moved by such "worship," inspired by such "worship," encouraged by such "worship," but, in reality, they are not worshipping the God of the Bible. This is exactly the problem dealt with by Lawson and Laytham, as well as many other evangelical authors whose books have never made the best-seller lists. In his day, Tozer declared many churches were growing and adding hundreds and thousands of members, but they were not leading people to worship the biblical God. He said the people may be satisfied, uplifted, and excited by their "worship," but the fact remains that they do not have a clue to the nature of worshipping God in spirit and in truth. Wow! There is little doubt that if Tozer were on the scene today in America, his criticism would be even more blunt and direct, all in an effort to help the church see the "ditch" (grave) it is digging for herself.

In perhaps his most classic book, *The Pursuit of God*, Tozer articulated his belief that entertainment in worship is a symptom of idolatry:

This is the cause of a very serious breakdown in modern evangelicalism. The idea of cultivation and exercise, so dear to the saints of old, has now no place in our total religious picture. It is too slow, too common. We now demand glamour and fast-flowing dramatic action. A generation of Christians reared among push buttons and automatic machines is impatient of slower and less direct methods of reaching their goals. We have been trying to apply machine-age methods to our relations with God. We read our chapter, have our short devotions and rush away, hoping to make up for our deep inward bankruptcy by attending another gospel meeting or listening to another thrilling story told by a religious adventurer lately returned from afar.

The tragic results of this spirit are all about us: shallow loves, hollow religious philosophies, the preponderance of the element of fun in gospel meetings, the glorification of men, trust in religious externalities, quasi-religious fellowships, salesmanship methods, the mistaking of dynamic personality for the power of the Spirit. These and such as these are the symptoms of an evil disease, a deep and serious malady of the soul (Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 62-63).

Regarding the pressure on pastors to produce "successful" or growing churches, Tozer wrote:

Pastors and churches in our hectic times are harassed by the temptation to seek size at any cost and to secure by inflation what they cannot gain by legitimate growth. The mixed multitude cries for quantity and will not forgive a minister who insists upon solid values and permanence. Many a man of God is being subjected to cruel pressure by the ill-taught members of his flock who scorn his slow methods and demand quick results and a popular following regardless of quality. These children play in the market-places and cannot overlook the affront we do them by our refusal to dance when they whistle or to weep when they, out of caprice, pipe a sad tune. They are greedy for thrills, and since they dare no longer seek them in the theater, they demand to have them brought into the church (Tozer, *The Next Chapter After the Last*, 8).

Long before today's worship wars, Tozer made it clear where he stood as an evangelical in the holiness tradition:

A church fed on excitement is no New Testament church at all. The desire for surface stimulation is a sure mark of the fallen nature, the very thing Christ died to deliver us from. A curious crowd of baptized worldlings waiting each Sunday for the quasi-religious needle to give them a lift bears no relation whatsoever to a true assembly of Christian believers. And that its members protest their undying faith in the Bible does not change things any. "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Tozer, *The Next Chapter After the Last*, 14).

In a sermon entitled, "The Holy Spirit," (Sermon #6, on Romans 12:1-2), Tozer declared:

The old writers talked about the dark night of the soul. A time of emptying. A time when it became dark all around us. But we're too carnal to allow our hearts to get dark longing for God now. We're so determined we want to be happy that if we can't be happy by the Holy Ghost we'll drum up our happiness. Religious "Rock and Rollers"! We're going to get happy somehow if we've got to beat it up with a tom-tom. You can have that kind of happiness if you want it, but if you don't want it and are dissatisfied with it and you want the joy that comes out of Joseph's new tomb open now forever, if you want the joy that comes from the Holy Ghost, a well of water springing up within you forever, then you will likely have a loneliness and an inner darkness and a despair with self and you'll wonder what happened to you and you'll say, "Am I backsliding?" No, you're not backsliding. You are going on with God (Tozer, "The Holy Spirit," Sermon #6, Romans 12:1-2, Toronto).

In another sermon based on Hebrews, Tozer contrasted believers seeking entertainment to taking up Christ's cross:

There is a cross for you and me and there is a cross for every one of us. And that cross is subjective and internal and experiential....That cross is that which we voluntarily take up - that's hard and bitter and distasteful - that we do for Christ's sake and suffer the consequences and despise the shame....

