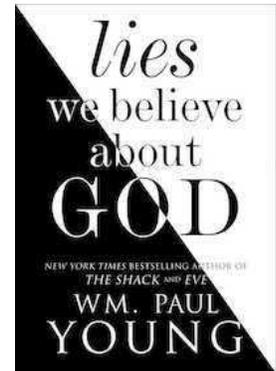


What Does The Shack Really Teach? “Lies We Believe About God” Tells Us

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The Shack has sold twenty million copies and along the way generated at least twenty million conversations. Many of these have been attempts to discern the fact behind the fiction, to interpret what Paul Young means to teach through his story. Some have read the novel as a fresh expression of Christian orthodoxy while others have read it as rank heresy. In the end, only Young knows what he really believes.



At least, that was the case until the release of his new non-fiction work *Lies We Believe About God*. In this book he tells what he believes about sin, religion, hell, substitution, submission, salvation, and a number of other issues that cut to the very heart of the Christian faith. He does this by addressing a series of twenty-eight “lies” people—evangelicals, that is—tend to believe about God. In Baxter Kruger’s foreword he insists that Young “is standing in the mainstream of historic Christian confession.” For the sake of time and space, I cannot evaluate that claim against all twenty-eight chapters. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the few that are most central to the Christian faith.

Twenty-Eight Lies

In this section I provide a brief overview of the most important chapters in *Lies We Believe About God*. As much as possible, I allow Young to speak in his own words.

Chapter 2: “God is Good. I am not.” This chapter looks at the human condition. “Many of us believe that God sees us all as failures, wretches who are utterly depraved.” But the reality, he insists, is far different: “Yes, we have crippled eyes, but not a core of un-goodness. We are true and right, but often ignorant and stupid, acting out of the pain of our wrongheadedness, hurting ourselves, others, and even all creation. Blind, not depraved is our condition.” First falls the doctrine of human depravity.

Chapter 3: “God is in control.” Close behind it is God’s sovereignty. Christians often state that God has a plan for our lives, even through pain. “Do we actually believe we honor God by declaring God the author of all this mess in the name of Sovereignty and Omnipotent Control? Some religious people—and Christians are often among their ranks—believe in grim determinism, which is fatalism with personality. Whatever will be, will be. It happened. And since God is in charge, it must be part of God’s plan.” He insists that God is not sovereign, but that he “submits rather than controls and joins us in the resulting mess of relationship...” As we will see, this idea of God’s submission to humanity is one of the book’s most prominent themes.

Chapter 5: “God is a Christian.” In chapter five Young means to show that it is futile and even dangerous to concern ourselves with who is a Christian and who is not. “Believing (trusting) is an activity, not a category. The truth is that every human being is somewhere on the journey between belief and unbelief; even so, we perpetuate the categories of believer and unbeliever.” Rather than seeing people as being believers or unbelievers, we should understand that we are all on the same path, though in different locations along it.

Chapter 12: “God created my religion.” Young often speaks of the beauty of relationship and the danger of religion. Thus, “God did not start religion. Rather, religion is among a whole host of things that God did not originate but submits to because we human beings have brought them to the table. God is about relationship; and therefore, any understanding of church or any community of faith that is centered on structures, systems, divisions, and agendas has its origin in human beings and not in God.”

Chapter 13: “You need to get saved.” Here he turns to the matter of salvation. I will excerpt this at length so you can see his full-out embrace of universalism—that everybody has been or will be saved by God.

So what is the Good News? What is the Gospel?

The Good News is *not* that Jesus has opened up the possibility of salvation and you have been invited to receive Jesus into your life. The Gospel is that Jesus has already included you into His life, into His relationship with God the Father, and into His anointing in the Holy Spirit. The Good News is that Jesus did this without your vote, and whether you believe it or not won't make it any less or more true.

What or who saves me? Either God did in Jesus, or I save myself. If, in any way, I participate in the completed act of salvation accomplished in Jesus, then my part is what actually saves me. Saving faith is not our faith, but the faith of Jesus.

