

Lee Grady: Why T.L. Osborn Is My Hero

I heard T.L. Osborn preach when I was a college student, and at the time I thought, *That guy looks pretty good for an old man.* That was 31 years ago. I sat down with this spiritual giant for an hour in his office in Tulsa, Okla., two weeks ago, and I thought, *I hope I can keep up this guy's pace when I'm his age.*

Osborn, who is 88, was born 29 years before the first commercial airliner took flight. Yet he and his immediate family have preached in 90 nations, and he took a trip to India last January. He is remarkably agile (he is strict about a healthy diet), his intellect is still sharp (he spoke fluent French and Spanish to international guests when I was with him) and he is as spiritually intense as ever.

"I once had a vision of the Lord," Osborn told me, leaning over in his chair to look into my eyes. "But in the vision, God didn't have any hands. Then He looked at me and said, 'You are my hands.'" Throughout his worldwide ministry—which has never been well-known in the United States—he reminds Christians that God is waiting on us to obey the Great Commission.

I was thrilled to hear stories of this man's missionary ventures. But what encouraged me most about our hour-long visit was seeing a man who is finishing well. At a time when so many charismatic and Pentecostal ministers are going down in the flames of financial or moral scandal, Osborn gives me hope that I don't have to end up a casualty. I noticed five distinct qualities about this man that I admire:

His primary passion is evangelism. We charismatics are easily fascinated with exotic teachings, and this has led us down a

path to weirdness or downright deception. Osborn prefers to keep it simple. He believes in all the gifts of the Holy Spirit (and sees them manifest regularly), but he teaches that the secret to living a vibrant Christian life is fully understanding what Jesus did on the cross to redeem us. This has fueled his desire to take the gospel to every nation—especially in print so people in the developing world can have the gospel in a format they can read over and over. (In one of his overseas campaigns, Osborn shipped and distributed 56 *tons* of literature!)

He expects the supernatural. After T.L. and his wife, Daisy, watched God perform healings in meetings with Gordon Lindsay, founder of the Christ for the Nations Institute, they became convinced that the Lord wanted them to take the supernatural power of Jesus to the world. Wherever they went—especially throughout Africa—the Osborns saw the Lord heal blindness, leprosy and dozens of other diseases. Yet Osborn never sensationalized the gift of healing, marketed it with a price tag or cheapened it with exaggerations.

He's radically committed to gender equality. Osborn says he was called into missions after hearing a sermon by a female missionary who was working in India. Later, he and his wife were powerfully touched by the ministry of a woman named Hattie Hammond, an Assemblies of God preacher. This may explain why T.L. and Daisy were so radical in their insistence that the Holy Spirit empowers women to work in the harvest. Daisy was a founding voice in the organization known as Christians for Biblical Equality, and today T.L. and Daisy's daughter, LaDonna, provides oversight to an international network of churches.

He has a global focus. Many faith preachers in the 1970s and 1980s focused their efforts on the saved—and they ended up developing a message of prosperity that pumped up Americans but didn't relate to the poor in Nairobi, Jakarta or Dakar. Osborn refused to preach to the choir. He had to *go*—and he

didn't carry an American gospel. His international evangelistic campaigns typically attracted 250,000 to 500,000 people, but he never came home to brag about his accomplishments. Many Americans, even those living in Tulsa, still aren't aware of the impact this man has made on the world.

He exudes Christlike humility. Success can destroy people, especially if they let fame and money corrupt them. But Osborn has never been a showman, and he doesn't exude even a hint of aloofness. I don't know if this has anything to do with the fact that T.L. (his full name is Tommy Lee) grew up on a potato farm in the tiny town of Skedee, Okla.

During the hour I spent with him, Osborn gave me his full attention as he shared insights from the Bible, his missionary trips and his marriage. (Daisy died in 1995.) Then I asked him to pray for me. I fell to my knees and expected him to pray from his chair. But when I opened my eyes he was struggling to kneel on the floor with me.

His prayer was powerful, but his posture spoke even louder. I'm grateful we still have this humble giant with us for a while longer. He's modeling what it means to be a true Jesus follower.

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