

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 3

At the age of twenty until his death forty-one years later, A. W. Tozer was a prolific writer and faithful pastor of the Alliance Churches in Nuter Fort and Morgantown, West Virginia; Toledo, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; and Toronto in Canada. His grasp of spiritual concepts has been widely recognized by Christians in all walks of life. In Warren W. Wiersbe's introduction to his book, *52 Favorite Chapters The Best of A. W. Tozer*, he says,

What is there about A. W. Tozer's writings that gets hold of us and will not let us go? Tozer did not enjoy the privilege of a university or seminary training, or even a Bible School education for that matter; yet he has left us a shelf of books that will be mined for their spiritual wealth until the Lord returns.

For one thing, A. W. Tozer wrote with conviction. He was not interested in tickling the ears of shallow Athenian Christians who were looking for some new thing. Tozer redug the old wells and called us back to the old paths, and he passionately believed and practiced what he taught. He once told a friend of mine, "I have preached myself off of every Bible Conference platform in the country!" The popular crowds did not rush to hear a man whose convictions made them uncomfortable. p.8.

Tozer's description of himself best describes his attitude toward spiritual matters. "I guess my philosophy is this: Everything is wrong until God sets it right." *Ibid.*, p. 7

Excerpts from A. W. Tozer's book, *THE MENACE OF THE RELIGIOUS MOVIE*

When God gave to Moses the blueprint of the Tabernacle He was careful to include every detail; then, lest Moses should get the notion that he could improve on the original plan, God warned him solemnly, "And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount." God, not Moses, was the architect. To decide the plan was the prerogative of the Deity. No one dare alter it so much as a hairbreadth.

The New Testament Church also is builded after a pattern. Not the doctrines only, but the methods are divinely given. The doctrines are expressly stated in so many words. Some of the methods followed by the early New Testament Church had been given by direct command; others were used by God's specific approval, having obviously been commanded the apostles by the Spirit.

From God's revealed plan we depart at our peril. Every departure has two consequences, the immediate and the remote. The immediate touches the individual and those close to him; the remote extends into the future to unknown times, and may expand so far as to influence for evil the whole Church of God on earth.

The temptation to introduce "new" things into the work of God has always been too strong for some people to resist. The Church has suffered untold injury at the hands of well intentioned but misguided persons who have felt that they know more about running God's work than Christ and His apostles did. A solid train of box cars would not suffice to haul away the religious truck which has been brought into the service of the Church with the hope of improving on the original pattern. These things have been, one and all, positive hindrances to the progress of the Truth, and have so

altered the divinely-planned structure that the apostles, were they to return to earth today, would scarcely recognize the misshapen thing which has resulted.

Our Lord while on earth cleansed the Temple, and periodic cleansings have been necessary in the Church of God throughout the centuries. Every generation is sure to have its ambitious amateur to come up with some shiny gadget which he proceeds to urge upon the priests before the altar. That the Scriptures do not justify its existence does not seem to bother him at all. It is brought in anyway and presented in the very name of Orthodoxy. Soon it is identified in the minds of the Christian public with all that is good and holy. Then, of course, to attack the gadget is to attack the Truth itself. This is an old familiar technique so often and so long practiced by the devotees of error that I marvel how the children of God can be taken in by it. [1-3]

I believe that most responsible religious teachers will agree that any effort to teach spiritual truth through entertainment is at best futile and at worst positively injurious to the soul. But entertainment pays off, and the economic consideration is always a powerful one in deciding what shall and what shall not be offered to the public — even in the churches.

Deep spiritual experiences come only from much study, earnest prayer and long meditation. It is true that men by thinking cannot find God; it is also true that men cannot know God very well without a lot of reverent thinking. Religious movies, by appealing directly to the shallowest stratum of our minds, cannot but create bad mental habits which unfit the soul for the reception of genuine spiritual impressions. [10,11]

The religious movie is a menace to true religion because it embodies acting, a violation of sincerity.

Without doubt the most precious thing any man possesses is his individuated being; that by which he is himself and not someone else; that which cannot be finally voided by the man himself nor shared with another. Each one of us, however humble our place in the social scheme, is unique in creation. Each is a new whole man possessing his own separate “I-ness” which makes him forever something apart, an individual human being. It is this quality of uniqueness which permits a man to enjoy every reward of virtue and makes him responsible for every sin. It is his *selfness*, which will persist forever, and which distinguishes him from every creature which has been or ever will be created.

Because man is such a being as this all moral teachers, and especially Christ and His apostles, make *sincerity* to be basic in the good life. The word, as the New Testament uses it, refers to the practice of holding fine pottery up to the sun to test it for purity. In the white light of the sun all foreign substances were instantly exposed. So the test of sincerity is basic in human character. The sincere man is one in whom is found nothing foreign; he is all of one piece; he has preserved his individuality unviolated.

