

Revisiting *The Shack* and Universal Reconciliation

James B. De Young

June, 2008

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. There is talk about making the book into a movie.

What is so unusual about this success is not only that this is purportedly a Christian work of fiction but it espouses a view of God that is creative if not persuasive. But while the novel breaks sales records it also breaks traditional understanding of God and Christian theology. And therein lies the rub. Does a work of Christian fiction have to be doctrinally correct?

But first a brief look at the book. 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 left him bitter toward God that led him to abandon his preparation for 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 (=the Father), a Jewish carpenter (=Jesus Christ), and a small Asian woman by the name Sarayu (=the Holy Spirit). By their discourses these three lead Mack on a mythical journey that leads him to discover anew the meaning of God's love for him and forgiveness.

It is this aspect of the novel that is truly "novel." Mack's encounter leads to repentance toward God and others, including his father and the murderer, and to a new understanding of God and relationship with him. Indeed virtually every area of doctrine is touched by his novel understanding centered on the love of God.

Now about the author. For over a dozen years I have known the author, William P. Young. Paul (as he prefers to be known) and I and our families have interacted, being involved in a Christian day school outside of Portland, Or. Paul and I have belonged to a Christian "think tank" of sorts, and have conversed over a multitude of theological issues. About four years ago Paul embraced Christian universalism and has defended this on several occasions. While he frequently disavows general universalism, the idea that many roads lead to God, he carefully affirms that Jesus Christ is the only way to God, and that all will be reconciled to God either this side of death or afterward.

Christian universalism (also known as universal reconciliation) argues that love is the supreme attribute of God that trumps all others. Those who refuse him now will be given another chance to repent after they die. Thus unbelieving humanity, and fallen angels and the Devil himself, will one day in hell repent and be delivered from it and be admitted into heaven. There cannot be any left in the universe whom the love of God does not conquer; hence the words, universalism reconciliation. This view of future

destinies claims many texts that seem to assert that the reconciliation that Jesus accomplished on the cross extends to all creatures (Col. 1:19-20; 2 Cor. 5:16-20), that all universally will confess him as Lord (Phil. 2:6-11), that God's will 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. It was rejected by several Christian publishers. The editors went through and eliminated, they claim, the universalism as defined above. Yet a careful reading uncovers universal reconciliation remains as a strategic focus of the book. And this is not unexpected when the author (in his "Acknowledgments") attests to having been influenced by many writers that include several universalists. He cites one at the beginning of chap. 14. His own earlier claims were that Christian universalism changed his life and his theology.

Now many others have pointed out the theological errors that they find in the book. They fault Paul'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 of these errors together is Christian universalism (which many suspect). It turns out that a historical study 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, characteristically describe universalism. It has been a subversive movement seeking to undermine evangelical faith in modern Europe and America. It has joined with Unitarianism to form the Unitarian-Universalist church.

So what are the many doctrinal errors found in the book? For clarity let me list them. 1) *The Shack* presents love as the preeminent attribute of God, as the attribute that is supreme over all the others. Now, while Christians may be inclined to agree initially in this statement, they do not give it the force that universalists do. The universalist creed of 1899 affirmed that "there is one God whose nature is love." Similarly, PY claims that love defines God ("I am love"; 101). As the voice of Papa (God) PY then argues that if loving did not take place within the relationship of the Godhead God "could not love. Or maybe worse, you would have a god who, when he chose, could only love as a limitation of his nature. That kind of god could possibly act without love, and that would be a disaster. And *that*, is surely *not me*" (italics his) (102). PY then asserts that God "*cannot act apart from love*" (102), and that God purposes what he does always as an expression of love (191). Love is described as holy (107).

Yet without saying that both love and holiness are equally God's attributes is a distortion of the nature of God. God cannot act without both love and holiness.

