

AT THE BACK OF *THE SHACK*
A TORRENT OF UNIVERSALISM

A Review

By

James B. De Young

February, 2008
Rev. May, 2008

Damascus, Oregon

**At the Back of *The Shack*:
A Torrent of Universalism**

**Reviewed by
James B. De Young
February, 2008
Rev. May, 2008**

INTRODUCTION

The Shack by William P. Young is a recently published (2007) book (248 pp. plus acknowledgements) from Windblown Media, Newbury Park, CA. Its ISBN is 978-0-9647292-3-0. The book is a novel set in the Northwest, for the most part in the northeast corner of the State of Oregon. It is a novel designed to propound a particular view of the nature of God and the resolution of the problem of human suffering. Its subtitle betrays its scope: *Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*.

From a literary standpoint, the prose stretches the imagination, being almost poetical. It evinces creativity, character, and splendor. The representations of the triune God, his purposes and plan, the nature of relationship with him, the state of believers after death are moving and compelling. Directly and indirectly the author challenges not a few of the stereotypes that Christians and others have. But not all is convincing.

The format is a retelling of the experience of Mackenzie Allen Phillips by his friend Willie. From one standpoint the story line is quite a common one. A man with a troubled past finds himself in training for ministry yet unable to pursue it. Then he with his family experience great tragedy: the brutal murder of their youngest daughter. This event brings great darkness and anger to the father who becomes bitter toward God. Three and a half years later, he is led by God back to the murder scene—a desolate cabin in the mountains and forests of Northeast Oregon—where he encounters the Triune God and finds how to have joy again in his life. It is tied to the reason for his existence and his relationship with God. The murder of his daughter is also solved.

Yet from another vantage point the story is quite beyond the ordinary. It is a fiction determinedly theological. The manner in which the author presents the Trinity, the reason for suffering and tragedy, the meaning of the fall in the garden of Eden, the present state of the Christian dead, and how to find forgiveness and wholeness are quite carefully drawn and in many ways unique and deeply affective. But all is not biblically correct.

Because the fiction is deeply moving the reader is caught up in the emotions of the story. And therein lies the problem. It is too easy to feel deeply with the sufferings and triumphs of the characters and miss the theological point of what is being said. For the novel is Young's way of projecting his particular views of theology on crucial issues in a subtle and almost persuasive, manner. Because Paul has injected his theology

throughout the story, one must read the book with one eye on the story and another eye on the theology.

Paul (he prefers to be known by his middle name) appears to be orthodox in much of what he writes. He treats God as three persons (but falls into the heresy of modalism), and he affirms the *facts* of the incarnation and the death of Christ, the *events* of the creation and the fall of humanity, the idea of forgiveness, etc.

Yet Paul challenges strategic and basic evangelical doctrines. I'm referring to such matters as the nature of the Godhead, how love and justice relate in God, the destiny of the lost, the holiness of God, the nature of sin, the origin of sin, the *meaning* of the incarnation and death of Christ, the *meaning* of reconciliation, the destiny of unbelievers, the institutions that God has established (such as the state, the church, even marriage), etc.

The greatest doctrinal distortion in the book is Paul's assumption of universal reconciliation. There are other points of theology that are distorted or improbable or debatable. These include mutual submission in the Godhead; no subordination within the Godhead or among people; the Father's co-crucifixion with Christ (modalistic); people completing a circle of relationship with the three persons of the Godhead; institutions being identified as diabolical; etc. Yet the most serious error is Paul's embrace of universal reconciliation which lies embedded in the book.

As an example of this theological error let me cite a phrase from chapter 11. Universal reconciliation relates justice and love in such a way that love limits God's justice. Paul affirms that God chose "the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love." While this is almost word-for-word from Scripture (James 2:13b), Paul makes crucial changes. Paul 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. James 2:13 actually says: "mercy triumphs over justice." That's it. Paul 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 Paul tries to make in this chapter, that God will not judge sin in the future. The context shows that James is dealing with human partiality and that works of impartiality are a necessary evidence of a Christian's faith. Also, the word "triumphs" represents a Greek word meaning "boasts over" or "against" and can be translated also as "be joyfully confident." 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 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. I return to this issue when I discuss chapter 11 below.

There are two reasons why I believe that Paul is an advocate of universal reconciliation. It is based on my reading of evangelical sources that describe universal reconciliation and on several discussions with Paul himself.

The Tenets of Universal Reconciliation

The best way to allow the reader to discover whether or not Paul advocates universal reconciliation in *The Shack* is to list the tenets that those who embrace universal reconciliation affirm (as in the creeds of 1878 and 1899) and see if these tenets lie embedded in the book. What does universal reconciliation assert? Here are the points.

- 1) God wills all his creatures, people and angels, to be saved and to acknowledge Jesus as Lord; and (this is important) God's will cannot be thwarted.
- 2) God's attribute of love limits his attribute of justice. It is unjust and unloving for God to send people who live a short life of perhaps seventy years to an eternal (everlasting) hell.
- 3) God has already reconciled all creatures—all humanity and all angels—to himself by the atonement of Jesus Christ at the cross.
- 4) This reconciliation will be applied to all people, either before or after death, and to all the fallen angels, including the Devil.
- 5) Those who do not repent in this life will repent after they have died.
- 6) Faith is necessary to appropriate reconciliation in this life; God's love delivers unbelievers (and fallen angels and the Devil) from hell in the next life.
- 7) The sufferings of hell and the lake of fire are not punitive, penal, or eternal but corrective, restorative, purifying, cleansing, and limited in duration.
- 8) Hell and the lake of fire are not forever, but will cease to exist after all people and the fallen angels, including Satan, have been delivered from them and enter heaven.
- 9) Universalism is the teaching of the Bible.
- 10) Universalism was the majority belief of the Christian church for the first five centuries.
- 11) God has acted as the Judge of all at the cross; there is not a future judgment for anyone.
- 12) All institutions including the church and the government are diabolical systems of hierarchy that use power to control people.

In the next several pages let's discover if *The Shack* is just a creative novel from which a lot of different people may discover a lot of helpful things; or a theological discourse with universal reconciliation at its base. While not all of the above tenets may be in the novel, enough are, I believe, to reveal the author's universal reconciliation. It is this that cripples the story and its benefits. Moreover, it is a serious doctrinal error that the community of faith has identified as heresy.¹

¹ The church declared it such in the sixth century A. D. It is rejected by the Eastern, Roman, and Protestant churches. See J. Gerstner, "Universalism," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. E. F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 539. Alister McGrath (*Justification by Faith*) has said: "Universalism perverts the love of God into an

Why This Review

Before I proceed to the critique let me say a word about myself and why I feel compelled to write this review. Paul and I and our families have been friends for about a dozen years. We have lived in close proximity during this time, southeast of Portland, Oregon, in a rural area that is known as Damascus and Boring (yes, that's the town's name!). Our children have interacted in sports and celebrated birthdays over the years. We have been in their home and they have been in ours. We both have children who have graduated from the same Christian school.

On another level Paul and I have been "theological buddies." We have enjoyed multiple discussions of theological issues over the years. Paul graduated from a Christian college where he took courses in Bible and other subjects taught from a Christian world view. I attended two evangelical seminaries and hold a Th.D. I teach at an evangelical seminary in Portland, Oregon.

Several years ago Paul and I co-founded a Christian forum where we and several others have explored many, many theological issues including universal reconciliation. Our only two restrictions have been that the truth of the Bible is our final authority and that love is our supreme ethic.

The Dispute over Universalism

During the years we have had many conversations about things that are reflected in his novel—the meaning of reality, the Trinity, love, the fall, humanity, the future, etc. We agreed much of the time as we sharpened each other's concepts. About four years ago Paul embraced universal reconciliation, and strongly defended his decision. It is on this matter that we part company.

Needless to say, I have a special interest in reading and understanding what Paul has written in *The Shack*. Most have heralded it as a wonderful fiction to show how a person can be reconciled to God. They have felt that it was nothing more. Several, however, have suspected the presence of universalism. I think it is at the foundation of the novel.

To the uninformed reader the book makes a great read. But with an understanding of Christian theology and of church discussion of universalism through the ages, and with a good foundation in what the Bible teaches, the reader becomes more and more aware of

obscene scene of theological rape quite unworthy of the God whom we encounter in the face of Jesus Christ" (in Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3: "Spirit-Given Life: God's People Present and Future" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 489-490.

the fact that *The Shack* is Paul's presentation of beliefs and practices that most Christians have identified as questionable theology. Also, its omissions, what Paul does not say, are a major shortcoming, and distort the biblical view of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, God's love, judgment, the church, and a host of other things. If a person advocates only a half-truth he is distorting the truth for not telling the whole truth on core doctrines.

Now, let me be clear as to what the doctrinal error is that I'm addressing. Recently Paul has deflected charges that he is a universalist. I presume that he means that he is not an adherent of general universalism. This is that system of belief that affirms that there are many roads to God and Jesus is only one of these. This is not Paul's belief. Indeed, in May, 2007, after writing *The Shack*, he affirmed knowledge of the difference, disavowing universalism but claiming to adhere to universal reconciliation. It is this latter doctrine that I'm addressing. It is this doctrine whose tenets I have laid out above.²

Still there may be those who think that universal reconciliation is not Paul's position, at least not in the novel. It seems to me that there are two ways to show what Paul believes: what he teaches or confesses; and what he practices. Do these match things written in *The Shack*?

First, Paul has affirmed universal reconciliation on several occasions (as in May, 2007, cited above) and in differing ways. For example, he has verbally acknowledged recently that his editors removed all references to universalism from his novel. In addition, on web sites for his book, his editors claim that they took a whole year to remove universal reconciliation and even affected Paul's personal beliefs to a degree. Yet

² Universal reconciliation is the usual form of universalism which maintains restoration after future punishment. Another form of universalism asserts that restoration takes place immediately after death. In 1878, at Winchester, N.H., the idea of restoration only after punishment was declared by the Universalist movement in America to be the "orthodox" view. "Penitence, forgiveness, and regeneration" are all involved (Gerstner, "Universalism," 539). See the similar entry in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker). There is also a pagan form of universalism that teaches that all will ultimately be happy since all are, by nature, the creatures and children of God. This view asserts that Jesus is just one of many ways to God. In 1859 the broader universalism joined the Unitarian denomination. In 1825, the latter had declared itself as no longer a part of the Christian church.

Also, note M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), who cites other forms of universalism (universal conversion by evangelism, universal atonement, universal opportunity to respond) that are not examples of true universalism. People must still believe before dying to be saved. True universalism may take the forms of universal explicit opportunity (before or after death all place faith in Christ after explicitly hearing the gospel), universal reconciliation (God accomplished his purpose of reconciling all people to himself at the cross, and all simply need to learn of this reconciliation), universal pardon (in the end God will change his mind about condemning many and impute not only righteousness but also faith to all, and will forgive all), and universal restoration (the classic form expressed by Origen: after a time of suffering the purgatorial fires of hell, people will be purified enough to have fellowship forever with God). Paul Young's universalism seems to be a combination of universal reconciliation and universal restoration. Thus when I use the word "universalism" and "universalist" I have "universal reconciliation" chiefly in mind, but much of what I write pertains to other forms of true universalism.

