

UNMASKING THE DECEIT IN THE GOSPEL FICTION

ACCORDING TO PAUL YOUNG

WITH ATTENDANT ETHICAL CONCERNS

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The following pages summarize the beliefs of various authors who defend a form of universal reconciliation by denying the Biblical view of hell, judgment, the gospel, the role of faith in actualizing reconciliation for anyone, the nature of God, and the meaning of the local church and its mission. In recent years fictional writers expressing these views have become widely read.¹

Paul Young's *The Shack* (both the novel and the film) has out done all other fictions to sell such universalism. His earlier writing in 2004 is simply one of the more extended defenses of universal reconciliation (UR).² It provides the background and foundation for what his fiction unfolds. In the following pages I use Young's 2004 defense to illustrate how detailed and far-reaching the case for UR can be. In refuting the arguments that Young makes I am refuting the arguments of other advocates of UR.

¹ I'm thinking here of Paul Young's *The Shack*, Brian McLaren's *The Last Word and the Word After That*, and Rob Bell's *Love Wins*. I find that these authors express surprisingly similar beliefs.

² In his "Universal Reconciliation." I have known Paul Young for over two decades and have a copy of this 2004 paper which I heard Paul present to a forum we co-founded in the late 1990's.

Much of Young's case for UR rests on a distortion of what Christians believe, on imperfect and incomplete interpretation of the Bible, on appeals to emotion and the senses, and on an incomplete, even false, understanding of early church history. In the following pages I take up the strongest arguments.

Some of what Young has written borders on the slander, blasphemy, of the God of the Bible and the Lord Jesus Christ. Almost all of it is heresy. Christians everywhere should feel angered as they read Young's reasoning that betrays a demonic spirit. In truth, Paul Young is an anarchist, a terrorist, and demonic in the positions he takes. More about this at the end.

On Hell and Eternity

Universalists believe that there is no eternal hell. They claim that the Greek and Hebrew terms translated "eternity" in most Bibles mean only "a limited time, an age, and their plural means ages" (Young, 9). The word "cannot mean infinity" (11). Thus the OT understanding of hell "carries no concept whatsoever of endless punishment" (12-13). Instead, it is a "place or process of the purification of God's people" (13). The first "death was a transition from life to death; the 'second' death is a transition from corruption to incorruption, from mortality to immortality. . . . The second death is prepared to purge out and burn away sin and its results, and so doing cleanse God's entire universe" (16). The Lake of Fire is a "place of purification that will destroy both death and hell. . . . The processes of God to break the resistance of willfully wicked men and women are extremely severe" (16). It is a place of "divine purification" and "discipline" (16). The "everlasting punishment" of Matthew 25:41 is "age-abiding correction, age-enduring pruning" (19).

On God's Judgment

Paul Young does not see any punitive aspect to God's judgment. He writes: "All of God's judgments are corrective in nature, conceived in His wisdom, motivated by His love, administered by His power, and used to work out the divine purpose, for our good, and unto His praise" (20). God's wrath will "continue its work until all are broken before God and call upon Him for mercy, full and abundant" (20). In contrast to these the reader should compare Jesus' teaching (Matt. 25:46) and that of Paul the Apostle (2 Thess. 1).

On Torture

In 2004 Paul Young had some of his most critical words about eternal torture. "If one hundred billion helpless human beings are eventually being tortured, then Jesus, in an ultimate sense, is fundamentally involved" (22). This torment "meets the elements of the definition of 'torture' and 'sadism'" (22). "In one hour, in a hot searing hell, our Lord will inflict more pain and agony on each person than Satan inflicted on that person during his *entire life*" (italics Young's) (22). "I as a believer emotionally feel a great conflict between my compassion (which seems greater than God's and therefore must be part of my fallen conditioning) and justice (struggling with the seeming reality that God in the end is grossly unjust)" (22).

Perhaps the most slanderous things that Young says come when he addresses Jesus Christ and torture (23). Reflect on the meaning of what Paul Young is saying!

"Except Satan himself, Pharaoh, Nero, and Hitler were among the most horrible *killers of men* (italics his) this world has ever known. Yet, the doctrine of eternal torture makes Jesus *a million times* (italics his) more vicious and vindictive than these three put together. You see, these brutal murderers killed their victims. Death brought sweet relief in a moment of time. However, that Man of Galilee, that Man whom we love, praise, and

worship, that Man who taught that we should forgive four hundred and ninety times a day, that Man who told us that we should love our enemies and *bless them that curse us* (italics his), that man who died for all men, will never, never forgive “any one” who has rejected Him in this frail life, or, worse yet, who merely *failed* (italics his) to believe on Him during this brief time. Instead of torturing them for a season and then ending their suffering with death, (as a Hitler or Nero) Jesus will oversee their *torture through all eternity* (italics his). And we are supposed to be happy about this?”