But the evangelicals of which we are a part say, "Let the cross kill Jesus but we will live on and be happy and have fun." But the cross on the hill has got to become the cross in the heart. When the cross on the hill has been transformed by the miraculous grace of the Holy Ghost into the cross in the heart, then we begin to know something of what it means and it will become to us the cross of power (Tozer, Sermon #40 on Hebrews, Toronto).

In Tozer's day there was some debate about whether or not worship and entertainment overlapped to any degree. As the above quotations illustrate, Tozer argued there is a distinct difference and no overlap. For example, he did not view the singing of a hymn as entertainment. He wrote:

When you raise your eyes to God and sing, "Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord to me," is that entertainment - or is it worship? Isn't there a difference between worship and entertainment? The church that can't worship must be entertained. And men who can't lead a church to worship must provide the entertainment. That is why we have the great evangelical heresy here today - the heresy of religious entertainment (Tozer, *Success and the Christian*, 6-7).

Sounding much like Os Guinness in his book, *The Grave-digger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (InterVarsity, 1983), Tozer was very concerned in his day that modern culture was modifying (subverting) and changing the Christian faith. Tozer said:

The devil is busy brainwashing us and conditioning us little by little and feeding his ideas into the church. The counsel of the ungodly comes and as the ideas of the ungodly enter the church the ideas of God go out. My crusade in the day in which I live is to wake the church and rouse it to the fact that it is being brainwashed and propagandized into accepting

that which it would never accept if it were a law in Washington (Sermon, "Resisting the World's Propaganda," General Council).

In one of his many books, Tozer talked about the effort to make Christ popular:

The modern effort to popularize the Christian faith has been extremely damaging to that faith. The purpose has been to simplify truth for the masses by using the language of the masses instead of the language of the church. It has not succeeded, but has added to rather than diminished religious confusion (Tozer, *The Set of the Sail*, 159).

Long before modern evangelical authors begin to articulate the dangers of bringing popular culture into the church in order to attract seekers, Tozer was vocalizing the same warning. The "health and wealth" gospel of Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, and Kenneth Copeland would come after Tozer, but that teaching had its precursors all through Tozer's lifetime. In emphasizing holiness, the "deeper life," and the place of suffering in the faith, Tozer wrote:

Another reason for the absence of real yearning for Christ's return is that Christians are so comfortable in this world that they have little desire to leave it. For those leaders who set the pace of religion and determine its content and quality, Christianity has become of late remarkably lucrative. The streets of gold do not have too great an appeal for those who find it so easy to pile up gold and silver in the service of the Lord here on earth. We all want to reserve the hope of heaven as a kind of insurance against the day of death but as long as we are healthy and comfortable, why change a familiar good for something about which we actually know very little? So reasons the carnal mind, and so subtly that we are scarcely aware of it.

Again, in these times religion has become jolly good fun right here in this present world, and what's the hurry about heaven anyway? Christianity, contrary to what some had thought, is another and higher form of entertainment. Christ has done all the suffering. He has shed all the tears and carried all the crosses; we have but to enjoy the benefits of His heartbreak in the form of religious pleasures modeled after the world but carried on in the name of Jesus. So say the same people who claim to believe in Christ's second coming (Tozer, *Born After Midnight*, 134).

Steven Lawson is one of many evangelical authors today who is carrying on A.W. Tozer's biblical preaching and teaching. Regarding the tragedy that is taking place in many popular and growing churches, Lawson writes:

An offense greater by far than breaking into the Louvre and spray painting the Mona Lisa is the work of those who, whether intentionally or not, unlawfully enter the corridors of our hearts and despoil us of a true picture of God. The greatest sin anyone can commit is to distort the true knowledge of God. Vandalizing God's image - not with spray cans or permanent markers, but with loose thinking, partial truths, and bad theology - is at the center of every sin. Such sacrilege is a crime of the highest order (Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, Multnomah, 2000, 32).

Lawson begins his book this way:

A "user-friendly" god has become the trend of the day - a god made in our image, an inversion of the truth of man made in His image. Human qualities and finite limitations have been assigned to the One who exceeds our comprehension. Rather than seeing Him as He is - above and beyond us, infinite in His divine perfections - He is portrayed as a glorified us.