I think they failed to remove them all, as I point out below. In addition, at the back of his novel, among his “Acknowledgments,” Paul lists several authors who have influenced him, and among these are at least three universalists. He also cites with approval a universalist at the beginning of chap. 14. Do not these features connected to the writing of the novel suggest that universalism is in the book?

When someone affirms that he has departed from his previous paradigm of evangelical belief, and has embraced a doctrine that affects his personality in life-changing ways, his total perspective and much of his theology, the author himself may not fully realize just how extensively his new thinking pervades his writing. Paul has affirmed all of these things.

Second, there are certain practices advocated in the novel that characterize Paul, at least as long as I’ve known him. I suppose that any writer of a novel draws intentionally and unintentionally on his own experiences of life and his relationship with God and his people. Paul admits that his novel is partially autobiographical. Paul has shunned the institutional church, holding church instead in a private home with his family and some friends. He has regularly opposed other institutions associated with the church, such as seminaries and Bible schools, and has opposed the institution of the government. In *The Shack* he identifies all institutions as demonic systems and power-control entities that hinder relationship with God (see the discussion below). If these words show that Paul is being true to himself in his practices will not his other words reflect his being true to himself in his beliefs?

It is not surprising that all of these thoughts and beliefs are represented in *The Shack*. It is particularly bold for Paul to have them come from the mouth of God himself (often in neglect of other, contrasting words from God as recorded in the text of Scripture).

Interestingly, in keeping with the teaching of broader universalism, it is an important element of its creed that no creed shall be imposed as a creedal test, that no adherent shall be required to “subscribe to any . . . particular religious belief or creed.”³ Paul’s reluctance to be identified even with universal reconciliation reflects the practice of others in the larger universalism movement.

The situation may arise where an author does not want to accept all the consequences for the beliefs and practices that he may have embraced and expressed. In effect this person says: “Don’t pin me down. What you find in what I’ve written is up to you.” But should not such a one be held accountable for the choices he has made to write about and the content of the writing? Even Paul, in chapters 8 and 11, asserts that people are accountable for their choices.

If an author and teacher *cannot* be held accountable (and even *insists* that he/she *should* not be held accountable), is this a valid position? I maintain that it is not and it

³ See Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Abingdon, 1961), 213. Yet isn’t this denial of a creed part of their creed to believe?

cannot be. For if people cannot be held accountable for what they write, then what I've written I can readily dismiss if I don't like what you, the reader, find fault with; I don't have to be held accountable for my critique. Moreover, you can't be held accountable for criticizing me, either. Thus all communication becomes potentially hypocritical—saying one thing but meaning another or nothing. It then becomes meaningless. It is obvious that we all believe the contrary and we strive to hold one another accountable for what we say and write.

It is often said that to understand a book better one needs to know its author. We even say this about the Bible. Well, I am acquainted with Paul and his doctrinal beliefs. Thus I feel qualified and compelled to address the contents of the novel. I am concerned that many may read this story without discerning that what Paul writes undermines evangelical theology, the gospel, and the institutional church founded by Jesus himself and his Apostles.

Yet in the end this is a critique of the novel, not Paul. Paul may affirm publicly that he has changed his beliefs or is in process of changing them. He may make many disavowals. Yet the novel is the written document that represents what Paul believed at the time he wrote it. It is this object that lies before the reader that needs to be critiqued.

This critique is necessary because of the significance of universal reconciliation. The critique is not a complaint about Paul's often creative writing. It is a concern about the doctrine, the truth, revealed in the Bible and how it may be distorted. Universal reconciliation is not a minor doctrine. It goes to the heart of evangelical faith—who God is; what he accomplished at the cross; what sin is; how and when people are saved; what the nature of the judgment after death is; etc. Universal reconciliation is part of that larger universalism that joined with rationalism and liberalism to undermine and almost destroy evangelical faith on the continent of Europe and in England in the 19th century. In early America, it opposed the evangelical Great Awakening and, in later years, has joined with liberalism and Unitarianism to undermine evangelical faith. In 1960 the Unitarians and Universalists joined together to form one “denomination.”⁴

THE STORY (AND THEOLOGY) IN GREATER DETAIL

In the next several pages I make a detailed, lengthy review and critique of the chapters which are at the core of the book for several reasons. 1) These chapters contain the core of Paul Young's theology. Since his universal reconciliation is often subtle and deeply embedded, it is necessary to pay close and critical attention to what Paul writes. To understand correctly the questionable concepts and claims, and to deal with them fairly, it is necessary to place them in their larger setting or context of the book. 2) There are some special insights into a variety of theological issues, and I wish to allow my readers to be exposed to Paul's thoughts.

⁴ See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, ed., *Theology in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), 37-41; and Mead, *Denominations*, 212-213.

For those who need a shortcut, I recommend reading my review and criticism of chapters 8, 11, 12, 13; and the conclusion.

How does this mixed bag affect the overall value of reading the book? I address this and related questions at the end of this review.

I have written my review and summary in the present tense. Within brackets I have inserted my commentary on his story and his theology, and my evaluation of these. Some of these comments come within the review of each chapter; others come at the end of each chapter. While this critical review is extensive, there are yet additional matters that could be addressed. Perhaps other reviews will flesh these out (and are already doing so).

The story is about Mack, as Willie knows him, who grew up in the Midwest on a farm. His father, a strict church elder, was an alcoholic and abusive toward his wife and children. After one particularly awful beating from his dad, Mack left home at the age of thirteen. He spent time overseas, probably fought in a war, and attended a seminary in Australia in his early twenties. After he “had his fill of theology and philosophy,” he returned to the States and moved to Oregon where he married his wife Nan. Apparently his marriage was tumultuous at first, but it had endured for 33 years. To Mack and Nan were born five children (three boys, two girls), with two of the boys grown up by the time of the events related in the novel. The youngest was named Melissa (affectionately known as Missy).

Willie notes that about seven years ago a great tragedy happened to this family and it brought *The Great Sadness* to Mack’s life. It resulted in Mack’s being angry at God. Yet about three and a half years ago something dramatic happened in Mack’s life so that the sadness and anger were gone forever. The novel is Willie’s reporting of what Mack told him about the event that caused the sadness, and how it was removed for good by a very special encounter with God himself. This encounter took place at the shack.

The story opens with Mack discovering a mysterious note in his mailbox on one winter day. It is signed as coming from “Papa” (Nan’s name for God) and invites Mack to visit him, if he wishes, at the shack where he will be that weekend. The shack represents the great tragedy that has brought sadness to Mack and his family. Mack decides, however irrational it may be, to return to the shack in the wilderness. This opening event allows the storyteller to go back and relate the tragedy that found its consummation at the shack, and what happened on Mack’s apparent return to the shack and his encounter there with God.

Mack’s “Cloud of Darkness”

On a Labor Day camping trip to the Wallowa Mountains in Northeast Oregon Mack finds himself enjoying the outdoors at Wallowa Lake with his three children and some friends made in the campground. Nan, a nurse, is taking a class in Seattle, Washington. On the morning of the last day of the vacation, Mack rescues his son and

older daughter from the lake when their canoe overturns. While he is doing this heroic deed some unknown person kidnaps his youngest, Missy, and disappears with her into the forests. The FBI and others become involved in the search for Missy. It turns out that the kidnapper is already known to the authorities from previous kidnappings and murders, and has left his calling card, a piece of jewelry in the form of a ladybug. This has led the authorities to identify him as the “Little Ladykiller.” By the end of the next day the FBI and Forest Service personnel discover a shack deep in the forests, and in it is the bloody, red dress of Missy. Like other victims of the killer, Missy’s body is never found. It is this tragedy that leads Mack to become “sick of God and God’s religion, sick of all the little religious social clubs” that don’t make any difference in the world.

At the Shack

Three and a half years later Mack gets the note and irrationally decides to accept the invitation of the note and to return to the shack, the scene of the killing. What he discovers there goes far beyond what he could have imagined. Winter changes to spring. He encounters God—all the persons of the Godhead. The Father or Papa appears as a large, African-American woman, Jesus as a Jewish handyman and carpenter, and the Holy Spirit as a small Asian woman called Sarayu. Papa is fun loving, cooks great meals, and likes contemporary and all other kinds of music. Jesus becomes Mack’s companion during the next two days. Sarayu is almost ethereal and grows gardens where both chaos and order rule together. It is a fractal incorporating chaos and order at the same time.

The last two thirds of the book are discussions between Mack and the persons of the Godhead around various topics. The chapters are appropriately labeled and address particular theological issues. I take up these chapters in greater detail.

“God Cannot Act Apart from Love”

In chapter 6, “A Piece of π ,” Mack learns that God may appear, at his/her pleasure, as several metaphors, and Mack has to deal with his stereotypes of God. Because men are more needy than women God usually presents himself as a male figure, but in truth he is neither male nor female. He appears as a Black woman to Mack because this is what best jolts Mack’s stereotype and meets his need. Because of Mack’s own estrangement from his father, God could not appear as a man to Mack without significant obstacles to overcome. Mack also learns that humans are free (94-95); what the meaning of freedom is; that the Truth—Jesus—is the only one able to set humans free (95); that freedom “is a process that happens inside a relationship with him” (95); that Papa bears the marks of crucifixion in his/her wrists just like Jesus does; that the crucifixion cost them—the Three—dearly (96); for humans to live unloved is a limitation (97); that God is “holy, and wholly other” than Mack (98); that God became incarnate and chose in the person of Jesus to be limited; that Jesus while fully divine did all of his miracles as a human fully trusting God, not as divine (100); that love and relationship among humans is only possible because they exist within the Trinity who love and relate among themselves; that love defines God and yet his loving is not “limited by his nature”

since then he “could possibly act without love” (102); that God “cannot act apart from love” (102); that Jesus died for all, not just Mack. Yet Jesus would have died for just Mack if he had been the only one on earth, but he wasn’t (103).

[This chapter lays the foundation for the importance of love as the supreme attribute of God above all others (a central tenet of universal reconciliation) and that it is intended to be such for people. It also shows that love is the basis for all that God wills, and asserts that God cannot act apart from love. Universal reconciliation affirms that because God is love he cannot act in holiness to punish or judge anyone in the future who rejects him now].

[There are a couple other concerns. If the limiting of Jesus’ miracles to his human nature is extended to his entire ministry and death, it contradicts Jesus’ own self-consciousness of, and claims of, being equal in nature (essence) with the Father. Also, there are serious consequences regarding the nature and scope of Jesus’ death.⁵ There is also significant imprecision to say that the whole Trinity became incarnate as the Son of God, and that the whole Trinity was crucified (99). This idea reflects the heresy of modalism, that God is a monadic or singular being who reveals himself in three different modes, rather than as a Triune being, a Trinity of three-in-one. Paul’s portrayal of God also runs counter to the Bible that attests that at the cross Jesus died, forsaken by the Father; that the Father laid on him 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).⁶ The Father was not crucified with the Son. Finally, Paul has an anti-institutional bias throughout, and the first signs of it occur here, when Mack reflects that “none of his old seminary training was helping in the least” (91)].

