

Entertainment, An Evangelical Heresy by A.W. Tozer

IN OUR DAY WE MUST BE DRAMATIC ABOUT EVERYTHING.

We don't want God to work unless He can make a theatrical production of it. We want Him to come dressed in costumes with a beard and with a staff. We want Him to play a part according to our ideas. Some of us even demand that He provide a colorful setting and fireworks as well! (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 8, pp. 48-49*)

Then there are some among us these days who have to depend upon truckloads of gadgets to get their religion going, and I am tempted to ask: What will they do when they don't have the help of the trappings and gadgets? The truck can't come along where they are going! (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 8, p. 50*)

Entertainment Is a Symptom

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. (*The Pursuit of God, pp. 62-63*)

The Danger of Overreacting

We have already seen the reaction [the denial of spiritual longing and desire] among the masses of evangelical Christians. There has been a revolt in two directions, a rather unconscious revolt, like the gasping of fish in a bowl where there is no oxygen. A great company of evangelicals have already gone over into the area of religious entertainment so that many gospel churches are tramping on the doorstep of the theatre. Over against that, some serious segments of fundamental and evangelical thought have revolted into the position of evangelical rationalism which finds it a practical thing to make peace with liberalism. (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 4, p. 88*)

Pressure on Religious Leaders

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 marketplaces 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. (*The Next Chapter after the Last*, p. 8)

Does Not Belong in Church

A church fed on entertainment 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 into the kingdom of heaven but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." (*The Next Chapter after the Last*, p. 14)

Pray for Conviction

Let's pray that God will bring conviction on the world. Let's pray that He will send conviction back. Religion has become so popular now that it is shown in theaters, sung over radio and in barn dances. Just one more form of entertainment. We fundamentals and evangelicals just will not believe the truth about ourselves and the kind of people we are. So we have a popular religion but very little power because we have very little conviction, very little repentance and very little sorrow. (*Sermon, "Men Do Not Believe the Truth about Themselves," John 8:38, General Council*)

Don't Seek Entertainment

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. (*Sermon #40 on Hebrews, Toronto*)

We have the breezy, self-confident Christians with little affinity for Christ and His cross. We have the joy-bell boys that can bounce out there and look as much like a "game show host" as possible. Yet, they are doing it for Jesus' sake?! The hypocrites! They're not doing it for Jesus' sake at all; they are doing it in their own carnal flesh and are using the church as a theater because they haven't yet reached the place where the legitimate theater would take them. (*Sermon, "Complete Surrender," Chicago*)

Religious shows leave a bad flavor. When they enter the holy place, they come perilously near to offering strange fire to the Lord. At their worst they are sacrilege; always they are unnecessary, and at their best they are a poor substitute for prayer and the Holy Ghost. Church plays are invariably cheap and amateurish, and in addition to grieving the Holy Ghost, those who attend them are cheated by getting wretchedly poor entertainment for their money. (*The Early Tozer: A Word in Season*, p. 98)

Not Real Joy

The reason evangelical Christianity has so many cowbells and handsaws and shows and films and funny gadgets and celebrated men and women to stir them up is because they don't have the joy of the Lord. A happy man doesn't need very much else. (*Sermon, "Fruit of the Spirit," Chicago*)

We don't have joy so we try to create it, and I think that God in His heaven is probably more kind and patient about all this than I am. But I think that even God must get awfully sick of what He sees: all the little cowbells we have to jingle to try to be happy when we are simply missing the fountain of happiness that ought to spring from within. When the well of joy isn't flowing, we try to paint the pump in order to get a little joy or tack jingle bells on the old pump handle, but it doesn't bring the water up. (*Sermon, "Fruit of the Spirit," Chicago*)