The result is a god who makes us feel comfortable - one we can control and manage, even use. This downsized version of God is a diminutive deity dependent upon us; we are not dependent upon Him. Forged upon the anvil of a sloppy handling of Scripture and shallow thoughts about God, this user-friendly sovereign is a strange kind of co-dependent god, and we see the effects of his influence all around us. Many churches have become nothing more than entertainment centers, giving slick performances to growing numbers of mesmerized but unproductive churchgoers. Such devices may bring people into the church, but they do not transform them once they arrive (Lawson, 15-16).

Lawson goes on to talk about churches that are consumer-driven, culture-driven, driven by felt-needs, and those that are purpose-driven. He says while there are elements in each of these approaches that are worthwhile, they are marked by more negatives than positives. He says, "The problem with all these approaches to the church is that they lack depth. On the surface they sound fine. But, unfortunately, that is where they remain - on the surface" (Lawson, 17).

The problem of worshipping a god that is not the God of the Bible is a serious one. Unfortunately, as noted above, this problem is subtle and, because false beliefs and experiences tend to feel so true and real, it is also one that is viewed as being someone else's problem. Along with Lawson's book, *God is Not...*, edited by D. Brent Laytham (Brazos, 2004), addresses this same issue. In addition to Laytham's, the essays in the book are written by Rodney Clapp, D. Stephen Long, Michael J. Baxter, Michael L. Buddle, and William T. Cavanaugh. Although taking a somewhat different bent than the forthcoming *Christianity in Crisis - The 21st Century* by Hank Hanegraaff (Thomas Nelson, March 2009), like Hanegraaff, and Tozer, these writers are alarmed that many word of faith and prosperity teachers are now viewed as mainstream and thus the greatest threat to evangelical Christianity is today not from without, but from within.

For example, in his essay, "God is Not 'A Stranger on the Bus,'" playing on Joan Osborne's popular song "One of Us," Rodney Clapp, like Lawson, warns that many Christians today have cast God in their own image and the church in general accepts "contemporary popular culture's terms for evaluating itself and its events..." (Rodney Clapp, "God is Not 'A Stranger on the Bus,'" in *God is Not...*, edited by Laytham, 33).

In his essay, "God Is Not Nice," D. Stephen Long is more direct and frank, sounding very much like A.W. Tozer. He writes:

You can purchase the "nice god" for \$1.50 at yahoo.com, plus shipping and handling. The living God of Jewish and Christian faith will cost you considerably more. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Though these two gods are often confused with one another, though they are regularly called by the same names, they are utterly distinct. The nice god who seeks to meet our every need and who constantly seeks to relate to us on our own terms is not even distantly related to the Triune God of traditional Christian teaching. Yet in contemporary worship, preaching, and teaching, it is regularly the nice god we encounter...

In this essay I contrast these two images of God in order to show how the contemporary church has been led astray - indeed, led into slavery - by the nice god. The contrast, I confess, is overdrawn. For if the options were as easily seen as I present them here - either the nice god or the Triune God - then there would be less temptation to follow the nice god. But because the nice god continually hides under the cloak of traditional Christian language and practice, because the nice god continually makes alliance with our most passionate pieties and beliefs, I must intentionally overdraw the contrast so that we can see what is difficult to see (D. Stephen Long, "God Is Not Nice," in Laytham, 39-40).

Notice the problem here with which Tozer, Long, and all of us wrestle with in dealing with sincere believers who have been taken in by the nice god: "the contrast...is difficult to see." That is exactly as Satan would have it. Deception is his speciality.

Providing an overview of his essay, Long writes:

First, the nice god is dangerous because he is false - a creation of well-meaning but misguided church leaders, and because he is malicious - intent on killing us by stealth and sentimentality. Second, the nice god is relatively new, produced by the unholy alliance between a therapeutic culture that wants to feel better and a Protestant theology that focuses on Christ's benefits "for us." Third, I will conclude that the nice god, whose only job is to be nice to us, is not as morally or intellectually serious as the Triune God of traditional Christian faith, who always has been and always will be a community of love among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Only this God is fully and finally worthy of our thought and desire, of our worship, service, and praise (Long, 40).