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 PY has Papa (God) answer the query of Mack (the deeply disturbed main character in the novel) as to whether or not Papa is the one "spilling out great bowls of wrath and throwing people into a burning lake of fire." Instead of affirming that there is

such a judgment PY has Papa deny that he punishes sin. Instead, he affirms that God is not who Mack thinks God is, that he doesn't "need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it" (120). To Mack's final comments that he can't "imagine any final outcome that would justify all this" Papa replies: "We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it" (127).

This again is terminology used by universalists. Under the "curative" and "corrective fires" of hell people and fallen angels will all repent and enter heaven. There is no judgment for sin leading to eternal death.

Also PY clearly disassociates God with the punishment of evil. In his crucial chapter on judgment (ch. 11) Mack acknowledges that he believes that God "will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love." But the story proceeds to show that Mack is wrong in believing this! When he is asked to choose three of his children to send to hell, he protests that he could not act as judge and send any of his children to hell. He is willing to be "tortured for eternity" instead of them. It isn't about his children's "performance; it was about his love for them" (163). At this point Mack is told that he sounds like Jesus, that he is loving as Jesus loves (163). The chapter concludes with Papa affirming that "judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right" (169). Many biblical statements affirm that God indeed does have anger or wrath against sin, that he judges and that he does punish the ungodly (note condemnation in John 3:16-17; and in many places in Romans, chs. 1-5; cf. 2:2-16; 3:5-6; 5:9).

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 PY's discussion of the fall (134-137). In so doing the complete picture of explaining the enormity of evil in history and in our own day goes unmet. The evil one who was so real to Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11) and to Paul the Apostle (Eph. 6:11ff.) is apparently unreal to those of universal reconciliation.

4) There is a subjugation of God's justice to his love. It is a central tenet of universalism that not only is love the supreme attribute of God but that love qualifies or limits all of God's attributes. This is the most serious consequence of exalting above all else the attribute of love. The creed of 1878 asserts that God's attribute of justice is "born of love and limited by love." In the chapter on judgment (ch. 11, already introduced above), at the heart of the entire book, PY has wisdom affirm the principle that God's dealing with people flows from his love. "He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love." Wisdom asserts that this is a better way than that God should have exercised justice (164-165).

The principle is false for several reasons. God did exercise justice, fully and completely, at the cross. It was not a case where God's love or mercy triumphed over his justice. Love was involved. It led God to pay the price of providing an adequate payment—the gift of his Son. But God's justice demanded a sacrifice sufficient to atone

for the sins of the whole world, and Jesus satisfied this demand that flows from God's justice and holiness (see Rom. 3:25-26).

The principle represents a very similar biblical principle but distorts it. While it is almost word-for-word from Scripture (James 2:13b: "and mercy triumphs over justice"), PY makes crucial changes. PY has added "because of love" and assumes that *God's* mercy is the alternative to justice, as shown by his next sentence: "Would you prefer he'd chosen justice for everyone?" Yet the context shows that James is not talking about God showing mercy to people at the cross but about believers showing mercy toward the poor. PY also fails to quote or use the first part of the same verse ("For judgment will be merciless to the one who has shown no mercy"; 2:13a). Thus God's judgment is "without mercy"—just the opposite of the point that PY tries to make in this chapter! PY claims that God will not judge sin in the future, or that if God judges he will be merciful. This text affirms just the opposite.

The idea is that in the future, believers' mercy (not God's) expressed in good works will deliver them from the judgment coming on those who show partiality. Even if "God" is assumed and brought into the text, the verse is saying nothing of God judging unbelievers. Finally, this verse and the preceding verse make it very clear that God will judge in the future—an idea that universal reconciliation denies.