Paul Young goes on. “I will say this, either those who teach eternal torture are extremely and brutally calloused or *they do not truly believe what they teach*” (italics his) (24).

On the Just Punishment for Sin

Paul Young struggles with the punishment of sin. Recall that in *The Shack* he writes that God “does not punish sin.” In 2004 he wrote: “The idea that a temporal fault (sin committed within time—even by children) is to be punished with an eternal punishment is, in the very nature of things, unreasonable, illogical, and dare we say, wicked and unjust. How can it be just to mete out an ‘eternal’ punishment for a ‘temporal’ sin?” (24).

Regarding the sin of Adam (Rom. 5:12ff.) Young writes: “This means that the very worst offender on earth, has committed a crime which is inherent in his own nature, and beyond that, we are told that he has no choice but to sin (he is a slave to sin). Adam already made the choice for each person. I wasn’t consulted” (25). He writes more: “Any penalty which does not take into account the fact that a poor miserable human creature has been the victim of such an inheritance is an unjust penalty” (25).

On “The Wages of Sin Is Death”

Paul Young strongly asserts that by the evangelical view of the death of Christ, Christ never atoned for sin! Indeed, Jesus is then a deceiver and a failure. Here in an extended statement is his logic (strange as it is) to defend the belief that there is no eternal torment for sin (29). This discussion is anchored to Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“If ‘eternal torment’ is the penalty for sin, then Jesus never atoned for sin. He did not suffer eternal torment. If that is the price that God demands as punishment for sin, then Jesus paid nothing at all. If my punishment were eternal torment, and Jesus took my place, receiving the full judgment for my sin, then it should be clear to any thinking person that He would have had to *suffer eternally in hell* (italics Young’s). That is the only way the debt could be paid!”

“But he became a man, lived as a man, was tempted as a man, suffered as a man, died on a cross, was buried, descended into Hades, and the third day arose, and is now seated on the right hand of the Majesty on high. And if eternal torment is the punishment for sin, then every son of Adam, whether saved or lost, still has to pay the full penalty himself. Then God’s righteous wrath can never be appeased until every sinner, who ever committed even one sin, has paid that debt in full. If eternal torment is the punishment for sin, it then seems that Calvary was nothing but a farce, a burlesque, a travesty, and a sham. Then Jesus died a failure and in vain, and never redeemed any one from anything. If eternal torment were the penalty for sin, then Jesus is not the Savior of men, for He failed to take our place, and pay our debt, by being eternally tormented. And if He is not the Savior of men, then He is not even a good man, but a liar, and therefore a rogue and a deceiving rascal. And therefore, if eternal torment is the penalty for sin, then salvation is

a mere myth and the Bible the world's most abominable maze of evil imaginings; for it then merely leads men to trust for deliverance to a concept which will lead to everlasting sorrow.”

“If the wages of sin is eternal torment, then we must re-write the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. We must make the Bible say that, if that is what God meant.”

But there is more from Paul Young on this point. He writes (30):

“If annihilation is the penalty for sin, then every son of Adam, saved or lost, must yet suffer his own penalty and be blotted out of existence for evermore. Then Jesus never saved anyone from anything. And then we all might as well enjoy this world to the full; for it is the only life and existence that any of us will ever know!”

And finally to quote a bit more (30): “All men are born sinners; and the wages of sin is death. But Jesus became a sin offering for all men, He carried those sins to the cross, and that ends the matter. And there, because He actually atoned for ‘all’ those sins, He actually ‘abolished death.’”

On the “Good News”

On the matter of the gospel, which means “good news,” Paul Young asserts: “From the traditional viewpoint, the Gospel, for most people, is not good news at all. It was only Good News if they received it and bent the knee. Otherwise, it is very bad news indeed . . . you are going to hell” (31).

On the Nature of God's Love

Paul Young writes the following on the nature of God's love (32).

