

Book Review

The Shack

By William Paul Young

Seldom does one have the opportunity to review a work of fiction written by a friend that has risen to the top of best seller lists. Recently *The Shack* has been approaching sales of one million copies. There is even talk about making the book into a movie. But while the novel breaks sales records, it also breaks with the traditional understanding of God and Christian theology. And therein lies the rub. Does a work of Christian fiction have to be doctrinally correct?

From the viewpoint of the plot, the story is quite common. The book is the fictional retelling by Willie of the story of his friend, Mackenzie Phillips, who has been estranged from God for several years. His past experiences under an abusive father leave him bitter toward God, the Bible, and the ministry. When his youngest daughter is kidnapped and brutally killed in a mountain shack, Mack's anger freezes his total outlook in sadness and despair. Then one day he returns to the shack and encounters the Trinity in the form of a large African woman ("Papa" =the Father), a Jewish carpenter (=Jesus Christ), and a small Asian woman by the name Sarayu (=the Holy Spirit). By their discourses with Mack these three lead him on a mythical journey to discover a fresh meaning of God's love and forgiveness.

Who is the author? William P. Young, a man I have known for over a dozen years. About four years ago Paul embraced "Christian universalism," and has defended this view on several occasions. While he frequently disavows "general universalism," the idea that many roads lead to God, he has affirmed his hope that all will be reconciled to God either this side of death or after death.

Christian universalism (also known as universal reconciliation) asserts that love is the supreme attribute of God that trumps all others. His love reaches beyond the grave to save all those who refuse Christ throughout their lifetimes. Even fallen angels, and the Devil himself, will one day repent, be delivered from hell enter heaven. There cannot be left in the universe any being whom the love of God does not conquer; hence the words, universal reconciliation. This view of future destinies claims many texts that *seem* to assert that the reconciliation Jesus accomplished on the cross extends to all creatures (Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor. 5:16-20; Col. 1:19-20), that all universally will confess him as Lord (Phil. 2:6-11), and that God's desire that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) will be accomplished. Nothing can thwart God's will and love.

On current web sites the editors of *The Shack* indicate that they worked with the book for over a year. The editors went through and eliminated, they claim, the universalism as defined above. Yet a careful reading shows that *The Shack* rests on the foundation of universal reconciliation. This is not unexpected when the author (in his "Acknowledgments") cites many writers who have influenced him, several of which are universalists.

Many others have pointed out the theological errors they find in the book. They fault Young's view of revelation and the Bible, his presentation of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus' death and the meaning of reconciliation, and the subversion of institutions that God has ordered, such as the government and the local church. But the common thread tying all these errors together is Christian universalism. A study of the history of universal reconciliation that goes back as early as the third century shows that all of these doctrinal deviations, including opposition to the local church, are characteristic of universalism. In modern times it has undermined evangelical faith in Europe and America. It has joined with Unitarianism to form the Unitarian-Universalist church.

By comparing the creeds of universalism with a careful reading of *The Shack* one discovers how deeply universalism is embedded within the book. Here is the evidence in brief:

- 1) The universalist creed of 1899 affirmed that "there is one God whose nature is love." Young asserts that God "*cannot* act apart from love" (p. 102), and that God purposes what he does always as an expression of love (p. 191);

- 2) There is no eternal punishment for sin. The creed of 1899 again asserts that God "will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness." Similarly, Young denies that Papa (God) "pours out wrath and throws people" into hell. God does not punish sin; it's his "joy to cure it" (p. 120). Papa "redeems" final judgment (p. 127). God will not "condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love" (p. 162);
- 3) There is an incomplete picture of the enormity of sin and evil. Satan as the great deceiver and instigator of the temptation to sin goes unmentioned in Young's discussion of the fall (pp. 134-137);
- 4) There is a subjugation of God's justice to his love—a central tenet of universalism. The creed of 1878 asserts that God's attribute of justice is "born of love and limited by love." Young affirms that God chose "the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love," and that this is a better way than that God should have exercised justice (pp. 164-165);
- 5) There is great error in the portrayal of the Trinity. Young asserts that the whole Trinity became incarnate as the Son of God, and the whole Trinity was crucified (p. 99). Both Jesus and Papa (God) bear the marks of crucifixion in their hands (contra. Isa. 53:4-10). Young's error leads to modalism, that God is singular and at different times assumes the different modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a heresy condemned by the early church. Young also makes God into a goddess; moreover, he breaks the second commandment by imaging God the Father as a person;
- 6) Reconciliation is effective for all without exercising faith. Papa asserts that he is reconciled to the whole world, not just to those who believe (p. 192). The creeds of universalism, both of 1878 and 1899, never mention faith;
- 7) There is no future judgment. God will never force his will on anyone, even in his capacity as judge, for this is contrary to love (p. 145). God submits to humans, and humans submit to God in a "circle of relationship";
- 8) All are equally children of God and loved equally by him (p. 155-156). In a future revolution of "love and kindness" all people out of love will confess Jesus as Lord (p. 248).
- 9) The institution of the church is rejected as diabolical. Jesus claims that he "never has, never will" create institutions (p. 178). Evangelical churches are an obstacle to universalism.
- 10) Finally, the Bible is discounted in this novel. It is a book of guilt rather than hope, encouragement, and revelation.

Near the beginning of this review I raised the question: "Does a work of fiction have to be doctrinally correct?" In this case the answer is yes, for Young is deliberately theological. The fiction serves the theology, not vice-versa. Another question is: "Do not the good points of the novel outweigh the bad?" Again, if one uses doctrinal impurity to teach how to be restored to God, the end result is that one is not restored in a biblical way to the God of the Bible. Finally, one may ask: "Could not this book lay the foundation for seeking a growing relationship with God based in the Bible?" Of course, this may be possible. But in light of the errors the potential for going astray is as great as the potential for growth. Young offers no direction regarding spiritual growth. He discounts the Bible and the institutional church with its ordinances. If one finds a deeper relationship with God that reflects biblical fidelity it will be in spite of *The Shack* and not because of it.

Young has written a creative, provocative novel. Unfortunately, its creativity strays from an evangelical understanding of core doctrines. In the sixth century the church of Jesus Christ called universal reconciliation heresy, and it has treated this belief as such ever since.

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