“This Was Holy”

Chapter 7, “God on the Dock,” presents Jesus’ and Mack’s conversation while lying on their backs at night on the dock of a lake and looking at the stars that Jesus has made. Even Jesus, now as a man, is enthralled by what he did as God. But the chapter begins with Mack’s enjoying a meal with the Three and observing the love that they each have for the other. Power is denounced as contrary to relationship; hence “one way to avoid the will to power is to choose to limit oneself—to serve.” This love is “simple, warm, intimate, genuine; this was holy” (107). [Here we get another inkling that for the author love is superior; it defines holiness. But why doesn’t holiness also define love? Is not one attribute just as perfect in God as the other, and all in perfect balance? If this is so then one cannot exist without the other. Also, power is not antithetical to relationship, for Jesus holds up the whole universe by his “powerful word” (Heb. 1:2-3), yet relationship within the Trinity or with believers is not threatened].

⁵ Historically broader universalism has progressively humanized Jesus. See Meade, *Denominations*, 212-213.

⁶ This assertion of co-crucifixion also blurs the distinctiveness of persons within the Trinity. Again, in American history, universalists eventually came to team up with the Unitarians and deny the Trinity (see Mead and Ahlstrom cited above).

After Mack joins Jesus in drying the dishes they spend some time on the dock. While gazing at the heavens Jesus tells Mack that Sarayu is the Holy Spirit, that she is Creativity, Action, the Breathing of Life (110). Her name is from one of the human languages and means “wind.” She is Jesus’ Spirit. Papa is also known as Elousia, meaning that she is the Creator God who is, who is truly real and the ground of all being. Mack also learns that he and the whole human race are in the center of God’s love and purpose (111). [Yet Scripture distinguishes different purposes for the elect, the “loved,” as compared to the non-elect—Rom. 8:28ff.]. Jesus defends his Jewish ethnicity and big nose. Yet Mack is told that appearances don’t matter for “being always transcends appearance—that which only seems to be” (112). By Mack’s real living or indwelling in Jesus and Jesus’ dwelling in Mack the Spirit restores the union that God originally intended for humanity. In this way Mack came to the end of his first day with God.

God Doesn’t Need “to Punish People for Sin”

Chapter 8 is “A Breakfast of Champions.” It leads much deeper into Paul’s special concepts of God and his relationship to sin and punishment. Mack falls asleep and has a beautiful dream of soaring over lands and oceans. But his dream turns ugly when he dreams of Missy calling for him out of her distress. He suddenly awakens to his second day with God. At a breakfast cooked and served by Papa, Mack discovers that she has no favorites among people but is “especially fond” of everyone and by nature has not found any she is “not especially fond of” (119-120). Indeed, while Papa gets angry at some of her/his children such anger is “an expression of love all the same. I love,” Papa says, “the ones I am angry with just as much as those I’m not.” [This is another hint of Paul’s universalism. While these words may reflect the first part of John 3:16, Paul disregards, thus rejects, the truth of the second part of the verse and v. 18 (as will be seen shortly). From Paul there is no mention of those with whom God is perpetually angry (cf. Psa. 2:3, 12; etc.); and the Bible never calls unbelievers the “beloved of God” (cf. Col. 3:12), nor does it place them within the church, his body, nor does it call them the “bride of Christ.” In this way, at least, Scripture distinguishes between those who are loved by God and those who are not].

To Mack’s query as to whether or not Papa is the one who spills out “great bowls of wrath” and throws people “into a burning lake of fire,” Papa tells Mack 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). When Mack protests that he doesn’t understand, Papa replies only that Mack is right, he doesn’t. But she will tell him more in the near future. [Thus Paul projects a somewhat cavalier attitude toward sin. And while he defines punishment for sin similar to what Paul the Apostle does in Rom. 1, Young leaves off saying what the Apostle concludes in v. 32, that people know “God’s righteous decree that those who do such things are worthy of death,” and this death must be eternal death in light of the context (Rom. 6:23). Also Young clearly disassociates God with the punishment of evil, but verses 18ff. say that God does punish people for sin (note v. 18). All of this reflects Paul’s universalism. Many biblical statements affirm that God indeed does engage in judgment and does punish the ungodly (note condemnation in John 3:16-17; and in many

places in Romans, chs. 1-5).⁷ Who God is relative to judgment is not a matter of what Mack thinks but what Scripture teaches—and the scene closes with Papa denying that he/she punishes sin. To have Papa say that she/he “cures” sin rather than “punishes” it is standard terminology that universalists use (120)].

A Circle of Relationship

After a time Mack observes that there seems to be equality in the relationship among the Trinity, with no hint of subordination. They affirm a circle of relationship, and deny a “chain of command” (122). There is no power over the other, no hierarchy. The latter is the problem of humans and their institutions (including politics, business, marriage, and the church; see the next chapter) in order to use power to enforce rules and regulations, thereby destroying relationships.

[Yet most Christians affirm a hierarchy, a subordination, within the Godhead, although it is not heretical to deny a hierarchy. In addition, the Bible presents God as the maker of institutions where, for example in government, a hierarchy must exist and yet an abuse of power is not necessary to the functioning of government designed by God and relationships among the people. Indeed, God has established the institution of his kingdom, both past (in the OT) and present (Jesus said his kingdom is at hand; note Matt. 5, the beatitudes; and ch. 11; etc.) and will come in the future (cf. Matt. 24-25; Rev. 19). This is a God-ordered institution. Similarly the church is an institution, with leaders in authority and regulations that both Jesus (Matt. 18) and the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 11, 12, 14; 1 Tim. 2, 3, etc.) institute. There are gifts to be exercised, teaching to be done, worship expressed, collections to pay pastors, shepherding exercised, elders and deacons and overseers to appoint who exercise authority and rule, etc. All of this is done by the instruction and authority of Scripture; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1ff.].

Institutions a Diabolical Scheme

Sarayu comments that authority is usually an “excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want” (123). [But what about those in authority in the church that God has designed (cf. 1 Tim. 2:13; Rom. 13:1-7; etc.)?]. Systems (such as institutions) represent struggles for power, the “will to power and independence”; they form a “matrix, a diabolical scheme” in which humans are entrapped (p. 124). [Thus Paul attributes virtually all institutions to the Devil contrary to the witness of Scripture that asserts that God, not Satan, has established government (Rom. 13:1-7) and Jesus the church (Matt. 16:18). Paul wrongly attributes to the Devil what Scripture attributes to God and Christ!]. When humans protect themselves with power they yield to the matrix, not to God. God desires people to join him/her in “a circle of love” to change this (124). Yet God will use every human choice, or free will, for power, and rights and evil, for the “ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (125). [Note here the lack of mentioning a just or right outcome]. People need to trust God as good—his goodness covers all the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives. Papa claims that God is not a

⁷ I deal with this in some detail in my forthcoming study, “Reaffirming the Reality of Hell: Visiting *The Shack* and Other Fiction of Universal Reconciliation,” *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*.

“bully, not some self-centered demanding little deity insisting on my own way. I am good, and I desire only what is best for you. You cannot find that through guilt or condemnation or coercion, only through a relationship of love” (126).

[Yet why does not Paul also identify God as holy (Lev. 19:1)? He also fails to recognize the promise that all things work together for good *to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose*” (Rom. 8:28). No such promise exists for those who do not love him]. 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). Again, “redeeming” is the standard language of universalism to describe the meaning of the suffering in hell. Evangelicals never use this terminology.

[Papa’s final words mean ultimately that there is no final judgment, only redemption. Yet Mack’s question begs for an answer. If God respects human choices, and some choose evil, how are the choices of evil dealt with when love is rejected? Universal reconciliation affirms that by means of the fires of hell God leads those who have rejected him to repent and embrace him after death. Does not such suffering constitute coercion (a “bully insisting on his own way”)? Does this not suggest that within universal reconciliation God does not honor human freedom or choices?].

[It is as though Jesus at his death says to one thief: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” To the other thief he says: “Tomorrow you will be with me in paradise after I have chastised you enough to force you to repent.” This is neither an act of love nor a response of faith. Instead, Jesus describes the end as everlasting life or everlasting suffering and separation from God (Matt. 25:46).]

[It is an odd irony, but a contemptuous one too, that universal reconciliation follows Jesus in understanding God’s love, but it rejects Jesus for teaching the eternal suffering of those who reject him. The Jesus of universal reconciliation is not the biblical Jesus. The biblical “ultimate good and most loving outcome” is judgment and everlasting separation from God. Universal reconciliation ends up being the most deterministic of all the positions on hell and the future. From the will of God it excludes God’s will that humans be free to exercise their will to choose to reject God].

Independence the Evil of Eden

In chapter 9, “A Long Time Ago, in a Garden Far, Far Away,” Paul places Mack in a garden tended by Sarayu. The topics concern the original garden of Eden and the impact of the events there. It makes little difference if some reject it as an actual garden, since “rumors of glory” are often hidden in myths and tales (134). In Sarayu’s garden there is an infinitely changing pattern of growth and complexity—a “fractal,” as Sarayu terms it. Surprisingly her garden is chaos in color, a total disregard for certainty (128-129). Mack tires from the work of pruning the garden but is reminded that it is “not the work, but the purpose that makes it special” (131). Science is described as the discovering of what God has hidden (132). In humankind’s desire for independence from

God it lost freedom, for freedom “involves trust and obedience *inside* a relationship of love” (132).

Then there ensues a discussion between Mack and Sarayu to discover why eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden was so devastating. In seeking independence from God humanity divorced the spiritual from the physical (135). Lust for independence, to decide what is good and evil apart from God, is the evil of Eden. Sarayu goes on to explain that evil is simply the absence of the good, it has no “actual existence” (135). [Early church fathers similarly speak of evil]. Independence brings death because people have separated themselves from God who is Life. People seek rights only to avoid relationships; if they would give up their rights, enter into relationship with God and become dependent on him they would find true freedom (137). At the end of their conversation Sarayu reveals to Mack that the garden they have been tending is actually his soul, a true fractal with its mess and beauty wrapped together.

[It is somewhat surprising that the chapter identifies the evil of Eden as independence, when most Jews and Christians through the ages have identified the basic evil of Satan and of the garden as pride, which may then lead to independence. Paul seems to be looking at the result of pride rather than dealing with the motive, the evil, that leads to independence. As elsewhere Paul here regularly avoids using such terms as “sin,” “iniquity,” “transgression,” and “disobedience,” whereas the Bible (both OT and NT) uses this variety of terms for evil—probably because of the Bible’s view of the enormity of evil in contrast to a holy God. Paul also makes no mention of sin arising from the tempter, Satan, or of his role in the fall in Eden. Thus goes unanswered the question: Who or what led to the temptation in the garden? This is an incomplete picture of the garden and of the reality of evil in our world today. The Devil was very real to Jesus].

Living in Relationships Not Roles

Chapter 10, “Wade in the Water,” is, as the title indicates, Mack’s opportunity to walk on water. It is a chapter devoted to explaining the meaning of living in relationships, whether with God or with other humans in marriage, etc. Mack and Jesus walk across the lake, sinking down only a little, less than their ankles. Jesus exhorts Mack to live in the present and to stop imagining the future, since this leads usually to what harm may lie in the future, usually something fearful and without God. Imagined fears lead people to try to control the future, to have power over it. People fear because they do not believe in, they do not know, the love of God and that he is good. This makes one incapable of finding freedom in God’s love (142). When Mack and Jesus reach the other side of the lake Mack reflects on the beauty of the creation that Jesus has made. Jesus reminds him that it has been given to humans to care for and they have usually plundered it, in part because of war [another reflection of Paul’s anti-war disposition]. Because of love Jesus has never acted in his capacity as “Lord and King” to take control of his world (145).