[Christianity has seen] a steady decline in the quality of Christian worship on the one hand and, on the other, the rise of religious entertainment as a source of mental pleasure. Wise leaders should have known that the human heart cannot exist in a vacuum. If men do not have joy in their hearts they will seek it somewhere else. If Christians are forbidden to enjoy the wine of the Spirit they will turn to the wine of the flesh for enjoyment. And that is exactly what fundamental Christianity (as well as the so-called "full gospel" groups) has done in the last quarter century. God's people have turned to the amusements of the world to try to squeeze a bit of juice out of them for the relief of their dry and joyless hearts. "Gospel" boogie singing now furnishes for many persons the only religious joy they know. Others wipe their eyes tenderly over "gospel" movies, and a countless number of amusements flourish everywhere, paid for by the consecrated tithes of persons who ought to know better. Our teachers took away our right to be happy in God, and the human heart wreaked its terrible vengeance by going on a fleshly binge from which the evangelical Church will not soon recover, if indeed it ever does. For multitudes of professed Christians today the Holy Spirit is not a necessity. They have learned to cheer their hearts and warm their hands at other fires. And scores of publishers and various grades of "producers" are waxing fat on their delinquency. (*The Root of the Righteous, p. 69*)

Attacking Amateurism

The church today is suffering from a rash of amateurism. Any untrained, unprepared, unspiritual, empty rattletrap of a fellow who is a bit ambitious can start himself something religious. Then we all listen to him, pay him for it, promote him and work to try to help this fellow who never heard from God in the first place. Amateurism has gone mad, gone wild. That's because we are not worshipers. Nobody who worships God is likely to do anything off beat or out of place. Nobody who is a true worshiper indeed is likely to give himself up to carnal and worldly religious projects. (*"The Chief End of Man," Sermon #4, Toronto, 1962*)

Because we are not worshipers we are wasting other people's money tremendously. We're marking time, we're spinning our wheels with the axles up on blocks, burning the gasoline and making a noise and getting no place. God calls us to worship and I find this missing in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in this day. Instead of worship, we are now second in entertainment to the theaters. I want to tell you something. If I want to see a show I know where I can see a good

one put on by top flight geniuses who know what they are doing. If I want a show I'll duck out and go down to a theater and see a show hot out of Hollywood or London by men and women who are artists in their field. I will not go to a church and see a lot of ham actors putting on a home talent show. And yet, that's where we are in evangelical circles. We've got more show in evangelical circles than anywhere else. (*"The Chief End of Man," Sermon #4, Toronto, 1962*)

When I say we are suffering from a rash of amateurism, I mean that we like to have just everybody, anything, anyway worship. It can't be. You must prepare yourself to worship God. That preparation is not always a pleasant thing. There must be some revolutionary changes in your life. There must be some things destroyed in your life. (*"The Chief End of Man," Sermon #6, Toronto, 1962*)

We are not a religious theater to provide a place for amateur entertainers to display their talents. (*"The Chief End of Man," Sermon #10, Toronto, 1962*)

Worship Is Not Entertainment

I hope that we will remove from our hearts every ugly thing and every unbeautiful thing and every dead thing and every unholy thing that might prevent us from worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ in the beauty of holiness. Now I am quite sure that this kind of thing is not popular. The world does not want to hear it and the half-saved churches of the evangelical fold do not want to hear it. They want to be entertained while they are edified. Entertain me and edify me without pain. (*"The Chief End of Man," Sermon #9, Toronto, 1962*)

The average Christian is like a kitten that has found a ball of yarn and has played with the yarn and romped until it is wrapped in a cocoon. The kitten cannot get itself out. It just lies there and whimpers. Somebody has to come unwind it. We have tried to be simple, but instead of being simple we have simplified—we have not become simple. We are sophisticated and overly complex.

We have simplified until Christianity amounts to this: God is love; Jesus died for you; believe, accept, be jolly, have fun and tell others. And away we go—that is the Christianity of our day. I would not give a plug nickel for the whole business of it. Once in a while God has a poor bleeding sheep that manages to live on that kind of thing and we wonder how. (*Rut, Rot or Revival, p. 173*)

Oh, brother or sister, God calls us to worship, but in many instances we are in entertainment, just running a poor second to the theaters.