God does not wait for my choice and then “save me.” God has acted decisively and universally for all humankind. Now our daily choice is to either grow and participate in that reality or continue to live in the blindness of our own independence.

Are you suggesting that everyone is saved? That you believe in universal salvation?

That is exactly what I am saying!

Here's the truth: every person who has ever been conceived was included in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. When Jesus was lifted up, God “dragged” all human beings to Himself (John 12: 32). Jesus is the Savior of all humankind, especially believers (1 Timothy 4: 10). Further, every single human being is in Christ (John 1: 3), and Christ is in them, and Christ is in the Father (John 14: 20). When Christ—the Creator in whom the cosmos was created—died, we all died. When Christ rose, we rose (2 Corinthians 5).

Young leaves no doubt that he espouses universalism. To further his argument, he includes an appendix on the matter.

Chapter 15: “Hell is separation from God.” Having advocated universalism, he must now say something about the tricky matter of hell. “I may have convinced myself or been convinced by others that I deserve to be separated from God. Such lies will bring with them a shadow in which I experience a sense of separation, feelings that seem to validate the illusion that God is not connected and in relationship with me or that God has stopped loving me or has given up on me. Many of us on the planet live in this illusion *now*. ... I propose the possibility that hell is not separation from Jesus but that it is the pain of resisting our salvation in Jesus while not being able to escape Him who is True Love.” Hell, too, falls by the wayside.

Chapter 17: “The cross was God's idea.” Should we be surprised that he now moves against the notion that the cross was somehow part of God's divine plan? He borrows Steve Chalke's language of “divine child abuse” to describe any God who would plan such a thing.

Who originated the Cross?

If God did, then we worship a cosmic abuser, who in Divine Wisdom created a means to torture human beings in the most painful and abhorrent manner. Frankly, it is often this very cruel and monstrous god that the atheist refuses to acknowledge or grant credibility in any sense. And rightly so. Better no god at all, than this one.

The alternative is that the Cross originated with us human beings. This deviant device is the iconic manifestation of our blind commitment to darkness. It is our ultimate desecration of the goodness and

loving intent of God to create, an intent that is focused on the human creation. It is the ultimate fist raised against God.

And how did God respond to this profound brokenness?

God submitted to it. God climbed willingly onto our torture device and met us at the deepest and darkest place of our diabolical imprisonment to our own lies, and by submitting once and for all, God destroyed its power. Jesus is God's best, given willingly and in opposition to our worst, the Cross.

When did God submit? Not only in Jesus incarnate but before the creation of the world, according to Scriptures (Revelation 13: 8). God knew going into the activity of creation what the cost would be. That God's own children, this highest order of creation, would one day make the final attempt to kill Life.

And how would we religious people interpret this sacrifice? We would declare that it was God who killed Jesus, slaughtering Him as a necessary appeasement for His bloodthirsty need for justice.

Chapter 19: "God requires child sacrifice." And then he refutes the doctrine of propitiation: "One of the narratives about God is that because of sin, God required child sacrifice to appease a sense of righteous indignation and the fury of holiness—Jesus being the ultimate child sacrifice. Well, if God is like that, then doesn't it make sense that we would follow in God's footsteps? But we know intuitively that such a thought is wrong, desperately wrong."

Chapter 21: "Death is more powerful than God." Do we need to urge people to respond to God before they die? According to Young, not necessarily. "I don't think God would ever say that once you die, your fate is sealed and there is nothing that God can do for you. ... Personally, I do believe that the idea that we lose our ability to choose at the event of physical death is a significant lie and needs to be exposed; its implications are myriad and far-reaching. ... I think evil exists because of our turning from face-to-face relationship with God, and because we chose to say no to God, to Life and Light and Truth and Good. God, with utmost respect and reverence, submits to our choice even while utterly opposing it. God, who is Love, not only allows our choice but joins us in our humanity in order to rescue us from our choices that are harmful and destructive. God has gone to incredible lengths to protect our ability to say no, even though that freedom has produced unspeakable pain and loss."