Sincerity for each man means *staying in character with himself*. Christ’s controversy with the Pharisees centered around their incurable habit of moral play acting. The Pharisee constantly pretended to be what he was not. He attempted to vacate his own “I-ness” and appear in that of another and better man. He assumed a false character and played it for effect. Christ said he was a hypocrite.

It is more than an etymological accident that the word “hypocrite” comes from the stage. It means *actor*. With that instinct for fitness which usually marks word origins, it has been used to signify one who has violated his sincerity and is playing a false part. An actor is one who assumes a character other than his own and plays it for effect. The more fully he can become possessed by another personality the better he is as an actor.

Bacon has said something to the effect that there are some professions of such nature that the

more skillfully a man can work at them the worse man he is. That perfectly describes the profession of acting. Stepping out of our own character for any reason is always dangerous, and may be fatal to the soul. However innocent his intentions, a man who assumes a false character has betrayed his own soul and has deeply injured something sacred within him.

No one who has been in the presence of the Most Holy One, who has felt how high is the solemn privilege of bearing His image, will ever again consent to play a part or to trifle with that most sacred thing, his own deep sincere heart. He will thereafter be constrained to be no one but himself, to preserve reverently the sincerity of his own soul.

In order to produce a religious movie someone must, for the time, disguise his individuality and simulate that of another. His actions must be judged fraudulent, and those who watch them with approval share in the fraud. To *pretend* to pray, to *simulate* godly sorrow, to *play at worship* before the camera for effect — how utterly shocking to the reverent heart! How can Christians who approve this gross pretense ever understand the value of sincerity as taught by our Lord? What will be the end of a generation of Christians fed on such a diet of deception disguised as the faith of our fathers?

The plea that all this must be good because it is done for the glory of God is a gossamer-thin bit of rationalizing which should not fool anyone above the mental age of six. Such an argument parallels the evil rule of expediency which holds that the *end is everything*, and sanctifies the means, however evil, if only the end be commendable. The wise student of history will recognize this immoral doctrine. The Spirit-led Church will have no part of it. [12-15]

Now, *for the religious movie where is the authority?* For such a serious departure from the ancient pattern, where is the authority? For introducing into the Church the pagan art of acting, where is the authority? Let the movie advocates quote just *one* verse, from any book of the Bible, in any translation, to justify its use. This they cannot do. The best they can do is to appeal to the world's psychology or repeat brightly that "modern times call for modern methods." But the Scriptures — quote from them one verse to authorize movie acting as an instrument of the Holy Ghost. This they cannot do.

Every sincere Christian must find scriptural authority for the religious movie or reject it, and every producer of such movies, if he would square himself before the faces of honest and reverent men, must either show scriptural credentials or go out of business.

But, says someone, there is nothing unscriptural about the religious movie; it is merely a new medium for the utterance of the old message, as printing is a newer and better method of writing and the radio an amplification of familiar human speech.

To this I reply: The movie is not the modernization or improvement of any scriptural method; rather it is a medium in itself wholly foreign to the Bible and altogether unauthorized therein. It is play acting — just that, and nothing more. It is the introduction into the work of God of that which is not neutral, but entirely bad. The printing press is neutral; so is the radio; so is the camera. They may be used for good or bad purposes at the will of the user. But play acting is bad in its essence in that it involves the simulation of emotions not actually felt. It embodies a gross moral contradiction in that it calls a lie to the service of truth. [18,19]

God has ordained four methods only by which Truth shall prevail — and the religious movie is not one of them.

Without attempting to arrange these methods in order of importance, they are (1) prayer, (2) song, (3) proclamation of the message by means of words, and (4) good works. These are the four main methods which God has blessed. All other biblical methods are sub-divisions of these and stay within their framework. [20]

The religious movie is out of harmony with the whole spirit of the Scriptures and contrary to the mood of true Godliness.

To harmonize the spirit of the religious movie with the spirit of the Sacred Scriptures is impossible. Any comparison is grotesque and, if it were not so serious, would be downright funny. Try to imagine Elijah appearing before Ahab with a roll of film! Imagine Peter standing up at Pentecost and saying, "Let's have the lights out, please." When Jeremiah hesitated to prophesy, on the plea that he was not a fluent speaker, God touched his mouth and said, "I have put my words in thy mouth." Perhaps Jeremiah could have gotten on well enough without the divine touch if he had a good 16mm. projector and a reel of home-talent film.

Let a man dare to compare his religious movie show with the spirit of the Book of Acts. Let him try to find a place for it in the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians. Let him set it beside Savonarola's passionate preaching, or Luther's thundering, or Wesley's heavenly sermons, or Edward's awful appeals. If he cannot see the difference *in kind*, then he is too blind to be trusted with leadership in the Church of the Living God. The only thing that he can do appropriate to the circumstances is to drop to his knees and cry with poor Bartimæus, "Lord, that I might receive my sight."