[Yet he will do so at his return in power and glory; Rev. 19-20. By putting it this way Paul makes it virtually impossible for Christ to be ever heralded and worshipped as Lord and King. Yet this is what all biblical history points to and the church anticipates. The Apostle Paul says that Christ will exert “his power to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:21). In its distortion of biblical love, universal reconciliation is blinded to the obvious teaching of Scripture]. Genuine relationships are marked by submission, as in the Trinity where each is in submission to the other. [Yet this submission is mutual, born out of love, voluntary and free. What about those who will become the “footstool” of Jesus’ feet, as *Jesus himself* and virtually all the writers of the NT affirm, when they quote or allude to Psalm 110:1? This is not willing submission but conquest by the one “who loves righteousness.” See Matt. 22:44ff.; Heb. 1:3, 7-8, 13; Rev. 19:11-16; etc.].

Jesus continues his dialogue with Mack. There is no hierarchy among the three or among humans where love and respect prevail. Similarly the three are in submission to human beings so that a “circle of relationship” might prevail. Jesus does not want “slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me” (146). When Jesus is one’s life, submission in all other relationships, including marriage, will prevail. Relationships are broken because people sought in Eden independence from God. Men express this by seeking fulfillment and identity in their work; women express it by seeking fulfillment in relationships apart from God—in their husbands who aren’t up to the task and end up playing God and exercising power and rule over her (147). [Here there is an inherent logical contradiction, for Paul has already rejected the exercise of power within the Godhead! Thus, for universal reconciliation to be consistent, men do not act as God!]. Men turned to themselves and to their work; women turned to another relationship. Both need to “re-turn” to God and relationship with him. God does not desire that men and women simply fulfill roles because “filling roles is the opposite of relationship” (148). [Here again Paul Young seems to neglect the fact that Paul the Apostle and Jesus never call for the obliteration of certain roles this side of heaven. For example, this side of heaven only women will be mothers, and parents will always be such! Within the church shepherding is a role some will have (1 Pet. 5) and yet this is not opposed to relationships].

God took woman out of man so that he might create a “circle of relationship”—she out of him and then all males birthed through her, and all birthed from God [reflecting 1 Cor. 11:1ff.]. This allows a being that is fully equal and powerful in the counterpart, the male and the female (148). But independence leads always to a quest for power and the destruction of relationship. The scene concludes with Jesus asserting that his life was not meant to be “an example to copy,” to be like him. Rather one’s independence needs “to be killed.” One needs to follow Jesus in the sense of letting Jesus live out his life in him/her and let Jesus be expressed in every way.

[Again, there is much in this chapter that involves overstatements and doctrinal errors flowing out of Paul’s universalism, as identified above. For example, the words dealing with letting Jesus’ life be lived in us who profess to follow him are Biblical, and flow from John 14-17. But Paul’s last point, that Jesus is not an example to copy, is contradicted by Jesus’ own invitation to follow him (John 13:15), by Paul the Apostle’s

statements that Christians should follow Christ's example (Phil. 2:5; 1 Thess. 1:6), that he follows Christ's example (1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Thess. 3:7-9; cf. Eph. 5:1), that he is himself an example to follow (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17), and by Peter's words (1 Pet. 2:21). In addition, there are many texts in which Jesus exhorts us to follow him. Does this not mean taking him as an example "to be copied" in all that we think, say, and do, in all of our living?].

God Loves All His Children the Same Forever

Chapter 11, "Here Come Da Judge," is an especially crucial chapter for Paul's universalism, focusing as he does on the issue of God acting as judge of the wicked (which is denied). The chapter is at the heart of the book both physically and theologically. Across the lake Mack mysteriously penetrates into the rock face of a mountain and enters a pitch black room where he faintly perceives the presence of a judge—a beautiful, tall, Hispanic looking woman in a flowing robe. The judge questions Mack regarding his love and his judging of his children. In this light Mack (acting as God does) affirms that he loves all his children the same; he just loves them differently. He loves them in spite of their occasional disobedience; they will be his sons and daughters forever. His capacity for knowing them grows and "love simply expands to contain it [the knowledge]" (155). The judge tells Mack that God loves his children in a similar way (156).

[Clearly Paul intends that the whole discussion about Mack's love for his children should find its parallel in God's love and his judging all humanity. This is the crucial point for Paul's universal reconciliation. As humans care for their children, so God cares for his. There is an assumption that everyone has been reconciled to God (see below, in ch. 13, where universal reconciliation is affirmed) and that all enjoy the privilege of being God's children by virtue of this. 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 the Apostle was "preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection." Paul Young fails to point to this distinction by saying that God loves "all his children the same," and will love them forever. The Bible says that only those who respond by faith in Christ (note that some did and some did not, in Acts 17:34) become those destined for heaven; the rest will experience Jesus as their judge (contrary to Paul Young)].

When Mack challenges the truth of this in light of the death of Missy, Mack thereby fills the role of judging God. The judge asks Mack to assume the role of judge and act like a judge of his own children in the manner that he thinks God judges his children. The judge reminds Mack that he has had much practice in judging others, in acting superior over the ones judged (159) [This is Paul's definition of judging]. There are many who, Mack believes, deserve judgment, such as the greedy, those who sacrifice their young for war, wife beaters, those who abuse children, and murderers of children. The judge asks Mack to choose two of his five children to spend eternity in heaven and to

choose three of his children to spend eternity in hell (162). When Mack protests that he could never do such a thing the judge tells him that this is only doing something that he believes God does. Yet just because his son or daughter had sinned against him Mack protests that he could never send either of them to hell. It wasn't "about their performance; it was about his love for them" (163). Finally, Mack volunteers to go in their place to be tortured for all eternity.

[Yet why is nothing said regarding faith? When it comes to the destinies of heaven and hell, it is not about performance nor about God's love—for he has shown incomparable love—but it is about exercising faith to respond to God's love. Those who go to hell are not "sent" there by God in some arbitrary fashion. This is a terrible caricature of divine election (Rom. 8:28ff.; chs. 9-10). Those who go to hell do so as the result of their own choice not to believe, a choice for which they are fully accountable (John 3:16-18). The way that Paul Young puts it is a horrendous subversion of the love of God, the justice of God, election, etc. In this place Paul virtually identifies himself as a champion of universal reconciliation, since it is not about what people do (including, in light of chapter 13, exercising faith) but about God's love alone].

"Mercy Triumphs over Justice Because of Love"

At this point the judge tells Mack that he is acting like Jesus, that he has judged his children to be worthy of his love, even if it costs him everything (163). Jesus loves "all his children perfectly" (163). The judge tells Mack that Missy died because "it was the work of evil"; it was not part of God's plan (164). The judge tells Mack that God has done all he can do to right the evil. She says he did it "for love. He chose the way of the cross where *mercy triumphs over justice because of love*" (164; italics mine). [This is probably the most all-encompassing statement of the novel and flows from true universalism].

The judge exhorts Mack to turn from his independence, to turn from his being the judge of God and how he thinks the universe should be run, and to trust God to run his universe. Mack confesses that he wants to trust God and to stop being a judge.

Somewhat in reward for this progress in his thinking, Mack is given the opportunity to see through a waterfall his daughter Missy playing in the presence of Jesus. She is able to perceive her father's presence, even to mouth an "I love you" to him, but she cannot see Mack. The judge affirms that Mack is not to blame for her death; and even if he had been to blame, Mack is told: "her love is much stronger than your fault could ever be." As the scene of bliss disappears, the judge tells Mack that "judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right" (169).

[This chapter contains the strongest affirmations of universal reconciliation in the book. All that Paul has the judge saying is to represent his universalism. There is an implicit denial of a time of judgment, and an explicit affirmation that judgment is unnecessary because Jesus in love has already born it and "mercy triumphs over justice." As I have shown above, the latter is partially correct biblically (virtually it is a quote of

part of James 2:13). Yet Paul neglects the warning of the earlier part of the same verse that says that “judgment is merciless to the one not showing mercy.” This clearly speaks of God’s future judgment based in justice that depends on what people do, even though Jesus has already died under judgment for sin. *It means just the opposite of what Paul’s universalism affirms—that mercy limits God’s justice.* Indeed, by these biblical words there is no mercy! The part of the verse that affirms “mercy triumphs over justice” is speaking about what Christians do].

[It seems that a more biblical way to relate justice, mercy and love is to say that God’s love was the reason that God sent the Savior so that the full requirements of justice, of the law, might be met (cf. Romans 3:25-26) and mercy could be extended to all. Mercy does not “trump” justice or triumph over it or limit it. Justice is fully served].

[As also pointed out above, even the wording for “triumphs over” in James 2:13 is a bit misleading, for the words are better translated as “boasts against” or “is joyfully confident over.” James is referring to believers’ needing to show by their works that they are impartial toward the poor. It is not a discussion of God’s nature or actions but a principle of human behavior toward others. It does not say that because of his mercy God after the cross will no longer act to judge and apply the sentence of judgment already placed on those who disbelieve (John 3:16-18). James is dealing with expressions of human mercy. While God does extend mercy to all unconditionally, Young neglects all the texts that also assert that God fills the role of Judge past and future (beginning with Gen. 18:25; Heb. 10:30; etc.); 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). God judges according to a standard. All the world cries that it be what is right or holy as well as loving or merciful. But it is never said to be love alone or limited by love].

[Also this chapter distinctly says nothing about those passages of the Bible that speak of lasting torment or separation of the wicked who refuse to believe Christ. The very strongest words in the Bible come not from Paul or John or Peter but they are those of Jesus 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). For Paul to ignore totally these words and truths makes his picture of Jesus and God distorted. 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 and to bring a person through the purifying powers 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].

[It is the greatest distortion to subsume justice under mercy, when the Bible presents God as perfect in all his attributes. This cannot mean that one attribute is to be exalted over another, and the Bible never does this. The Bible says both that God is holy (Lev. 19:1) and light (1 John 1:5) and that he is love (1 John 4:8, 19). Truth and love are interlocking themes in 1, 2, 3 John. Note also that Jesus “loves righteousness” (Heb. 1:9; cf. all of Ps. 45 from which the quote is taken). In addition, 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 lasting, eternal attribute of God, and God ceases to be God].

[Now someone will say: “Didn’t God’s love override God’s justice at the cross?” If this is meant in the sense that love led God to deal justly with our sin by applying his justice to the person of Christ for what we truly deserve, then the answer is “yes” (see Rom. 3:25ff.; John 3:16). But this is not what universal reconciliation asserts. Instead, it contends that God cannot fully exact justice because his love restrains or limits him. Note that Paul has Wisdom pitting the choice of love over against the choice of justice. “Justice is limited by his love” is what the universalist ministers of Boston announced in 1878. As long as one unbeliever remains in hell God’s love has failed and he is unjust. While such a person is there for rejecting Christ, God’s love will deliver him/her from there given enough time of “corrective suffering.”].