“Are we to suppose that God requires us to behave in one way toward the unrighteous, while His own disposition toward them is markedly different? Are we to believe that our Father commands US to *be merciful, to love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good* to them that *hate us*, and *pray* for them that *persecute us* (italics his) . . . while He banishes His enemies to everlasting damnation, torturing endlessly those that curse Him, meting out eternal vengeance upon those that hate Him, and shutting up all mercy from those who persecute Him? Something just doesn’t compute.”

On Having Another Chance After Death

Paul Young clearly does not believe that physical death ends the availability of God’s grace. He writes (33): “The question is, why do we suppose that *physical death* (italics his) ends the availability of God’s grace? . . . Does physical death render our moral character changeless? Does it irrevocably fix our eternal destiny? Are the grace and mercy of God tied to our physical heartbeat?”

Young strongly asserts (33):

“I do not hesitate to say that there is not one passage of Scripture in the whole Bible that indicates that the grace of God is limited to physical life, or that the mercy of God is tied to one’s heartbeat. . . . Why should there be salvation provided as long as the *mortal body* remains animate, but no salvation for the spirit of the same man or woman as soon as the last *mortal* breath is drawn (italics his)?”

Young asserts even more, faulting the evangelical church system (33). The careful reader will recall that in *The Shack* Paul Young similarly indicts the church as a “diabolical scheme” or “system” (123-124).

“The Church system concludes that God has both the will and the power to save a breathing man, but no will and no power to save a non-breathing man. It teaches that God has both the will and the power to regenerate a spirit which has a body of dust, but no will or power to save the same spirit without a body. God’s mercy and power are limited to the temporary function of certain animal organs. Good heartbeat, good mercy. No heartbeat, no mercy!”

On God’s Lack of Love for People Now Dead

Paul Young writes that in heaven God and the saints have lost their love for lost people. He asserts (34):

“So we must conclude this: there is more love and compassion in the natural world than there is in the spirit world. Furthermore, there is more love for sinners while they have bodies than there is for sinners without bodies. What has happened to cause God and the saints to turn from love and pity for the lost, to a feeling that the lost are now getting what they deserve and should suffer the torments of the damned for all eternity? What has happened to God and the saints to cause them to love and seek the lost only as long as their frail, mortal bodies endure? Can we believe that God, having created *all things for His pleasure*, having *so loved* His creation that He freely gave heaven’s most precious gift, after a few paltry years, the brief span of a man’s mortal existence, throws up His hands in futility and disgust, saying that He has done all He can and men would not respond, so He must cease all effort, seat Himself upon His golden throne, and consign His creation to everlasting hell (italics Young’s)?”

Salvation By Knowledge?

Paul Young believes in the principle that if people have more knowledge and information they will repent and that it is unfair for God to judge people until they do have full knowledge (34). He states: “God will not inflict ultimate punishment on men who have not had ultimate knowledge,” and he quotes 1 Timothy 2:3-4: “God will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” What seems to escape Paul Young is that people will never have ultimate knowledge; and that knowledge is not what delivers people from judgment. Faith delivers us. Finally, the text sets forth knowledge of the truth as the goal of salvation, not the means. But by citing this passage the way he has, Paul Young clearly embraces universalism.

On Christ’s Descent to Hell

It may come as a surprise to many that Paul Young believes that Christ descended to hell after his death and resurrection to lead out there all who were rebellious. But it was not “doom or gloom or judgment that was preached to these, but ‘the Gospel,’ the good news which is the power of God unto salvation was even (sic) to these spirits in prison, the disobedient ones” (35).

Paul Young finds in Ephesians 4:8-10 support for his belief that Christ entered the very “portals of Hell. It appears that behind Him come all the hosts of heaven, all the saints of Old Testament times, and all those to whom He preached in Hell and trusted in Him. This is the Triumph!” (36). Furthermore, Young finds in 2 Corinthians 2:14 the continuing triumph and conquest of Christ whereby former enemies are now merged into the conquering army (37).

Young reasons that if Christ descended once to hell, preached the good news, and led out of it the masses from Noah’s day (see 1 Pet. 3:18ff.),

“what would stop him from going back a thousand times? . . . Why would He not consider the poor, wretched people that have gone to hell by the billions? Many never

heard the name of Jesus, or if at all only profanely or in some empty religious platitude. They know nothing of His word or His power. The Churches too often cared nothing for them, and cares next to nothing for them today” (the variations if capitalizing are Young’s) (37).