Again, reemphasizing Tozer's concern for what he saw taking place in worship services in his day, Long observes today:

"User-Friendly Worship," "Entertainment Evangelism," "Meeting My Spiritual Needs," "The Friendly Church," "Jesus as My Personal Lord and Savior" - whether you find yourself in an evangelical, a mainline Protestant, or even a suburban Catholic church, language like this dominates the contemporary church jargon. Such talk is intended to be inoffensive. What could be less threatening than a god who only seeks my spiritual fulfillment, who wants to meet my needs in a tolerant, inclusive, nonjudgmental style? What could be less threatening than a god who seeks to be my "personal Savior?" Such talk is intended to be inviting. How are we going to have effective church growth if we do not begin "where people are" by trying to meet their needs? Don't we need first to tell people "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" before we tell them that "following Jesus will lead you to the cross"?

Listen carefully to most children's sermons, and the gospel you hear proclaimed is "God is nice. You should be nice, too." To which the clever child should respond, "Let me get this straight. Jesus was crucified by saying that God is nice and we can be, too?"...

Why has the church's understanding of God been reduced to this basic doctrine that "God is nice"? Because we want a harmless god. After all, the idea of god appears to have done a great deal of harm in human history. People kill and die in the name of god...But since some people cannot break the god habit altogether, the next best thing is to at least domesticate God in order to curb the danger (Long, 41-42).

Long next recalls how in Exodus 32, after Moses had come down the mountain and saw the golden calf, he told the people the Lord commanded those on His side, the Levites, to take their swords and go through the camp and kill "your brother, your friend and your neighbor" in God's service (Ex. 32:26-29). We are told about 3,000 of the people were killed. Long writes:

What kind of God allows His name to be used for that kind of despicable act? The golden calf never commanded such carnage. It offered the people spiritual fulfillment and a good time, too. When the golden calf was worshiped, the people

"rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel" (Ex. 32:6). A god who invites you to rise up and revel is a god who clearly wants to satisfy your personal "needs." Today we call this "entertainment evangelism" and suggest that faithful congregations adopt its strategies. But this God in whose name Moses speaks, this God seems dangerous - especially since this particular story is not an isolated incident. Surely that is why we try to domesticate the dangerous God of Israel and Christianity into an image, a concept, a "god" that we can more easily contain. We seek a god who will not allow for this kind of frightening excess. A god who is...nice.

But beware the nice god with the saccharine smile; beneath lies a vindictive spirit. Of course, the nice god appears to be fairly innocuous. His purpose is to give us a good time while insuring that god can never be taken so seriously as to demand that we sacrifice or suffer, that we die or kill in his name. It sounds like a safe strategy. But turning the living God into a sentimental idea does not make God less dangerous; it only hides the danger. And the danger is hidden even more by the fact that the primary purveyors of this kinder, gentler god are those who bear authority in the church. The nice god wants to kill us, but we can't see it because he is presented by a clericalism that is a monstrous hybrid of the Grand Inquisitor and Mickey Mouse.

Fyodor Dostevsky introduces us to the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel, Ivan Karamazov tells a story in which Christ "decided to show Himself, if only for a moment, to His people, long-suffering, tormented, sinful people who loved Him with a child-like love." People recognize Him and are drawn to Him. But a cardinal of the church, the "Grand Inquisitor," realizes that the presence of Jesus is dangerous. So he has Jesus arrested.

The ninety-year-old Grand Inquisitor says to Jesus, "You? Is it really you?...You need not answer me. Say nothing. I know only too well what you could tell me now. Besides, You have no right to add anything to what You said before. Did You come here to interfere and make things difficult for us?" The Grand Inquisitor then renders judgment on Jesus. He condemns Jesus for not fulfilling the people's needs - for not doing what the devil asked Jesus to do in the desert. The devil tried to offer the people bread, but Jesus "came empty-handed." The Grand Inquisitor tells Jesus, "You know that for the sake of that earthly bread, the spirit of the earth will rise up against You, will confront and conquer You, and they will all follow him shouting, 'Who is there to match the beast who has brought its fire from heaven?'" In other words, the Grand Inquisitor is condemning Jesus for refusing to do - then and now - the miracles that make people happy. Jesus did not throw Himself down from the temple, nor did He throw Himself down from the cross. Instead, for the sake of obedience and the freedom to do God's will He endured the cross with its suffering and violence. Who wants that? It is not nice, and it certainly is not what the people seek.