To Share Jesus’ Life

Chapter 12, “In the Belly of the Beast,” is Paul’s attempt to deal with such concepts as wisdom, time, and reality; and to denounce all institutions including marriage as wrong. He also defines who a Christian is. Mack notices that *The Great Sadness* that has crippled his life ever since Missy’s death has gone for good. He is also told that the judge in the previous chapter is Sophia, wisdom, a personification of Papa’s wisdom. He also learns that his other children were present in their dreams when he saw his Missy playing with Jesus. He learns too that Missy was in communion with Jesus before she died and knew his peace. The way for Mack to cope with his loss is to learn to live loved (175), to experience life together with Jesus as friend, in dialogue, and to share his life, wisdom, and love (175). Only then will Mack begin to understand what “it means to be truly human” (177). Heaven is going to be a cleansing of the present universe and look a lot like the present one (177). The description of heaven as pearly gates and gold actually describes Jesus’ bride, his church, forming a spiritual city. Jesus tells Mack that his disappointment with the visible church should not deter him for Jesus did not come to build “the institution, a man-made system” (178). Rather Jesus’ church is all about people and relationships, a living “breathing community of all those who love me, not buildings and programs” (178).

[This reflects again Paul’s basic anti-institutional beliefs and his practice of not attending a local church for many years. This view ignores such texts as Heb. 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 do business (such as finding out about needs, spending funds, choosing leaders, etc.). Paul’s view virtually has no place for spiritual gifts including *leadership* (Rom. 12:8) and their 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 commanded—but these go unmentioned here by Paul].

Jesus Doesn't Create Institutions

Jesus tells Mack that he doesn't create institutions—"never have, never will"—whether political, economic, religious, or even marriage (since marriage is said to be a relationship, not an institution) (178). Institutions are human creations to provide some sense of certainty and security where there is none. "It's all false" (179). Jesus asserts that institutions are part of the world system but his people are to be in them but not of them (181). With Jesus they will grow in "the freedom to be inside or outside" any system (181). When Mack asks whether this is what a Christian is, Jesus replies that he is not a Christian and doesn't try to make any one such. Rather, from all walks of life and from all religions he is seeking to join people "in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters." When Mack asks whether this means that all roads lead to him, Jesus replies that it does not mean this. Rather, it means that "I will travel any road to find you" (182).

[Again, in addition to the points of theological concern expressed in the brackets above, the final words of the chapter must give pause. While Paul does not say that there are many roads or ways to God of which Jesus is only one, he does seem to confuse the issue. While it is appropriate, especially in some cultures, to reject the title, "Christian," for the follower of Jesus, Paul has also rejected in chapter 10 the idea of Jesus being an example to copy. So what do we call one who follows and believes in Christ, a "believer"? Yet Paul gives little mention of this word. Also Paul does not indicate how one is transformed. Isn't it a bit strange to have Jesus say that he "joins people in their transformation into his brothers and sisters" when Scripture speaks of people first coming to Christ who then by the Spirit transforms them? Then the reciprocal relationship begins and develops deeper and deeper (John 14-17). And it seems that Paul could have stated here what Jesus emphatically states: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." It is not about many roads but about the Road, and his followers join the Way (he doesn't join their ways). It seems that universal reconciliation has again influenced Paul's understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The idea of Jesus' traveling "any road to find you" may reflect universalism's assertion that Jesus may go a thousand times to hell to bring out the wicked who repent there].

Love That Is Forced Is Not Love

Chapter 13, "A Meeting of Hearts," provides Paul the opportunity to address the matters of grace, the meaning of Christ's death, and reconciliation. Mack joins Papa on the back porch of the shack and over food engages in a conversation about grace. Papa makes it clear that he never causes tragedies but uses them and brings good out of them. Grace does not depend on suffering to exist but where suffering does exist grace can be discovered (185). Papa acknowledges that people often wrongly associate her with being stern and Jesus with forgiveness. Papa then deals with the issue of lies, how people hide within them to find power and safety, to protect themselves, but they are unloving. Instead people need to risk being honest, to confess to others, ask for forgiveness, and let forgiveness heal them (188). Yet Papa respects people's freedom to choose independence, to their own destruction, for to deny this freedom destroys "the possibility

of love. Love that is forced is no love at all” (190). God purposes what he does always as an expression of love (191). In reply to Mack’s question as to what Jesus accomplished by his dying, Papa says that he accomplished everything that love purposed from before the world was made (191). “Creation and history is [sic] all about Jesus. He is the very center of our purpose . . .” (192).

Then Papa clarifies in succinct dialogue what Jesus accomplished at the cross: through his death and resurrection God is “now fully reconciled to the world.” When Mack suggests that by the “world” she really means those who believe in her, she 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). At this Mack confesses that he doesn’t really understand reconciliation, and fears emotions. At this the dialogue comes to an end with Papa walking away and uttering that men are “such idiots sometimes.”

[Clearly Paul’s “universal reconciliation” is in the background here. Love is viewed as “opening the way” for all to *discover* their reconciliation. Since there is no judgment or eternal torment, as Paul acknowledges in other chapters (11) and elsewhere, then love finds a way for universal reconciliation. It is significant that the discussion about reconciliation unfolds as it does. 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 may lie in the background of this discussion, the Apostle Paul speaks of the role of faith in reconciliation. It 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). The Colossians were *not* reconciled until they believed. Instead, they were far from God. 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). Paul Young commits a significant doctrinal error of how God is related to the world of believers and unbelievers. Surprisingly, Mack who supposes a role for faith is here more biblical than Papa is! For Papa to break off the discussion with an *ad hominem* argument is unfortunate and theologically disappointing].

Christians Are Not Under Any Law

Chapter 14, “Verbs and Other Freedoms,” is Paul’s presentation of how rules relate to relationship, and why the Ten Commandments were given. As Mack paddles off across the lake in the mid after noon, Sarayu joins him. She promises that she will always be with him and make her presence known. He will hear her thoughts in his own thoughts as their relationship grows (195-196). Emotions are the colors of the soul and are neither bad nor good. Sarayu tells him that “*paradigms power perception and perceptions power emotions*” (italics Paul’s) (197). What one believes is true about something will ultimately influence one’s perceptions and then, in turn, one’s emotions. When Mack complains that living out of relationships is more complicated than living by

rules, even the rules of Scripture, Sarayu corrects Mack that the Bible “doesn’t teach you to follow the rules. It is a picture of Jesus” (197). She continues that religion is about having the right answers, but she is about the process that takes one to the living answer (Jesus) who is able to change one from the inside (198). She promises to communicate with Mack in unlimited, living, transforming ways, and to be seen in the Bible in fresh ways. [These are among Paul’s very few references to the Bible. Yet one’s relationship with God or with the Spirit can only grow as Scripture is read and forms the basis of relationship with God]. Mack is not to look for rules and principles but for relationship with them (she and Jesus).

Over supper the discussion continues on the line of relationship. The three tell Mack that he can add nothing to them to make them more fulfilled; they already are fully fulfilled within themselves (201). Papa makes it clear that only Jesus is fully human and fully divine; in her very nature she is not human. She clarifies: “I am truly human, in Jesus, but I am a totally separate *other* in my nature (*italics Paul’s*) (201). [Here Paul apparently affirms the transcendence of God, but his total focus has been on immanence thus far. He virtually omits any further reference to God’s transcendence. Yet Scripture balances them, as in Isa. 6].

When Mack asks what the three will expect of him once he gets back home, a discourse about “expectation” and the purpose of rules ensues. The Ten Commandments were not given to make it possible to live righteously but to act as a mirror to show just how filthy people are when they live independently of God. Sarayu asks whether one can clean one’s face with the same mirror that shows how dirty one is. [Dealing this way with the Ten Commandments as a mirror perhaps clouds the issue. The law is holy and good (Rom. 7). In addition, the only place in the NT that speaks of the law as a mirror speaks of obeying or doing the law in order to be blessed by God, to prove that one’s faith is genuine and alive. Works are a necessary evidence of faith—James 1:23-25]. There is no mercy or grace in trying to keep rules. Jesus fulfilled all the law perfectly so that it no longer has jurisdiction over people and the commands become a promise that God fulfills in his own (202). Jesus is “both the promise and the fulfillment” (203). Followers of Jesus “are not under *any* law. All things are lawful” (*italics Paul’s*) (203). Trying to keep the law is a declaration of independence, a way of keeping control over and of judging others and feeling superior to them (203). “Rules cannot bring freedom; they only have the power to accuse” (203).

[Reflecting his universalism Paul Young has Papa virtually deny the role of judge, yet this contradicts the rest of the witness of Scripture. The New Testament identifies God, even after the death of Christ, as the Judge of all, including Christians. James 4:12 says: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.” James simply warns that no person take on the role of judge (see also Rom. 3:6). This is very similar to Paul the Apostle’s words in Romans 14:10-13, where Paul affirms the role of God (or Christ) as the judge of all Christians. In this way everyone will acknowledge—“bow before”—the Lord and give account to him. The Apostle applies the OT passage to Christians of the new era. God acts in the role of the Judge of all, including Christians. The idea of bowing before God does not point to an act of

accepting God or Christ as Savior but being brought into submission, to confess and acknowledge God to be what he claims to be—the one worthy to judge people. The passage is not about finding salvation in God or Christ; it is about all who are opposed to his being brought into submission to acknowledge him].

God Is “I Am”

At this point Sarayu launches into a discourse about verbs and nouns, asserting that verbs are to be preferred over nouns because verbs are alive, dynamic, active and moving, God is a verb. “I am that I am. I will be who I will be,” she asserts (204). Nouns pertain to physical reality and without verbs nouns make the universe dead. It is similar to the difference between grace and law. She illustrates this by pointing out that the nouns, responsibility and expectation, become alive and dynamic in the verbal forms of respond and expectancy (205). Whereas religion uses law to empower itself, the Spirit because she is present infuses people with the ability to respond and to be free to love and to serve. Expectancy is alive and dynamic and undefined, but expectation brings law into a relationship and makes relationships—all relationships—deteriorate into dead things (205). Thus God has no expectations of anyone—he doesn’t need any since he knows all that there can be known about one—but God does have expectancy of people in his relationship with them. It is wrong to have priorities, such as to set God first and people second, for priorities suggest a hierarchy and destroy relationship. Instead God wants all of a person all of the time. Jesus wants to be, not at the top of a pyramid of choices, but at the center of everything, to be the center of a dynamic mobile (207). The scene closes with Sarayu touching Mack’s eyes so that he might see, for a brief time, a bit of what God sees.

[While the exact relationship of the Christian to the law is debated among Christians, it is certainly a mainline view to affirm that Christians are not under any law (so Paul the Apostle affirms in Rom. 6:14; 7:6; 8:2; Gal. 5:18). Yet Paul Young gives scant attention to the role of obedience in the Christian’s life. While the Christian gives loving obedience, it is still obedience to commands (note John 13:33-34; 15:9-17; etc.). Paul also continues the undercurrent of anti-institutionalism by having Papa reflect an anti-rule mind set].

Seeing But Not Seeing

Chapter 15, “A Festival of Friends,” is the unveiling for Mack of heavenly reality that was initiated at the end of chapter 14. In the midst of our physical world, it takes special sight to see the heavenly reality, and for a brief time Sarayu treats Mack to such a spectacle. Mack is transported from the shack to the top of a small hill where it is night with the moon and stars overhead. Children and adults, as well as angels, appear as each having a distinct light form (212-213). The light and colors and blaze are unique to each one for each relationship, with children having less color than adults. Each individual personality and emotion has its own unique combination of color and light that is ever changing. It is this that identifies each person and angel. They are all gathered to celebrate the arrival of Jesus.