It is clear that the same anti-institutional church attitude comes through here as it does in *The Shack*. In his novel he labels the church, the government, and marriage as the “man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I care about. . . . It’s all false” (p. 179). It makes one wonder what bitter experience in his early years set Young off on this negative trajectory. It is certainly not Christ-like, for Jesus “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). In this present era Jesus is building “his church” (Matthew 16). Now while these references may refer primarily to the invisible church, the context of Ephesians refers to gifted people and the work of ministry (5:8-12, 19); and the wider context of the Epistles shows that the institution must also be included. To take just the Epistle to the Corinthians as one example there are many references that must refer to the institutional church (1 Cor. 4:17: “every church”; when they are assembled together the man caught in incest is to be handed over to Satan, 5:4-5; “judges . . . in the church,” 6:4; “churches of God,” 11:16; “meetings . . . when you come together as a church,” 11:17-18; “come together,” 11:20, 33; 14:26); the exercise of spiritual gifts including the “gifts of administration” (12:4-11, 27-31; 14:26-35: “all the congregations of the saints . . . women should be silent in the churches . . . it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church”; the “Galatian churches . . . on the first day of the week,” 16:1-2; the “churches in the province of Asia . . . the church that meets in their house,” 16:19). Hebrews 10:25 exhorts believers not to forsake the assembling of themselves together.

In addition the Pastoral Epistles make the institutional church quite obvious, with instructions about the roles of elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1-4). The observance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (communion) also necessitates the institutional church (1 Cor. 1:13-17; 11:17-34).

On Hell As "Sadistic Humbug"

Paul Young completes his section of appealing to logic and the love of God as arguing against eternal suffering by citing George Hawtin and his opposition to evangelical understanding of the gospel and hell. He quotes him as follows (37):

"Is it any wonder that in the face of such sadistic humbug there has been a wholesale manufacture of infidels? All these statements (by eternal hell-fire preachers) may be a show of oratorical eloquence, but they are nothing more. They hold no part of truth. They deny every attribute of God. They make wisdom foolishness, turn eternal love into exasperated hate, make omnipotence helplessness, and make the justice of God the grossest injustice in the universe. To say that I believe in such repugnance would be a lie of the first order. . . . It puts God in the ridiculous position of being the almighty King of kings and Lord of lords yet having dominion (sic) a vast pocket of hate and resistance that even He cannot overcome. Further than this it makes the mighty sacrifice of Christ that was made for all the world to be almost impotent in its power and scope. . . . The hell of tradition is hopeless and eternal, while the hell of the Scripture, like every judgment of God, is corrective, remedial, and restorative."

Interestingly, neither Paul Young nor George Hawtin cite any Scripture to support their view of hell as just described!

On the Universalist Ministers of Boston in 1878

Paul Young devotes an entire section to citing with approval the statement made by various universalist ministers of Boston in 1878. Its eight articles are all important but the most crucial are the following. Let the reader reflect on whether or not these are clearly embraced in *The Shack*.

“4. We believe that divine justice, born of love and limited by love, primarily requires ‘love to God with all the soul,’ and to one’s neighbor as one’s self. . . .”

“5. We believe that the salvation Christ came to effect is salvation from sin rather than from the punishment of sin, and that he must continue his work till he has put all enemies under his feet, that is, brought them in complete subjection to his law.”

“6. We believe that repentance and salvation are not limited to this life. Whenever and wherever the sinner truly turns to God, salvation will be found. . . .”

“7. To limit the saving power of Christ to this present life seems to us like limiting the Holy One of Israel; . . . We shudder at the thought that his infinite love should have made no provision for their welfare, and left them to annihilation, or, what is worse, endless misery. And it is but little better with myriads born in Christian lands, whose opportunities have been so meager that their endless damnation would be an act of such manifest injustice as to be in the highest degree inconsistent with the benevolent character of God.”

“8. In respect to death we believe that . . . it has no saving power. Salvation, secured in the willing mind by the agencies of divine truth, light, and love, essentially represented in Christ—whether effected here or in the future life—is salvation by Christ, . . .”

On William Barclay, a “Convinced Universalist”

Near the end of his 103-page document, Paul Young favorably cites at great length the defense of universalism that William Barclay made (91-92).³ Barclay cited the three reasons that Gregory of Nyssa gave for his belief in universalism: the character of God as good; the nature of evil that must cease to exist; and the purpose of all punishment as always remedial. Barclay gave his own four reasons. (1) The NT teaches it (he cites John 12:32; Rom. 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:22, 28; 1 Tim. 2:4-6); (2) the word “punishment” used in Matthew 25:46 is always remedial in nature; (3) it is impossible to set limits to the grace of God; (4) the ultimate and complete triumph of God is that the “only possible final triumph is a universe loved by and in love with God.” Once again *The Shack* witnesses to the universalism of William Barclay as adopted by Paul Young.