That is where we are, even in the evangelical churches, and I don't mind telling you that most of the people we say we are trying to reach will never come to a church to see a lot of amateur actors putting on a home-talent show. (*Whatever Happened to Worship?, p. 17*)

So many churches and other religious structures are being built these days that the building industry, which once considered such things something of a dead weight, is pretty well steamed up about the whole thing and is now quite eager to have the religious trade. Church membership is growing out of all proportion to the growth of the population. Converts to one or another religion are being sought on every level of society and among all classes and age groups. We have zealous work going on among children and young people. We are using sound trucks,

radio, television, streetcar cards, billboards, neon signs, messages in bottles and on balloons. We are using trained horses, trained dogs, trained canaries, ventriloquists, magicians and drama to stir up religious interest. Innumerable professional guilds, industrial clubs and businessmen's and women's committees have sprung up to provide spiritual fellowship for religious-minded persons engaged in the various pursuits of life. Religious songs are in the repertoire of many professional entertainers. Religion is being plugged by nightclub entertainers, prize-fighters, movie stars and by at least one incarcerated gangster who has up to this time shown no sorrow for his way of life and no evidence of repentance. Religion, if you please, is now big business. (*The Price of Neglect*, p. 83)

Entertainment in the Church

For centuries the Church stood solidly against every form of worldly entertainment, recognizing it for what it was—a device for wasting time, a refuge from the disturbing voice of conscience, a scheme to divert attention from moral accountability. For this she got herself abused roundly by the sons of this world. But of late she has become tired of the abuse and has given over the struggle. She appears to have decided that if she cannot conquer the great god Entertainment she may as well join forces with him and make whatever use she can of his powers. So today we have the astonishing spectacle of millions of dollars being poured into the unholy job of providing earthly entertainment for the so-called sons of heaven. Religious entertainment is in many places rapidly crowding out the serious things of God. Many churches these days have become little more than poor theaters where fifth-rate "producers" peddle their shoddy wares with the full approval of evangelical leaders who can even quote a holy text in defense of their delinquency. And hardly a man dares raise his voice against it. (*The Root of the Righteous*, p. 32)

The great god Entertainment amuses his devotees mainly by telling them stories. The love of stories, which is characteristic of childhood, has taken fast hold of the minds of the retarded saints of our day, so much so that not a few persons manage to make a comfortable living by spinning yarns and serving them up in various disguises to church people. What is natural and beautiful in a child may be shocking when it persists into adulthood, and more so when it appears in the sanctuary and seeks to pass for true religion. (*The Root of the Righteous*, p. 33)

The cross stands high above the opinions of men and to that cross all opinions must come at last for judgment. A shallow and worldly leadership would modify the cross to please the entertainment-mad saintlings who will have their fun even within the very sanctuary; but to do so is to court spiritual disaster and risk the anger of the Lamb turned Lion. (*The Root of the Righteous*, p. 63)

It is because there are so many of these ignoble saintlets, these miniature editions of the Christian way, demanding that Christianity must be fun, that distinct organizations have been launched to give it to them. Yes, there are organizations that exist for the sole purpose of mixing religion and fun for our Christian young people. (*The Tozer Pulpit*, Book 8, p. 28)

Christianity to the average evangelical church member is simply an avenue to a good and pleasant time, with a little biblical devotional material thrown in for good measure! (*The Tozer Pulpit*, Book 6, p. 72)

Heresy in the Church

Religious entertainment has so corrupted the Church of Christ that millions don't know that it's a heresy. Millions of evangelicals throughout the world have devoted themselves to religious entertainment. They don't know that it's as much heresy as the counting of beads or the splashing of holy water or something else. To expose this, of course, raises a storm of angry protest among the people. (*Success and the Christian*, p. 6)

But I say that if the gospel proclamation has to bring that in in order to get a crowd, boycott it. (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 1, p. 139*)

Wordly Programs

Evangelical Christianity is gasping for breath for we happen to have come upon us a period when it is a popular thing to sing about tears and prayers and believing. You can get a religious phrase kicked around almost anywhere right in the middle of a worldly program dedicated to the world, the flesh and the devil. Old Mammon with two silver dollars for eyes sits at the top of it, lying about the quality of the products, shamelessly praising actors who ought to be put to work laying bricks. They call that religion, and I will admit that, all right, but it isn't salvation and it isn't Christianity and it isn't the Holy Ghost. It isn't New Testament and it isn't redemption—it is simply making capital out of religion for a price. (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 3, p. 34*)