PY neglects all the texts that assert that there is a limitation to God's mercy if disobedience and unbelief occur (Rom. 11:22-23; Heb. 4:1-3, 11; 6:3-6; 10:26-31; 12:25-29); and that those who reject Christ in this life will experience judgment afterward (Heb. 9:27). Also this chapter of the novel distinctly says nothing about those passages of the Bible that speak of lasting torment or separation from God that the wicked who refuse to believe Christ will experience. The very strongest words in the Bible come not from Paul or John or Peter but they are those of Jesus. It is he who asserts that the wicked will suffer "eternal punishment" just as the righteous will enjoy "eternal life" (Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:23, 24, 25, 28). Finally, if Hebrews 6:3 says that it is impossible for God to renew to repentance those who turn away and reject him, then it *is* impossible for God to do something. That something is to overturn the human choice to disbelieve and disobey the gospel so that God will bring a person through the purifying fires of hell so that the person comes to God. This verse says that God cannot do this, but universal reconciliation asserts that God's love must do this. What the Bible says God cannot do, universalism asserts that he can and must do.

The requirement for an OT believer is clearly balanced: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Finally, if mercy or love "limits justice" then love becomes the only complete, eternal attribute of God, and God ceases to be God.

5) There is misrepresentation of the nature of God that distorts the meaning of the crucifixion and the humanity of Jesus. It is said that Jesus did all his miracles by his human nature totally yielded to God. Yet if the narrowing of Jesus' ministry to his human

nature is extended to his death, there are serious consequences regarding the nature and scope of Jesus' death.

Why is it significant to point this out? What does this humanizing of Jesus have to do with universal reconciliation? Simply this. In its history, the broader universalism has shown an increasing tendency to humanize Jesus.¹

Jesus' died as both human and divine, since he accomplished atonement, reconciliation, justification, redemption, and forgiveness that only Jesus as deity could do (cf. Col. 1:13-14, 19-20; etc.). His death covered sins both backwards and forwards; and only a divine Savior's death could have this effect.

6) There is also imprecision in the portrayal of the Trinity by PY. He writes that the whole Trinity became incarnate as the Son of God, and that the whole Trinity was crucified (99). In an emotive appeal to the readers that glosses over this distinction, PY has both Jesus and Papa (God) bear the marks of crucifixion in their hands. Yet this idea runs counter to the Bible that attests that at the cross Jesus died, forsaken by the Father. The Bible affirms that the Father laid on the suffering Messiah the sin of all; that he was "stricken" by the Father; and that it was the will of the Father to "crush" him (Isa. 53:4-10). This proves a division of roles in the meaning of the death of Christ. Yet PY claims that "filling roles is the opposite of relationship" (148). The pathway to this heresy is another heresy—what is called modalism. This perversion of the truth teaches that the Trinity of three-persons-in-one is wrong and that God is singular who at different times assumes the different modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the church condemned this as heresy!

The one-sided emphasis on love leads PY to speak also about a circle of relationship based on love to which the Trinity belongs, and in this circle humans join. There is no hierarchy, but only mutual submission on the part of all to all. Yet if this is so, why should even the title "Father" for God be used, or "Lord" for Jesus, since these suggest authority and submission that is not mutual or equal? Jesus calls us "brothers" (Heb. 2:11) and "friends" (John 15:14-15), but he never calls us "lord." Yet believers call on Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9-14). Jesus' sending the Holy Spirit, who would not speak on his own initiative but only from what the Father and the Son say (John 16:13-15), suggests a subordination in the Godhead that is not equal in the roles that are exercised. While in essence the three persons-in-one are equal, their roles are different and distinguished. Again PY's teaching leads ultimately to a denial of the Trinity he professes.

7) Reconciliation is effective without exercising faith. It is startling that the need to believe as the means for salvation goes unmentioned in the creeds of universalism, both that of 1878 and 1899. Similarly, PY espouses universal reconciliation without an explicit confession of Jesus Christ by which his atonement is effective for each individual. For PY to claim that Jesus died for all shows that he espouses unlimited

¹ See Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (New York: Abingdon, 2nd rev. ed., 1961), 212-213, and the content of the creeds exposed in the pages below.

atonement. This is not a heretical belief but one embraced by many evangelicals in contrast to the limited atonement of strict Calvinists. But it is what PY does with unlimited atonement that is disturbing and heretical.