On “Final Words”

Paul Young concludes his single spaced, 103-page document, by listing five chief points that summarize his convictions of universal reconciliation (103). (1) The word “aeons” or “ages” refers to undefined periods of time but not to “eternity.” (2) God works behind the scenes to turn everyone’s choice to his [loving] purpose. (3) Judgment is not vindictive punishment but God’s way to restore his “cracked and broken creation back to beauty and usefulness.” (4) Hell is not a place of eternal torment. Unbelievers and even Satan and his angels will go through a process of cleansing so as to be finally restored. (5) All “will be saved by the true and final

³ In *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 65-67.

sacrifice of Jesus Christ. . . . All shall be made alive and restored to fellowship with their Father and Creator, and God shall fulfill His Word. He shall finally be all in all.”

When one reflects on these words that Paul Young intended to be his final statement in support of universal reconciliation, it is relatively easy to see them reflected in *The Shack*.

In 2004 Paul Young Was Convinced By the Bible of Universal Reconciliation

Lest anyone think that Paul Young was just toying with the option of universal reconciliation in 2004 but didn't really commit to it consider the following statements from his document of 2004. He testified that “remarkable changes have occurred inside of me, even long before I had decided the validity of this perspective” (p. 32). He asserts that he has “suspended the traditional paradigm” of evangelical faith (32). He goes on: “It affects every area of my perspective, whether soteriology, ecclesiology, evangelism, eschatology, etc. . . . I believe that Scripture strongly supports this view” (33).

The Problem with Young's Claim That He Has Changed His Convictions

Now in light of these statements, is it not difficult for Paul Young to later assert that he is not a universalist or that he does not want to be pinned down, that he is a person in flux?⁴ Are we to believe that he has now experienced another change greater than the one to universalism? If universalism changed him into a more loving person, to what would he attribute his more loving nature now if he has disavowed universalism? Or, is he not so loving now? And when did he disavow universalism? And has he disavowed all of it? If he was once convinced of the “validity” of universalism, what has changed his mind? And how has his theology been changed

⁴ Universalists commonly take this position. A famous statement from the 1920's has: “When someone asks, ‘Where do you universalists stand?’, the only correct answer is: ‘We don't; we move.’”

again? Finally, since he was once convinced that Scripture “strongly supported” universal reconciliation, what has subsequently convinced him otherwise? Has he really been otherwise convinced?

Personal Accountability

An even more intriguing question is this. If he put into writing all of the above statements from pages 32-33 of the 2004 document that affirm his conversion to universalism, but now no longer believes in it, is he a fickle person? Is he a reliable guide? Should we follow him? Should we accept what he says now? If now he is convinced of something else, should we even believe him? These are very serious and sober questions.

Lest anyone should think that Paul was not persuasive in his defense of universal reconciliation I point out that in all the subsequent reading that I’ve done on universalism, his is one of the most able defenses. In over one hundred single-spaced pages Paul Young appealed to Scripture (over one hundred passages!), to church history, and to reason and logic. Yet on point after point I responded in writing to show how his interpretation of the Bible, and that of other universalists, was fatally flawed.⁵

Let me illustrate this failing by citing his argument about church history. In his document Paul Young parroted the universalist claim that universal reconciliation was the predominant view of the Christian church for the first five hundred years. This is patently false. I’ve taught the earliest Apostolic Fathers for over thirty years and there are countless statements that they believed in the eternal suffering of the lost. Only a handful of later fathers, beginning in the third and following centuries, including Origen and Clement of Alexandria, adopted universalism. In

⁵ See my paper, “Universalism: Its Dangers and Distortions; Unmasking the Gospel According to Paul Young” (available on the web).

my larger book on universalism I document all these references. And some writers even doubt that Origen was a universalist.

The Personal Impact of Universalism on Young's Personality, Behavior and Beliefs

It is also important to remember that in 2004 Paul testified in writing to M3 Forum that it was universal reconciliation that made him a more loving person, that it changed his “total perspective,” that it changed his doctrine of God, the church, evangelism, eschatology, and other doctrines. How does one who claimed in 2004 that his life was changed by universalism then now in 2008-2009 denounce universalism when it had been so life changing? If these changes are still true today (and many affirm that they are) what explanation can he give to them, since he seemingly disavows being categorized as a universalist? These views are still reflected in the novel, albeit in less clear-cut terms.