But some say, "We do not propose to displace the regular method of preaching the gospel. We only want to supplement it." To this I answer: If the movie is needed to supplement anointed preaching it can only be because God's appointed method is inadequate and the movie can do something which God's appointed method cannot do. What is that thing? We freely grant that the movie can produce effects which preaching cannot produce (and which it should never try to produce), but dare we strive for such effects in the light of God's revealed will and in the face of the judgment and a long eternity? [24-26]

I am against the religious movie because of the harmful effect upon everyone associated with it.

First, the evil effect upon the "actors" who play the part of the various characters in the show; this is not the less because it is unsuspected. Who can, while in a state of fellowship with God, dare to *play* at being a prophet? Who has the gall to *pretend* to be an apostle, even in a show? Where is his reverence? Where is his fear? Where is his humility? Any one who can bring himself to *act a part* for any purpose, must first have grieved the Spirit and silenced His voice within the heart. Then the whole business will appear good to him. "He feedeth on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside." But he cannot escape the secret working of the ancient laws of the soul. Something high and fine and grand will die within him; and worst of all he will never suspect it. That is the curse that follows self-injury always. The Pharisees were examples of this. They were walking dead men, and they never dreamed how dead they were.

Secondly, it identifies religion with the theatrical world. I have seen recently in a Fundamental magazine an advertisement of a religious film which would be altogether at home on the theatrical page of any city newspaper. Illustrated with the usual sex-bait picture of a young man and young woman in a tender embrace, and spangled with such words as "feature-length, drama, pathos, romance," it reeked of Hollywood and the cheap movie house. By such business we are selling out our Christian separation, and nothing but grief can come of it late or soon.

Thirdly, the taste for drama which these pictures develop in the minds of the young will not long remain satisfied with the inferior stuff the religious movie can offer. Our young people will demand the real thing; and what can we reply when they ask why they should not patronize the regular movie house?

Fourthly, the rising generation will naturally come to look upon religion as another, and inferior, form of amusement. In fact, the present generation *has* done this to an alarming extent

already, and the gospel movie feeds the notion by fusing religion and fun in the name of orthodoxy. It takes no great insight to see that the religious movie must become increasingly more thrilling as the tastes of the spectators become more and more stimulated.

Fifthly, the religious movie is the lazy preacher's friend. If the present vogue continues to spread it will not be long before any man with enough ability to make an audible prayer, and mentality enough to focus a projector, will be able to pass for a prophet of the Most High God. The man of God can play around all week long and come up to Sunday without a care. Everything has been done for him at the studio. He has only to set up the screen and lower the lights, and the rest follows painlessly.

Wherever the movie is used the prophet is displaced by the projector. The least such displaced prophets can do is to admit that they are technicians and not preachers. Let them admit that they are not sent-men, ordained of God for a sacred work. Let them refuse ordination and put away their pretense.

Allowing that there may be some who have been truly called and gifted of God, but who have allowed themselves to be taken in by this new plaything, the danger to such is still great. As long as they can fall back upon the movie, the *pressure that makes preachers* will be wanting. The *habit* and *rhythm* which belong to great preaching will be missing from their ministry. However great their natural gifts, however real their inducement of power, still they will never rise. They cannot while this broken reed lies close at hand to aid them in the crisis. The movie will doom them to be ordinary. [26-29]

In conclusion:

One thing may bother some earnest souls: why so many good people approve the religious movie. The list of those who are enthusiastic about it includes many who cannot be written off as border-line Christians. If it is an evil, why have not these denounced it?

The answer is, *lack of spiritual discernment*. Many who are turning to the movie are the same who have, by direct teaching or by neglect, discredited the work of the Holy Spirit. They have apologized for the Spirit and so hedged Him in by their unbelief that it has amounted to an out-and-out repudiation. Now we are paying the price of our folly. The light has gone out and good men are forced to stumble around in the darkness of the human intellect.

The religious movie is at present undergoing a period of gestation and seems about to swarm up over the churches like a cloud of locusts out of the earth. The figure is accurate; they are coming from below, not from above. The whole modern psychology has been prepared for this invasion of insects. The Fundamentalists have become weary of manna and are longing for red flesh. What they are getting is a sorry substitute for the lusty and uninhibited pleasures of the world, but I suppose it is better than nothing, and it saves face by pretending to be spiritual.

Let us not for the sake of peace keep still while men without spiritual insight dictate the diet upon which God's children shall feed. I heard the president of a Christian college say some time ago that the Church is suffering from an "epidemic of amateurism." That remark is sadly true, and the religious movie represents amateurism gone wild. Unity among professing Christians is to be desired, but not at the expense of righteousness. It is good to go with the flock, but I for one refuse mutely to follow a misled flock over a precipice.

If God has given wisdom to see the error of religious shows we owe it to the Church to oppose them openly. We dare not take refuge in "guilty silence." Error is not silent; it is highly vocal and amazingly aggressive. We dare not be less so. But let us take heart: there are still many thousands of Christian people who grieve to see the world take over. If we draw the line and call attention to it we may be surprised how many people will come over on our side and help us to drive from the Church this latest invader, the Spirit of Hollywood. [29,30]