Why should believing Christians want everything pre-cooked, pre-digested, sliced and salted, and expect that God must come and help us eat and hold the food to our baby lips while we pound the table and splash—and we think that is Christianity! Brethren, it is not. It is a degenerate bastard breed that has no right to be called Christianity. (*The Tozer Pulpit, Book 3, p. 37*)

Sinful Pleasures

Religious fiction... makes use of sex to interest the reading public, the paper-thin excuse being that if romance and religion are woven into a story the average person who would not read a purely religious book will read the story and thus be exposed to the gospel. Leaving aside the fact that most modern religious novelists are home talent amateurs, scarcely one of whom is capable of writing a single line of even fair literature, the whole concept behind the religio-romantic novel is unsound. The libidinous impulses and the sweet, deep movings of the Holy Spirit are diametrically opposed to each other. The notion that Eros can be made to serve as an assistant of the Lord of glory is outrageous. The "Christian" film that seeks to draw customers by picturing amorous love scenes in its advertising is completely false to the religion of Christ. Only the spiritually blind will be taken in by it. (*Born after Midnight, p. 38*)

Human Talent or Spiritual Gifts?

We hear that some fellow can whistle through his teeth. Someone else has marvelous talent for impromptu composition of poetry. Some musicians are talented players and singers. Others are talented talkers (Let us admit it!). So in this realm of religious activity, talent runs the church. The gifts of the Spirit are not recognized and used as God intended....

A Christian congregation can survive and often appear to prosper in the community by the exercise of human talent and without any touch from the Holy Spirit. But it is simply religious activity, and the dear people will not know

anything better until the great and terrible day when our self-employed talents are burned with fire and only what was wrought by the Holy Spirit will stand. (*Tragedy in the Church: The Missing Gifts, p. 23*)

Extra-scriptural Claptrap

This church ought to be a place that is lighted by the light of the world shed forth by the Holy Spirit. It is where we gather at intervals to eat of the bread of life, not only on communion Sunday, but all the time, every Sunday. It ought to be where the altar of incense sends up its sweet spirals of fragrant perfume sweet to God and pleasant in His nostrils, and the sound of prayer pleasant in His ear and the sight of enlightened people gathered together pleasant to His eyes.

This is the only kind of church that I'm interested in. I'm not interested when you have to go out and bring somebody in from the outside and say, "Will you come and perform for us?" Can you imagine a priest bringing a clown and saying to the clown, "*Now come, clown into the holy place. Be reverent and do it for Jesus' sake.*" And when that clown came in there was light, the light that lighted every man, light that never was on land or sea. "And here is the bread. Reverently we may eat and live forever. Here is the altar of incense where we can send up our prayers to the ears of God, and now the clown will do his part." (*Sermon #24 on Hebrews, Toronto*)

Those Christians who belong to the evangelical wing of the Church (which I firmly believe is the only one that even approximates New Testament Christianity) have over the last half-century shown an increasing impatience with things invisible and eternal and have demanded and got a host of things visible and temporal to satisfy their fleshly appetites. Without biblical authority, or any other right under the sun, carnal religious leaders have introduced a host of attractions that serve no purpose except to provide entertainment for the retarded saints.

It is now common practice in most evangelical churches to offer the people, especially the young people, a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of serious instruction. It is scarcely possible in most places to get anyone to attend a meeting where the only attraction is God. One can only conclude that God's professed children are bored with Him, for they must be wooed to meeting with a stick of striped candy in the form of religious movies, games and refreshments.

So we have the strange anomaly of orthodoxy in creed and heterodoxy in practice. The striped-candy technique has been so fully integrated into our present religious thinking that it is simply taken for granted. Its victims never dream that it is not a part of the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

Any objection to the carryings on of our present gold-calf Christianity is met with the triumphant reply, "*But we are winning them!*" And winning them to what? To true discipleship? To cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To crucifixion of the flesh? To holy living? To nobility of character? To a despising of the world's treasures? To hard self-discipline? To love for God? To total committal to Christ? Of course the answer to all these questions is no. (*Man: The Dwelling Place of God, p. 136*)