An Analogy Involving Betrayal

Consider an analogy. It is like meeting a wonderful friend who mentors you in such a way that your life is changed forever. Then a few years later you discover that this friend is not who he affirms that he is, that he is a liar and cheat and deceiver, and has always been so. What does one do? One has an emotional attachment that is difficult to shake. How can one find consolation knowing that his life is seemingly better because of his fallen friend? Does this not force one to examine how this all happened, to examine the genuineness of the changes, to question how one came to be deceived? And if one has been so deeply deceived then, how can one ever hope now to influence others without wondering if one has the character of integrity and discernment to do so?

Does not a person's careless, earlier abandoning of all and everything in favor of his friend make it questionable whether he should ever be trusted again? Is he being deceived once again by the new discoveries?

“Beating Around the Theology Bush”

Paul Young claims to be fully transparent. Why doesn't he release the original edition of his novel that he wrote for his kids? Would not such a release be part of being “fully transparent”? Shouldn't he clarify without any qualification that he disavows universal reconciliation, with all of its particulars, rather than “beat around the theology bush”? Millions of people look to Paul as a spiritual guru of sorts. Does he not owe them some explanation of the above contradictions and vacillations?

THE MATTER OF INTEGRITY

Finally, one other matter concerns me. It goes to the question: What kind of person is Paul Young? I know that this is an *ad hominem* appeal, calling into question Young's personal integrity, but in his aggressive marketing he has repeatedly tied his personal story and transparency to the story of the book. This appeal flows from the above concerns about truthfulness. If he has not been fully transparent and truthful about where he has been and where he now is on universal reconciliation, and perhaps about what he has taught his kids, how can we trust his other claims to transparency and truthfulness?

Paul publicly claims that his personal “shack” involved all kinds of immoral, evil behavior in the past. As a child he was verbally abused by his father; he was sexually abused by older boys in a mission school; then he became a sexual predator of other boys. When he was

married he committed adultery. The primary effect of these “confessions” is to instill sympathy and support for Paul and his story and support for the story and teachings of the novel.

Given this past can we be certain that he is finally “cured”? Is the success of *The Shack* a danger for him so that he replays his past? Should a person with these major character flaws be held up for public acclaim and example? What safeguards are in place to prevent failure again?

When he was released in 2004 from his position of assistant coach of the girls’ basketball coach, why did he feel hurt about this? He refused to sign the doctrinal statement of the Christian school which near the end affirms belief in the eternal suffering of the lost. Why did he remain in this position when he converted to universal reconciliation? Why did it require his being forced out?

In addition, given Young’s publicly acknowledged moral sins of the past, was it safe for the girls on the team to have him as assistant basketball coach? Should parents feel concerned about his regular practice of hugging the girls on the team?

The Concerns Raised by His Interviews about *The Shack*

In the end we have to evaluate the truth of the book from its content—that’s what we’re dealing with. If Paul goes beyond the book itself and wants us to evaluate and understand the book’s content by his explanatory statements that he gives in his many interviews (for example, why Satan is unmentioned and other matters), then he should also explain his earlier history in universal reconciliation. If he explicitly renounces all of the claims of universal reconciliation and embraces evangelical faith on the crucial issues mentioned above then he has made a 180 degree turn around a *second* time. But his history, past and present, on this issue is an appropriate focus of concern.

Doctrinal Deviations

If Young expects that we should accept him as a genuine brother in Christ who is in fellowship with Christ and the Father, and a true interpreter of Scripture, because he has repented of his sins of his past, then he should acknowledge his doctrinal deviations of the past. He needs to confess them and embrace and reaffirm orthodoxy—evangelical understanding of the total nature of God, the reality of hell and the punishment of sin, election, the role of the institutional church, etc. This total renunciation would then allow us to embrace him.

But he has not renounced his doctrinal deviations. He has publicly dismissed penal substitution. This means that he does not believe that Christ paid the penalty for our sins and that he did not die as a substitution for us who deserve to die. It means that Jesus Christ has not secured our eternal salvation by becoming sin for us and suffering the judgment of God for us.

Where Does Paul Attend Church?