But one light at the edge of the scene causes commotion and cannot contain his emotion. It is Mack's father, who mistreated his son and drove him to run away many years ago. Mack rushes forward to his father, embraces him and by mutual confession and forgiveness both are healed by a love greater than either one (215). Returning to his vantage point on top of the hill, Mack observes the arrival of Jesus clothed in brilliant white and wearing a gold crown. He enters the circle of lights on a carpet of love. Then the beings gather around him and they, everyone who has a breath, worships him with a song of "unending love and thankfulness." That night, "the universe," Mack observes, "was as it was intended" (216). In the midst of the celebration, Jesus avers his special fondness for Mack. And then all the participants have a personal time with Jesus before departing. Finally, Mack is left alone, he is blind again as his natural sight returns, and he returns with Jesus and Sarayu to the cabin.

[These pages show that angels and people in heaven are still very much alive and fully known, and in a sense present. Each one is identified by his/her unique identity, perhaps as an aura of color and light, and not by physical features. Paul's descriptions reinforce the reality of the future life. Yet this picture needs to be balanced by the opposite picture of those suffering eternal separation from God in darkness].

Forgiving and Forgetting

Chapter 16, "A Morning of Sorrows," concerns two unfinished items in the remaking of Mack. Mack is awakened by Papa out of his sleep at the end of his second night with the three. Yet now Papa appears as an older gentleman, not a large black woman, because Mack will need a father today (219). He is able to know God as Father because he had forgiven his father the day before (221). Papa reminds Mack again that he created freedom for people to choose independence if they wish, but it came at great cost—the death of Jesus to provide a "path of reconciliation" (222) [another hint of Paul's universalism]. To help Mack bring closure to his experience, Papa leads Mack up the trail above the cabin. Yet this experience must involve Mack's forgiving the murderer of his daughter Missy so that he can be released to God "to allow him to redeem" the murderer since he is also a son of God (224). While Mack struggles over being able to "forgive and forget," Papa reminds him that forgetting is not involved and forgiveness does not in itself "establish relationships" (225). Papa remarks: "In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship" (225). [This way of putting it seems to be a bit odd, and reflects universal reconciliation once more. At the end of the notes for this chapter I take up this oddity. Also Paul says nothing about the murderer being held accountable for his evil act, for justice to be served. Yet Paul the Apostle says that laws exist to deal with the lawbreaker and immoral and others, including murderers who do evil acts (1 Timothy 1:8-10), and that government has been *established by God* to punish evil (Rom. 13:1-7). Finally, is God's act of redeeming another person dependant on our forgiving that person (224)? Isn't it rather that God's forgiveness of us depends on our forgiving others (Matt. 6)?].

Papa goes on to instruct Mack that forgiveness of another does not require one to trust that person, but if a person finally confesses and repents then reconciliation can begin (226). Papa also tells Mack that he will handle the matter of justice for the murderer (226). [It is not clear what this means, in light of earlier statements in the novel that God does not judge sins. Is this Paul's accommodation to the obvious, that sin must be judged by someone on the earth?] Papa also declares that it is alright for Mack to be angry while he forgives the murderer, because "anger is the right response to something that is so wrong" (227). [Why is this not the case with God's attitude toward those who did such a wrong thing in crucifying his Son and who reject his offer to forgive them?] It may be that one day Mack will hand the murderer over to Papa "so that my love will burn from his life every vestige of corruption" (227).

[It is strange that the act of murder is called "corruption," and not called "sin" or "evil," especially when acting independent of God is described as evil. Also, how is it that love will "burn away corruption"? This is classic universalism, that all suffering and punishment is corrective and redeeming, not punitive. Love takes the form of the fires of hell so that all—people, fallen angels, and the Devil—repent in order to escape hell. Universal reconciliation has no place for justice and punishment, for suffering the consequences of one's evil deeds, even though there is absolutely no word in Scripture affirming universalism's view of punishment nor of an opportunity to repent after death.].

Having accomplished one task, the other unfinished task was to find Missy's body. Papa points out to Mack that the murderer has marked his trail with a small red arc to lead to the cave where he left Missy's body. Upon discovering the body, Mack places it in a special bag made by Sarayu and begins carrying it back toward the shack. So ends chapter 16.

Are All Forgiven?

[Now here I take up the oddity I mentioned above. If all people are forgiven already for their sins, does this not include their lust for independence? Does it not include unbelief? And if these are forgiven, then why are not all people thought of as having just as close a relationship as those who actually desire it? By this logic it seems that in the end there is none out of relationship with God. This is naked, uncovered, universalism—what universal reconciliation is all about in the end. All already have a relationship with God apart from believing].

[Yet biblical witness and human experience contradict this conclusion. The Bible teaches that one must believe and receive the offered gift of forgiveness (Rom. 6:23; John 3:16) for reconciliation to become effective or operative. In addition, all people have a moral sense within (called conscience) that says that there is a difference between Mother Theresa and Adolph Hitler as far as evaluating their morality is concerned. We grant to juries of fallen human beings the ability to discern significantly the difference between right and wrong. Thus there is something more that needs to be involved to classify one as forgiven. It seems that faith and trust are necessary, and without faith people's sins are not forgiven. The forgiveness is not actual but only potential. Again it seems that Paul's

universalism has blinded him to the reality that the Bible identifies some people as both hating God and under his wrath (Rom. 1:18ff.) because they fail to repent and believe/trust Christ. There are those who are in a state of condemnation because they are not in Christ (Rom. 8:1) because they do not believe (John 3:16, 18). They will perish (3:16). What is more, the Bible gives no hope that this destiny can be reversed after having once begun].

[Finally, Paul is wrong to say that “forgiveness does not establish relationship” [Paul 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. But this then *is* the basis for relationship; it does, indeed, *establish* relationship (contrary to Young). One is so intimate with Christ that he/she can be said to be *in* Christ; see Col. 2:6-15].

[It seems that Paul is creating categories about relationship that are in conflict with the Bible. The Bible teaches that confession and the resulting forgiveness do establish relationship with God (cf. 1 John 1:5-9). Paul creates a category of forgiveness apart from relationship with God and also a category of relationship with God that is something different from being a Christian (see Paul’s reluctance to use this title in the discussion above). If those in relationship with God are not Christians, what are they? Are they super-Christians? How deep does the relationship have to be? How does one measure whether it is deep enough? The issue is not various degrees of relationship but simply whether one is in relationship, in union, with Christ. And Scripture makes it clear that one enters into relationship with Christ by the act of faith, at conversion. Perhaps the issue is that of firming up the relationship, of strengthening it, of appropriating it more and more, rather than the Christian’s entering into it subsequent to becoming a Christian].

[Also, in keeping with Paul’s theology that God allows people to be independent from him means that he does not force himself on them (as asserted in an earlier chapter). If this is so, then why should not some be allowed to exercise their freedom to be unforgiven or to reject forgiveness? To already forgive everyone is forcing forgiveness on some who don’t want it. It is the evangelical doctrine of freedom for the individual to choose to reject Christ and to go to judgment that best captures biblical theology. The universalism of Paul Young isn’t freedom after all; it is coercion; and this opposes our understanding of the nature of God as love, and the nature of human beings].

[The biblical distinction is not between some children of God who desire relationship with God and others who don’t, but between those who have a relationship with God by virtue of their faith in Christ and are his children, and those who don’t believe and thus don’t have a relationship with God (John 1:12). Paul’s way of putting it makes salvation anthropological—man centered—rather than God centered, since the emphasis is on a person’s desire. On the other hand, since Paul considers all to be God’s children equally loved he is more deterministic than Calvinism. He obviously rejects the Biblical doctrine of election, which means “to pick out, to select, to choose from among

others” (as any good dictionary shows), as Jesus (Matt. 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; John 15:16, 19) and the Apostle Paul make clear (Rom. 8:28-33; 9:11; Eph. 1:3-14). By deduction, some are not chosen, some are not God’s children. Paul Young’s view makes all people elect or chosen, even those in hell. In this way his is a teaching independent of, apart from, Scripture (God’s word). Yet by his theology even this bad theology must be forgiven!].

The Garden of the Heart

Chapter 17, “Choices of the Heart,” concludes the special adventure that Mack has at the shack. Jesus has carved a special coffin for Missy’s body. It is placed in it, and then it is buried in the clearing that Mack made in Sarayu’s garden. Upon burying it, Sarayu sings a song that Missy had written just for this occasion. Then she scatters some of Mack’s tears collected for this occasion on the ground under which Missy’s body slept (233). Flowers instantly burst forth from the places where the tears fell. The garden represents the garden of Mack’s heart (234). Back in the cabin, the three and Mack partake of wine and bread. The three offer Mack the choice of staying with them or returning to his other home. He chooses the latter. Sarayu reminds Mack that every time he chooses to forgive or to do an act of kindness the world changes for the better and God’s purposes are advanced (235). Sarayu also gives a gift to Mack to take back to his daughter, Kate, who has blamed herself for Missy’s death. It will set her free from her guilt.

While Mack is changing back to the clothes he wore when he came to the shack, the three leave. Mack then falls asleep. When he awakens because of the cold, he finds himself in the shack as it looked at the first, and winter has returned outside. He is back in the real (or, un-real) world. He goes up the trail to his car and drives back to Joseph, Oregon. While pulling into an intersection he is struck by a driver running through a red light. The crash totals the Jeep and Mack is rendered unconscious with many broken bones. He is life-flighted back to Portland, Oregon. The crash, we later discover, actually happens at the beginning of the weekend, not at the end!

Everyone Will Confess That Jesus Is Lord

Chapter 18, “Outbound Ripples,” recounts Mack’s miraculous awakening after four days and his recovery. He gradually recalls the events of the weekend. He is able to bring Kate to wholeness so that she no longer blames herself for Missy’s death. After a month, Mack with Willie, Nan, and the deputy sheriff return to the trail to the shack and go beyond it. Following the red arcs marking the route, they discover Missy’s body in the cave. Within weeks the authorities are able to gather enough evidence in the cave to track down and arrest the Little Lady-killer and to locate the other murdered girls.

So this is the story as Willie recounts it. In an “After Words,” Willie ends the tale by relating how much the story, whether true or not, has affected his life and that of Mack. Willie wants “*all* of the [the story] to be true” (italics his) (247). [This may be taken to refer to the fictional story itself, that he wants it to be true; or to refer to the story

and also to the theological content. If it is the latter, then it could mean that Paul is speaking through Willie to say that he wants to have all the doctrine espoused in the book to be true or correct. There must not be any confusion about Paul's level of certainty here. In light of his statements elsewhere, it is clear that this is not just what Paul "wants to be true" but it is doctrine that he strongly believes to be true and affirms as such].

Willie goes on to assert that Mack is hoping for a new revolution of "love and kindness . . . that revolves around Jesus and what he did for us all" (248). Willie affirms that "*if anything matters, then everything matters*. 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). [This is Paul's final assertion of his universalism. While the words faithfully reflect such biblical texts as Phil. 2:10-11, Paul 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 cannot be an intimate relationship, by Young's own definition, for any subordination (reflected by confessing Jesus as "Lord") destroys relationship. It is a confession due to Christ's conquest, not to their faith. This does not constitute believing obedience sufficient to bring one into an eternity with God. 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)].