Because the Grand Inquisitor wants the people to be happy, because he wants to meet the people's needs, and because he has grown weary of the ways of the Christian God, he tells Jesus: "We shall tell them that we are loyal to You and that we rule over them in Your name. We shall be lying, because we do not intend to allow You to come back." For the sake of the people, this priest of the church recognizes that he must lie and do what Jesus refused to do - make the people happy by giving them the bread that Jesus refused to give. The Grand Inquisitor has lost his faith in that God. He no longer trusts a God who for the sake of freedom and obedience will tolerate suffering, judgment, and hell. The God found in Jesus simply cannot be trusted to meet people's perceived needs. So the Grand Inquisitor creates a new god but doesn't change God's name. Now he controls this god's actions to insure that the people under his care will be protected from the living God.

Now put the Grand Inquisitor into a Mickey Mouse costume, make him sing, "It's a small world after all," and we have the priests of our day who create the nice god, who teach us the prayer of Jabez, who remove the cross from the church. We get the ecclesial authorities who tell us that god never makes judgments but is always there to accept us "with open hearts, open minds, open doors" (this is the name of a recent advertising campaign of the United Methodist Church). It is as if God has been reduced to a friendly character with open arms who meets us at the entrance to his magic kingdom, inviting us to come in and find our individual fulfillment.

Of course, this god bears no relation to the God of Holy Scripture, but that may be a price we're willing to pay. For the Christian God seems to have let us down - all the violence, injustice, and oppression that has taken place in His name. The Christian God seems weak and ineffectual. When did He ever stop the torture of the innocent? Indeed, He even gives His own innocent Son over to torture and death!

Used as directed, the nice god promises results that are safe, effective, and enjoyable. The price appears small: we must live with the same lie as the Grand Inquisitor. But what is that compared to the cost of taking up a cross and following Christ? And our pain is less severe than the Grand Inquisitor's, for we anesthetize ourselves by continually denying that we have traded the living God for a newer, nicer model. We continue to talk earnestly about worship and witness and service in Jesus' name. The nice god is the rope that binds, the gag that silences Jesus - but always in Jesus' name (Long, 42-45).

If you are disturbed by this analysis, there is hope for you. However, you should know that relatively few people in the church today, even evangelical churches, apparently grasp this distinction. Indeed, for many decades, going back to the 19th century, there have been those in the church who have gained our attention, who, as Tozer observed in his day,

relate worship and entertainment, or if you like, revival and entertainment. Indeed, Long later points out that such manipulative people, either intentionally or unintentionally, view revival as "less a movement of the Spirit and more a mastery of the right means" (Long, 47). In other words, more something man brings about in the flesh, than something God does supernaturally. Worse, the vast majority of people involved in such revivals and churches are quite pleased and satisfied with the god held up at these events. As Lawson observes,

The sad result is this: Rather than seeking to become as much like heaven as they can, churches are instead striving to become like the world. Rather than pursuing spirituality and substance, many have become enamored with style and size. The sizzle - not the steak - has become the main entree. Gospel light is being replaced with gospel "lite," preaching with performance, exposition with entertainment, sound doctrine with sound checks, the upper room with the supper room, and the unfolding drama of redemption with - well, just plain drama (Lawson, *Made In Our Image*, 17).

This heretical contentment is nothing new. Perhaps you have heard the saying that many Christians are much better at supporting the idea or concept of prayer than they are at actually praying. In other words, what we profess with our lips is not always what we live out in our lives. Many Christians, yes, even evangelicals, can impressively talk the talk, but, as George Barna and others have observed, very few actually walk the walk. One of the major reasons for this facade is purely human: we want to impress people and have them think well of us, especially in the context of church. But another, deeper, and more spiritual reason is these people do not know the God of the Bible, they only know about Him. They will never read Marvin Hinten's *God is Not a Vending Machine* (Author's Choice, 1983).