As far as I know Paul continues the practice of having church in his own home with his family and friends. If he now wants to show that he is an evangelical Christian, he should become involved in an evangelical local church where he would come under the authority of its leaders. Such a change would signal, in part, that he has come under the doctrinal distinctives of the constitution of a local church and shows that he no longer views the local church as one of a demonic “trinity of terrors.” In his novel he uses these words for not only the church, but also for marriage and the government.

Moral and Doctrinal Sins of His Past

In other words Young's past includes moral sins and doctrinal sins. He is open about and confesses the former; he has not been open about nor confessed and repented of the latter. On this matter of being a Christian spokesman the doctrinal matters are more crucial than the moral ones, although neither can be dismissed. But it is what one believes about the gospel that is crucial. All sins of immorality can be forgiven but the sin of unbelief—the doctrinal matter of who you believe Jesus Christ to be (namely, the crucified and resurrected God-man who is coming again to judge the world) cannot be forgiven. *From one perspective* a person may be a confessing Christian but an immoral person and still be admitted to heaven. But to refuse to believe the gospel bars the door to heaven. However, I also affirm that a professing Christian cannot continue to live in sin without repenting when aware of it (1 John 1:7-9; 3:6-10).

Paul Young professes and apparently shows evidence of having turned from his moral sins. He has not confessed his doctrinal sins.

What are the doctrinal issues involved? It seems to me that it must be the clearest, most crucial issues (not the matters of the kind of church system we practice, nor our views of the tribulation, nor our views of tongues, etc.) that make up what we must believe to be saved. It includes the atoning death, burial and resurrection of Christ as the one in whom all the fullness of deity bodily dwells (1 Cor. 15:1-3; Col. 2:9), and who is coming again. This assumes that Christ was born without sin and had no sin nature, and never committed sins; and that what he teaches about hell and judgment and reconciliation and heaven, and about the Father and the Holy Spirit, must also be believed (John 14:1, 10-11). We must believe and accept Jesus' claim that he is the only way to God (John 14:6). We must believe that there are only two destinies, both permanent, and expressed as either eternal life or eternal torment—as *Jesus taught* (Matt. 21:24ff; Matt.

25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31). In the end we believe about him what he and his apostles (the NT) said we should believe (note 1 Corinthians 15:1-3; Col. 2:6).

For Young to deny that he is a universalist is not the issue. He has never affirmed universalism but he has affirmed universal reconciliation. After he had published his novel, he confronted me and my wife in a church foyer in 2007. He said something to the effect: “Remember Jim, I don’t embrace universalism; I do embrace universal reconciliation.” A person embracing the latter can absolutely affirm that Jesus Christ is the only, exclusive way to God. A person embracing the former cannot say this. Paul has affirmed the latter. But there logical and biblical reasons why this position leads one away from the gospel that proclaims that Jesus is the only way to God. In public interviews Paul has refused to state what the final destiny of all those who are outside of Christ is.

In conclusion, these thoughts and questions raise the matter of Young’s integrity. Until the above questions are dealt with people may justly remain skeptical of Young and his story. And if this is the case, then the content of *The Shack* is to be questioned as well. The above quotations from Paul Young’s writing show just how far reaching and extreme in 2004 was Paul’s position when he embraced universal reconciliation and rejected evangelical faith. These quotations also provide part of the basis for my claims for discovering universal reconciliation in *The Shack*, in both the novel and the film.

In light of these citations people should call on Paul Young to make a clear renunciation of universal reconciliation in all its particulars. They should ask that his earlier edition of *The Shack* written for his children should be released. It is essential that he consider answering the questions listed above to make clear his position.

However, whether he does or does not do so, the content of *The Shack* remains fixed and needs to be examined critically whether the universalism it had at the first still remains in it. I believe that it does, although in a more subtle form. It arose in a climate, an atmosphere, a conviction that universal reconciliation was correct doctrine. I believe that people need to be warned of the great distortions and dangers found in reading *The Shack*.

The Heart of the Matter: Deception Again?

The heart of all the preceding is this. On the basis of his own confession Paul was once deeply convinced by universal reconciliation and had his life changed by it (remember he claimed that universalism changed his total perspective about life and his theology and made him a loving person). How can we trust him now in what he writes about his doctrinal beliefs without wondering if again he is deeply deceived, even self-deceived, and that he is seeking to deceive his readers? Is he even aware of his deception? These are extremely serious questions that beg for answers.