CONCLUSION

The Profitable Aspects of *The Shack*

There are several good aspects of this novel. It seems to be written out of a high concern for realism and for using fiction to teach theology. Its emphasis on deepening one's relationship with God, on forgiveness and healing, are admirable. There is a good attempt to clarify the role of the law for the Christian. Paul's way of drawing the reader into the story to want to know more is captivating. The story is plausible, although perhaps over drawn in its detail. Those of us who live in Oregon can readily identify with the geography that Paul describes in considerable, realistic, detail.

The Unprofitable Aspects of *The Shack*

There are several things in the novel that are deeply troubling. The most important error is Paul's sustained writing from a theological framework that embraces universal reconciliation. This doctrine begins permeating the story at the beginning of Mack's encounter with God at the shack and doesn't cease till the tale is told. He uses fiction to teach bad theology.

Another concern is Paul's anti-institutionalism (all institutions are condemned by the mouth of God), and his opposition to the idea of judging, whether it comes from God or people.

The use of a large black woman and then an older white man to depict God is not particularly offensive, since early on Paul identified God as lacking sexual identity. Perhaps he chose the black woman and the Asian woman because they represent the two largest populations on planet earth—Africans and Asians. Perhaps there is intended shock value. But his choice of them, particularly the two to represent God the Father, is inherently inconsistent. For by virtue of giving them the name Papa he is on the one hand validating the predominate biblical portrayal of God as Father. Yet on the other hand, by making Papa female, he is subverting the biblical portrayal. While the biblical portrayal of God, especially Jesus, incorporates some female traits at times (he would gather the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks), the instances of these are rare. One has to ask whether this portrayal is purely cultural, reflecting patriarchy, or does it have permanent biblical authority? My real concern here is that people may make God in their own image, since the problem that Mack has in the story is said to be the reason why God appeared to him as a woman. If Mack can create God according to his need, why cannot everyone? This result flows from the imbalance arising from the emphasis placed on the immanence of God without a corresponding, equal emphasis on the transcendence of God.

Another fault of Paul's story is its omissions. He says nothing of the importance of Scripture as a medium for hearing God's voice; nor does he speak of joining with other Christians in common worship, nor of the Body of Christ of which Jesus is the head—probably because this suggests authority and subordination. Practically nothing is said of God's transcendence. In his advocating equality and relationship he also avoids the Apostle Paul's description of the Christian as a "slave" of Christ (Rom. 6:16-19). He undermines full relationship with God by omitting the many texts of Scripture (John 14-17, for example) that describe our loving Jesus and God as consisting in obedience to Jesus' commands; it is this that brings fullness of joy (John 15:9-15). Also Paul gives no mention of the two ordinances that Christians are commanded by Jesus Christ and his apostles to obey—the observance of the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) and Baptism.

Now someone will respond: "Well, you can't put everything in a novel." To this I respond: these ordinances are community oriented; their value is high in forging relationship between Christ and his people, and among them. Does Paul omit them in his discussion of the church because of his anti-institutional bias? In omitting them is Paul committing the evil of independence—going his own way instead of following Jesus? Has he confused freedom that comes in relationship (which he affirms) with independence? It hardly seems possible that the church can be identified as the church apart from observance of these, along with such roles or offices as elders, deacons, pastors, apostles, teachers, leaders, etc.—gifts that Christ gave to his church to be exercised (Eph. 4:1ff.; 1 Cor. 12; 14).

In the end, Paul's theology is a man-made depository of what he would wish to be so, including his hope that the wicked would escape hell. It lacks biblical support and is at times inconsistent with, and directly opposed, by Scripture. It would be well for Paul to apply the dictum that he loves to state in his novel and elsewhere—"if anything

matters, then everything matters”—to the attributes of God: “if the attribute of love matters, then all the attributes matter.”

Summary of Paul’s Universalism

Let’s list succinctly the troubling elements that reflect Paul’s universal reconciliation. These match up quite well with the list of the tenets of universal reconciliation given at the beginning of this study.

- (1) God was co-crucified with Jesus (96) [reflecting the heresy of modalism].
- (2) Love defines God (102).
- (3) God cannot act apart from love (102).
- (4) Jesus died for the whole world (102).
- (5) Power violates relationship (107).
- (6) The whole human race is at the center of God’s love and purpose; God loves all his children the same (111; 119-120), even the ones with whom he is angry (120).
- (7) God does not punish people for sin (120).
- (8) There is no hierarchy in the Trinity; it is a circle of mutual submission and relationship (122).
- (9) God will use every human choice for “ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (125).
- (10) Because of love Jesus has never acted in his capacity as “Lord and King” to take control of his world (145).
- (11) Submission is “not about authority and it is not about obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect” (145).
- (12) The Triune God is in submission to humans to form a “circle of relationship” (146).
- (13) God loves all his children the same forever (155-156).
- (14) “Mercy triumphs over justice because of love” (164).
- (15) God will not judge anyone, having done judgment at the cross (161-164).
- (16) There is not eternal torment or punishment (162-164).
- (17) No institutions have ever been created by God or Jesus. They are all false (178-179).
- (18) Jesus joins people on their multiple roads to God in their transformation into children of God (182).
- (19) God purposes every thing he does as an expression of his love (191).
- (20) God is fully reconciled to the whole world apart from requiring faith (192).
- (21) In Jesus God has forgiven all humans for their sins against him, but only some choose relationship (225).
- (22) Love burns from people every vestige of corruption (227).
- (23) Everyone will confess that Jesus is Lord of all (without mention of faith) (248).

Several of the statements above are biblically correct (for example, 2, 3, 4, etc). Yet they stand within the larger context of Scripture alongside other equally important truths. And without these other truths being cited the statements are only half-truths and distortions, and thereby lead to false understanding.

Questions Worth Asking and Answering

Out of respect for Paul Young and his readers it is necessary to ask some questions that others have raised about the book

Isn't It Just Fiction Anyway?

- 1) "Since the book is fiction, why do we have to think that Paul believes anything, or everything, in the book, whether it is from Papa or Mack or Willie? In a work of fiction does not Paul have license to have his characters say anything he may want them to say, with little or no concern for orthodox or biblical truth or doctrine? Some may only be filler, for color, for shock value."

In reply, I say that an author of fiction certainly may have his characters say anything and he does not have to approve or believe any of it to be true for himself. Yet consider that this fiction is professed to be a Christian work; there is an expectation that the characters will speak truth for the most part. This is especially true if young people and children may take up and read this fiction. Should not a Christian writer be expected to write for us what agrees with Christian truth or doctrine? When Paul has Papa or Jesus or Sarayu saying things, should not they as God speak the truth? This is not saying that a writer cannot speculate about what the future may hold or look like, and take other license. It simply means that we expect a Christian writer to write in accord with truth already revealed, and not contradict what is plainly taught in Scripture. And Paul does contradict several great truths, such as his denial that God is Judge, that God consigns anyone to endless torment (or, separation from him), that God has established several institutions including the church and the government, etc. In contrast to such recent works as *The Da Vinci Code*, we expect a Christian to affirm true truth.

Can We Not Profit from the Good Aspects of the Book?

- 2) Another fair question is this. "Regardless of whether or not Paul's writing is doctrinally sound, are there not many good aspects of it that will profit many people? For example, the emphasis on a relationship with God will help many to search and find such when before now they had none or a defective one."

Yet while this may be the case, is it truly helpful if one helps people in one area while simultaneously propounding error in another area and using it to support the helpful material? If the love of God is affirmed but the justice and/or holiness is shortchanged, will this not lead to a distortion of God and one's *relationship* with God? When the reader finds out that Paul's theology is suspect in one area (such as his support for universal reconciliation), will this not lead the reader to question the other areas including those where he thinks he has been helped? May it not lead a reader to renounce all of the good parts of the fiction as well, or at least to suspicion it?

3) A related question to this one is this. “Can you not appreciate all the good in the book? Does not the good outweigh the bad?”

The answer to this is similar to that just above. One does not use error to teach truth. Jesus is love but he is also truth. By deemphasizing or neglecting the justice or holiness of God in the service of propounding a heresy about the love of God one cheapens the love of God so as to obscure its meaning.

Our Relationship Is with a God Whose Attributes Are Perfect and Balanced

Only as we equally affirm both the love and holiness of God as distinct, perfectly balanced attributes of God will we see the magnitude of love or properly define it (and holiness). These two attributes are fully true in God and each helps us to comprehend the other. If we don’t understand or fully appreciate any one of them, our understanding of the others is distorted. God is not conflicted in his attributes, but universalism in all its forms would lead us to believe that he is.

The NT and the OT present a beautiful portrayal of God’s attributes. In a wonderful passage prophesying the royal king who is anointed by God, Jesus is described as “*loving righteousness*” or “*uprightness*” and “*hating lawlessness*” as he wields a “*righteous scepter*” (Heb. 1:8-9). In the Psalm (45) from which this quote is taken, Jesus is prophesied as the beautiful bridegroom and king. He is “*fairer*” than the sons of men and gracious (v. 2); a mighty warrior, with splendor and majesty (v. 3); victorious in the cause for truth and meekness and righteousness; and instructed (vv. 4-5). He is “*God*” (divine), ruling from an eternal throne (v. 6). He is more joyful than his companions (v. 7-8); he has perfumed garments (v. 8), and a queen (Christians?) at his right hand whose beauty he desires and whom he will entertain and whose children will be fruitful (v. 9-16). His name will be remembered with gratitude forever (v. 17). This is Jesus in all his splendor.

Would any doubt that the biblical writer had one of the most intimate relationships with God and his Son? How is it honoring God, and entering deeply into relationship with him, if we shirk the righteousness of his Son and his being our King? Will he want to reveal himself to us if we do this?

Similarly, Psalm 85:10 affirms that in God “*love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*” Surely this means that love and truth are intimately related. Psalm 62:11-12 records: “*One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O LORD, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.*” Here special and general revelation combine to tell us that God is both *strong* and *loving* when he *judges* the ungodly and the godly.

Even more powerful is a well known text regarding what God seeks in his people. As the capstone of what the OT identifies as the true believer we have Micah 6:8: “*What does the LORD require of you? To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.*” This sums up in wonderful balance what should characterize God’s people

because they reflect their God—justice and love, and their human response to him. Yet universal reconciliation virtually rejects doing justice—what the text puts first!

Again, the NT sums up what it means to know Jesus. John writes that it is to obey his commands to believe [the truth] and to love others (1 John 3:23). This is the central verse of his entire epistle. And it comes from the apostle who had the most intimate relationship with Jesus—the one whom Jesus loved. This verse represents balance and fullness.

Paul and his editors scorn what they call “performance” as breaking relationship. Yet both the OT and the NT insist that “doing” is a necessary corollary to faith and trust and love. “Faith without works is dead.”

John concludes his letter by affirming what it means to *know* God and Jesus Christ—to have an intimate relationship with them. “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” How much clearer could the content of true knowledge be, to understand 3:23?

Are You Not Being Overly Critical?

- 4) Many of the readers of this review will ask another question. “Are you not being overly critical, perhaps reading too much between the lines? Paul nowhere affirms universal reconciliation by name in this novel. Perhaps you have found it when it isn’t present anyway.”