Chapter 27: "Sin separates us from God." As the book draws to a close, he looks at the nature of sin and its effect on our relationship with God. "There is a truth about who you are: God's proclamation about a 'very good creation' is the truest about you. That very good creation is the form or origin of you, the truth of who you are in your being. Sin, then, is anything that negates or diminishes or misrepresents the truth of who you are, no matter how pretty or ugly that is. Behavior becomes either an authentic way of expressing the truth of your good creation or an effort to cover up (performance behavior) the shame of what you think of yourself (worthless). And what does the truth of your being look like? God. You are made in the image of God, and the truth of your being looks like God."

Going Back to *The Shack*

Through twenty-eight brief chapters, Young systematically discusses and denies tenet after tenet of the historic Christian faith. He denies human depravity and divine sovereignty. He proclaims there are none who are specially loved by God and that formal religion is opposed to God. He insists that all humanity has been or will be saved by the gospel, that hell does not exist, that God merely submitted to the cross, that any God who would punish his Son as a substitute is abhorrent, and that the very notion of appeasement is unworthy of God. He denies that sin separates us from God and that death represents the end of our opportunity to respond to his offer of divine grace.

As Jefferson famously excised from his Bible all those passages he considered unbearable, Young has gutted the Christian faith of anything he considers repugnant. What remains bears only a passing resemblance to the faith "once for all delivered to the saints."

Now that Young has described what he believes, his fans would do well to return to *The Shack*, for he has settled many of the debates. Does *The Shack* teach universalism? Absolutely. Does it encourage people to turn to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith? Is it meant to compel people to come to deeper confidence in the Bible? Is it a book that will persuade people to join and serve a local church? No, no, and no. Years ago when I reviewed *The Shack* I said, “Despite the amount of poor theology, my greatest concern is probably this one: the book has a quietly subversive quality to it. Young seems set on undermining orthodox Christianity.” “*Seems set?*” Now we know he *is* set. He is set on revoking and replacing the very pillars of the Christian faith.

Observations

Before I conclude, let me offer a few further observations about *Lies We Believe About God*.

- While the excerpts above may represent Young’s most significant claims, they are far from the only concerning ones. There is barely a chapter in the book that does not do damage to one or more precious doctrines. Many times these depend on novel interpretations of Scripture passages or on creative word studies.
- It is a well-established rule of polemics that before we engage another person’s ideas, we must ensure we have accurately understood and presented them. Young seems unconcerned with such protocol. To the contrary, he often lampoons or otherwise misrepresents what evangelicals believe. Time and time again he crafts a sloppy straw man, then beats it into the ground.
- Young never addresses whether or not the Bible is our ultimate authority when it comes to what is true and what is false. Thus, he rarely proves his statements or defends his own beliefs with the Bible. Even while he dismantles the Christian faith, he often appeals to no authority outside himself.
- The easiest book to write is the one that asks questions but stops short of proposing answers. This is especially true when the author associates humility with uncertainty and confidence with arrogance. And, sure enough, this is what Young does. “The book is not a presentation of certainty,” he says, as if this is an asset. “None of the examinations of ‘lies’ results in a final or absolute view on a subject. Rather, they are tastes of larger conversations.” Yet the careful reader will observe that Young’s uncertainty does not extend to the claims he believes to be false. When it comes to many core claims of the Christian faith, his uncertainty vanishes and he confidently castigates the positions and those who hold them.

Conclusion

In *Lies We Believe About God*, we see Paul Young apart from the subjectivity of narrative. And as he proclaims what he denies and affirms, he outs himself as beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. This book is a credo for false teaching, for full-out heresy. I do not say this lightly, I do not say it gleefully, but I do say it confidently. Christian booksellers should be utterly ashamed to sell this book or any other by its author. Christians should not subject themselves to his teaching or promote his works, for he despises sound doctrine that leads to salvation and advocates false doctrine that will only ever lead away from God.

Now that I have read *Lies We Believe About God* from cover-to-cover, one of its small statements seems to take on outsized significance. “To understand who God really is, you can begin by looking at yourself, since you are made in God’s image.” The man who wrote these words has exposed his own approach, for his God is obviously and unashamedly fabricated in the image of Paul Young.

(Please also consider reading [*David Steele’s review*](#).)