When PY explicitly addresses the specific issue of reconciliation to God, he has Papa affirm that he is reconciled to the whole world, not just to those who believe. God is “now fully reconciled to the world.” When Mack suggests that by the “world” Papa really means those who believe in him/her, Papa replies: “The whole world, Mack.” She adds that reconciliation is a two way street and that she has done her part, “totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way” (192).

If faith is denied as necessary what is the other part of the “two-way street”? For Papa as God affirms that he/she has reconciled the whole world *already* and not just those who believe. Papa virtually rejects the requirement of faith that Mack supposed. Yet in the passage that probably lies in the background of this discussion, the Apostle Paul speaks of the role of faith in reconciliation. He affirms that reconciliation is the potential for everyone, and Christ died for the purpose of reconciling everyone. But no one is reconciled to God without believing, and God is not reconciled with the rest who do not believe God (see Col. 1:19-23). It is universal provision of reconciliation but not universal reconciliation. While reconciliation was available, the Colossians were *not* reconciled until they believed. Instead, they were far from God (note v. 21ff.). All who do not believe are going to be conquered and thrust under Jesus’ rule (Phil. 2:6-11; Heb. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:25; 2 Cor. 5:18-21). Finally, PY is wrong to say that “forgiveness does not establish relationship” (PY has Papa saying this twice (225)). “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship.” Yet the Bible reveals just the opposite of this! Forgiveness is only potential for all; it does not belong to all. And only when one accepts Christ as one’s atoning sacrifice—believes and trusts him—does this forgiveness become effective (1 John 1:7-9). But this then *is* the basis for relationship; it does, indeed, *establish* relationship (contrary to PY). One is so intimate with Christ that he/she can be said to be “in Christ” (Col. 2:10-15).

8) From another standpoint, universal reconciliation violates the basic nature of human beings. Proclaiming that all are already forgiven in Christ voids the choice of some not to be forgiven. If the fires of hell are meant to be corrective and remedial, so that all come to repent and escape hell, then some are coerced to repent when they would otherwise choose not to.

9) Faith is given scant attention. It goes unmentioned as the way to find freedom in God and deliverance from independence from God (137). When faith is mentioned it is understood as believing in the love of God and that he is good, rather than believing in God himself (142) or in Jesus himself. Yet faith holds the central place as the only means whereby one can receive forgiveness (Rom. 3:26; 5:2; Eph. 2:7-8; Heb. 11:6).

While universalists make much of showing the proper concern for injustice in the world, and doing God’s work, they undercut the significance of faith. To the disciples’

question, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” Jesus gives an unambiguous answer. Jesus said: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:28-29).

10) There is no future judgment. There is overt denial that God will ever force his will on anyone, including God in his capacity as judge, for this is contrary to love. “‘To force my will on you,’ Jesus replied, ‘is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission . . .’” (145). Thus the universalists’ preoccupation with the love of God voids any ultimate transcendent view of God and his acting as judge of anyone. God becomes submitted to humans, and humans are submitted to God. Yet Scripture teaches that Jesus will fill the role of judge of both Christians and unbelievers (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 5:13; Jam. 5:9). “The God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end.”²

Universalism’s language is reflected by asserting that “love will burn” from the murderer “every vestige of corruption” (227). Love takes the form of the corrective fires of hell so that all—people, fallen angels, and the Devil—repent in order to escape hell.

11) All are equally children of God because of his love. There is the declaration that all people are children of God and loved equally by him (155-156). Yet in Acts 17, the Apostle Paul, in one of his greatest “sermons,” makes a clear distinction between being the “offspring of God” in a general sense (vv. 28-29) and “all people needing to repent because God has appointed a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, by giving proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead” (vv. 30-31). Verse 18 makes it clear that Paul was “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” PY fails to point to this distinction by saying that God loves “all his children the same.” Yet John says: “As many as received him, to them God gave the authority to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name” (John 1:12).