My answer is this. Paul himself has acknowledged that universal reconciliation has dramatically changed him, affecting him personally as well as his theology in several areas. We should assume that his words include his writing of fiction. In evaluating his work, my goal is to be fair but critical and truthful. The readers of the book and this review will have to decide whether or not my review meets this goal. But as a follower of Jesus, as a friend of Paul, and as a teacher of the New Testament for many years, I have an obligation to exalt God above all else, to glorify him. I will best do this by seeking to uphold the nature and will of God, of Jesus and of the Spirit, and to expose those errors that diminish his glory and his love.

Are You Being a Bit Harsh?

- 5) Some of my readers may continue this objection. They ask: “Aren’t you being a bit harsh? Can’t we look beyond the theological issues and profit from the reading of this novel? Isn’t the main thrust of the book on the idea that everyone should seek a deeper encounter or relationship with God, and isn’t this possible in spite of the book’s detractors? Is it possible that your concern for doctrine keeps you from profiting from this book? The pluses of the book outnumber the minuses.”

The heart of my possible answers to the foregoing is this. Yes, I believe that God desires his children to have a deep, intimate, reciprocal relationship with him, and I strive for this myself. But a key concern is this: How can I have a deep relationship with God, or with a human being for that matter, if it is based on lack of understanding, or even misunderstanding, of who the other person is? Does the lack of knowledge of the person of God lead to lack of faith and false or faulty living or practice? Do we not, should we not, live out our faith? I can only grow in relationship with God, or with anyone for that matter, if I know him or her. The more I truly know God the deeper my relationship will be. But if I am in error regarding what I believe God to be I cannot grow in relationship. Even Paul Young speaks of knowledge as the basis of love.

The Illustration from Islam: There Is No Intimacy with Allah

Let me illustrate it this way. God is able to love humans because he is a loving God by nature. Long before he ever created us or anything, love was being exercised within the triune God among the persons of the Trinity. This is a significant truth that validates Christianity over, for example, Islam. Islam adheres to a monadic idea of God—he is single in nature, only one being. In contrast to this monadic monotheism, Christians adhere to a triune monotheism. Now Islam affirms that God does loving acts, among others, but it steadfastly refuses to embrace any knowledge of the nature of God as loving. As far as his nature is concerned it is unknowable. It is even blasphemous to reflect on what his nature might be. Islam takes this view to avoid affirmation of the triune nature of God. If God is by nature understood as loving then he had to have an object to love before he ever created, and this leads to plurality within unity—to the Trinity. And this Islam vehemently rejects. One can be a Muslim only by affirming that God is one (that is, singular) and that Muhammad is his prophet.

Thus what one believes about the nature of God is strategic to having a relationship with him. Muslims cannot profess a “personal relationship” with God as Christians do. They cannot know God; they cannot be “in God” and he in them by virtue of being in Christ, as he spoke of this in the Upper Room Discourse (John 14-17).

Is Not the Stress on Relationship a Good Thing?

- 6) Others will say: “But is not the whole emphasis on relationship with God a good thing and needing assertion today when so many have missed it?”

The answer is that this indeed is good and needing assertion. Yet this can be done without compromising balance and truth. Indeed, it can only rightly and lovingly be done by doing love in the context of truth (this is the theme of 2 and 3 John). The emphasis on relationship with God has been made through the ages by many pious writers (Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*; John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*; and a host of others). They wrote, and some wrote fiction, without compromising Christian truth.

In recent years many (Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, etc.) have reinforced the need to practice the Christian disciplines. These include about a dozen or so practices that help Christians to grow in intimacy with God. While in his novel Paul touches on many of these (such as worship, confession, stewardship, silence, mutual submission, etc.), he says little or nothing about others that many believe are primary, namely Bible reading and study, and prayer. Yet Scripture gives much exhortation about practicing these. These are the primary ways by which God communicates to us and we communicate to God. These form the basis of the “circle of relationship” about which Paul speaks but distorts.

Assessing the Value of This Book

Let me suggest another approach to discovering the value of the book in light of Paul’s universalism. Paul has affirmed that his consideration of universal reconciliation has made him a better person, to have deeper, more loving relationships with people and with God. For the sake of argument let’s suppose that Paul is wrong in embracing universal reconciliation. This means, then, that his closer relationship with God is based on and reinforced by a great error. It means that false teaching or doctrine can have a significant impact, even a very good impact, on a person’s behavior and personality. Love, the central but unbalanced focus of universal reconciliation, has become the center for Paul. What should we make of this? Paul became a more loving person while (or, by) embracing false teaching!

Most readers of this review are Christians. They need to ask the question: “Should (perhaps “Will”) I discover from this book a greater love for God and people when it is based in the universalism that has transformed Paul?” I suggest that *if the doctrine is distorted, so is the relationship*. There are other questions. Do we not want to bring theology to life? Can bad theology produce good living? Could a person become a properly informed Christian by reading this book? Doesn’t the thrust of Paul’s witness mean that for him experience was the determining factor that validated what he should believe? If people are impressed by reading this book are they not in danger of imbibing the theology that lies behind it? Can we not discover in the Bible and in good fiction the encouragement toward intimacy with God? These are serious questions that every reader should ask before recommending the book to others.

In addition, there is the issue of an author’s being a role model, particularly for young people and immature believers. Paul’s practice of not attending an established evangelical church and holding church in a private home is consistent with the anti-institutional thrust of his novel. Will this not lead others to neglect Scripture’s exhortation to “do church” (Matt. 18:15ff.; Heb. 10:25; 13:7, 17; 1 Tim. 3:1-13)? Thus by his beliefs and by his way of “doing church” he does not commend the gospel as revealed in the NT.⁸

⁸ As Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Unbelief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), notes, repentance and faith, the two essentials for becoming a Christian, must have both an individual and corporate aspect. After becoming a Christian one needs to “publicly identify with Christ by becoming part of the church” (235). Christians “should confirm and seal that personal commitment through public, communal action in baptism and becoming part of the church” (236).

Did Paul Intend to Skirt Important Doctrines?

- 7) Another question concerns Paul's intent. "Is it not possible that Paul did not intend to skirt or diminish certain doctrines?" To put it another way: "Must we demand that Paul write equally about all the doctrines of Scripture? Since Paul has created a certain plot and certain characters struggling with particular needs, why should we expect Paul to weave into his story all the other doctrines of Scripture?"

The answer, of course, is that no writer has to do this. But the matter is different if a writer brings attention to some of the most basic truths or doctrines and then rejects or distorts them explicitly or implicitly. Paul gives sustained attention to very crucial doctrines.

To deal with an author's intention is a difficult matter. As I noted at the beginning of this review, Paul embraced universalism before he wrote the novel and he and his editors carefully weighed everything in the novel with the intent of removing the universalism. In light of this it is legitimate to assert that Paul intends to teach theology by his fiction. But regardless of his intent, he certainly does influence the reader with theology. Thus he should be faulted when he has his characters, the Triune God, deny or reject certain doctrines that the majority in the church has embraced for almost two thousand years; and he should be faulted when he has his characters propound beliefs such as universal reconciliation that the same church has pronounced heresy. The church has made its decisions on the basis of the authority of Scripture.

There is another thought that flows from this question. It is entirely possible that Paul himself doesn't realize just how deeply universal reconciliation has infected and changed his theology.

Why the Theology of *The Shack* Is Finally Destructive

The number one error of *The Shack*, its "Achilles' Heel," is that Paul commits the great evil that he faults the human race for committing from the beginning onward. Paul makes the number one evil in the world, the evil basic to all the rest, to be the independence from God that Adam and Eve exercised in the Garden of Eden and the independence that all people have subsequently embraced. By acting independently of God, by going their own way, Adam and Eve discovered the knowledge of good and evil. They discovered what good and evil are like, and began practicing both good and evil. Thus humanity is estranged from God. Only by turning from independence and coming back into whole-hearted relationship with God, by embracing relationship to God who is Good, does humanity discover its reason for existence, fulfillment, joy, and most of all, freedom.

Yet Paul follows the great sin of independence. By embracing universal reconciliation, Paul creates his own view of how love and holiness or justice relate and

neglects reflecting all those texts that talk about the judgment of God on the unbelievers who reject him. By not embracing both truth and love Paul gives a distorted view of the nature of God. While he embraces God's immanence—having a relationship with people—he neglects God's transcendence—his otherness. At least he subjects God's virtue of justice to his virtue of love (remember: “mercy triumphs over justice because of love” taken out of context), and creates an imbalance in portraying the character of God. The same apostle who wrote that God is love (1 John 4:8, 19) also said that God is light (1:5), faithful and just (1:8-10). John also quotes Jesus as saying that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

It is ironic that Paul's identifying the basic evil as independence from God is that very sin into which he falls. He propounds theology that is independent of the authority of God—of Scripture.

The Shack represents a hut of deception awaiting the uninformed reader. It is a place of theological entrapment that is constructed from a failure to represent all Scripture that presents a fuller, complete view of the nature of God, of people, of salvation, of relationship, and of the future. *The Shack* is a hut of deception that walls off the whole truth. Like many other shacks found in the forest, *The Shack* rests not on a concrete foundation but on wooden pillars that are rotted and insect infested and in time will fail. One might paraphrase Matthew 4:4 as follows: “Man does not live by [love] alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Behind the shack, at the back of the shack, the careful reader will discover two things. One is Paul's questionable theology that pervades all that he writes. The other is the omission of, what Paul fails to write about, the rest of evangelical theology and story about the doctrines he discusses. One has to go behind *The Shack* to find the rest of the truth. His sin of omission is glaring.

The Final Question

The most practical question that the reader of this review will ask is this: “Do I advocate the reading of this book?” My answer is both “yes” and “no.” For those who have a good grounding in the total teaching of Scripture and theology there is profit in reading *The Shack*. There are special, unique insights that Paul suggests regarding the nature or consciousness of the believing dead relative to their being able to see us who are still on earth, the nature of heaven, the future destiny for the earth, why Christians should be good stewards of the environment, etc.

Yet for those without maturity the book is deceptive. It can easily ensnare the reader in false doctrine and an unhealthy, unchristian understanding of institutions and church practices.

Similarly Paul short circuits a full-orbed relationship with God if he downplays the justice or holiness of God or subverts the holiness of God to the love of God. If Scripture does not do this and instead speaks of both love and holiness as equal in God

and beautifully balanced in God, then a relationship with God must involve God as both love and holy. If this is not the case then knowledge of God is distorted and so relationship with God is distorted, and, I would suggest, relationship with people is also distorted (since people are made in the image and likeness of God).

Thus I do not recommend this book because of the theological error in it. As another reviewer (Tim Challies) has said, Paul is subversive. He is subversive to the truth about a lot of things, including the nature of God and the eternal end of people, particularly the lost. He is subversive to the institutions of the church, the state, the home. The book hinders rather than helps genuine spiritual growth and understanding. Paul acts like an insurgent does within a culture. The effect is chaos and anarchy.

Universalism is the theological torrent that runs behind the shack throughout the story. While the countryside through which this river runs is often beautiful, the river itself is polluted carrying poison that threatens the health and productivity of the countryside. It has the potential to drown those without a life vest. The unprepared should avoid this torrent and stay far back from its banks. Once in the river it is quite difficult to climb up the slippery bank. All who drift down this torrent are in danger of being lost.

It is fitting to close this review with the words of C.S. Lewis relating to universalism. He remarked (in *The Great Divorce*): “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘thy will be done.’”⁹

⁹ This is from Lewis and Demarest, *Theology*, 498.