Near the end of his novel PY makes a final assertion of universalism. All people out of love will confess Jesus as Lord. There will be a new revolution of “love and kindness . . . that revolves around Jesus and what he did for us all. . . . And one day, when all is revealed, every one of us will bow our knee and confess in the power of Sarayu that Jesus is the Lord of all Creation, to the glory of Papa” (248).

While these words reflect biblical texts that deal with Christ as Lord (as Phil. 2:10-11), PY puts them in a context of love and kindness and says nothing about the day of judgment when people make this confession—not as a witness to their repentance and faith in Christ, but as their admission that God’s ways are right after all. It is a confession due to Christ’s conquest, not to their faith. Even the “demons believe and tremble” (James 2:19) before “the one Lawgiver and Judge, who is able to save and to destroy” (James 4:12). These are those who are “enemies of God” (Jam. 4:4) and become Jesus’ footstool by his conquest (Ps. 110:1).

² This statement by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 83, comes from his chapter on hell, and is followed by these words: “The belief in a God of pure love—who accepts everyone and judges no one—is a powerful act of faith. . . . The more one looks at it, the less justified it appears.”

12) The institution of the church is diabolical. PY has Jesus claim regarding the creation of institutions that he “never has, never will” (178). This view ignores such texts as Matthew 16:18 (Jesus said, “I will build my church”) and Hebrews 10:25 (“not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together”). Quite obviously, if people are to be in the relationship of the church they have to get together, be instructed, worship, and conduct matters of organization (such as finding out about needs, spending funds, choosing leaders with authority over others, etc.). Paul’s view virtually has no place for spiritual gifts including the gift of leadership (Rom. 12:8) and its exercise at some place!

In addition, the two ordinances of the church are the great means of promoting and experiencing relationship with Christ and with one another—matters that Jesus and the Apostles commanded (Matt. 26; 1 Cor. 11). It is the place where the community of faith expresses its union with Christ in a deep relationship. Yet these go unmentioned by PY.

What does a stance opposed to the institutional church have to do with universal reconciliation? Just this. Universalism seeks to reach across all denominations and all religions to discover where God’s children are. Evangelical churches represent an obstacle to universal reconciliation—they always have, and always will. Evangelicals insist on proclaiming the gospel that only those who place faith in Christ are delivered from God’s final wrath with its everlasting suffering.

13) Finally, the Bible is discounted in this novel. Paul represents it as a book of guilt rather than hope, encouragement, knowledge, and light.

These then are the errors of universalism reflected in the novel. How does one answer Christian universalism? I’ve cited in the appropriate places above where each of the points of universalism run counter to Scripture. Scripture is the best, complete answer to universalism. There we find Jesus Christ making the strongest declarations of the everlasting suffering of those who reject him (Matt. 25:46; Luke 16). There is much more to be found at my longer review of this book at theshackreview.com.

Near the beginning I raised the question: Does a work of fiction have to be doctrinally correct? In this case the answer is yes, for Paul is deliberately theological. The fiction serves the theology, not vice-versa. Another question is: Does 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. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” 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 it is a risky surmise and PY offers no hope or direction regarding this. For he discounts the Bible, the institutional church, the ordinances of the church, and the Christian disciplines of study and meditation of Scripture and the collective disciplines of worship in community (the church) and the potential of church discipline. If one finds a deeper relationship with God that is biblically correct then it will be in spite of *The Shack* and not because of it.

Paul has written a creative, provocative novel. Unfortunately, it is creative theologically in the sense of reinforcing universal reconciliation that distorts the evangelical understanding of God, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the meaning of the death of Christ, the necessity of belief in Christ, the final judgment, and the destiny of all humanity. In the sixth century the church called universal reconciliation heresy, and it has treated this belief as such ever since.