

BEWARE THE SHACK

Introduction

“The Shack will tell you much more about me than a few facts ever could.” - William Paul Young¹

“A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.” – G.K. Chesterton

I was busy helping a Gospel recording artist produce his latest album when, during a break, he told me about a most amazing, life changing, book that he had just read. He told me that it had changed his perception of God forever and that it had freed him from the characterisation of God that the institutional church had presented to its flock over many years.

He told me the storyline in broad brush strokes and then mentioned some of the ‘insights’ into the character of God contained in the book. After I countered some of his posits with words like “not necessarily”, “not exclusively” and “The Bible does not say that...”, he exploded in anger and frustration, saying that here he was trying to share the most wonderful feeling he had ever experienced of his “Papa” putting His arms around him and cuddling him, and I was just trying to break it all down and perpetuating the traditional stereotypes of God presented by the church institutional.

The book was of course “The Shack”. Like the author of the book, William P. Young, this gospel artist, whom I was working with, had a dysfunctional father who deserted his family when he was very young. He struggled to be the ideal father to his own children and to be a good husband to his wife. Here, he was convinced, for the first time, ever, that someone, in the personage of William P. Young, opened up the mystery of whom God really was, and what He expected (or did not expect) of us.

¹ <http://www.ambassadorspeakers.com/ACP/printSpeaker.aspx?speaker=1236>

A few months later, I saw interviews with the author on the major television networks where representatives of the media were trying to make sense of the phenomenal sales of the book, after an initial promotional budget of only \$300 (according to Young) and no publishing house being interested in publishing the book. It took two of the author's friends (Wayne Jacobson & Brad Cummings) to form their own publishing company to sell the books. After an inauspicious start, it shot to the top of the New York Times best seller list and sold over a million copies in no time. It was a fascinating story and the author seemed to be a very personable, intelligent and gracious person.

I decided to look on the Internet to see what else I could learn about the book and its author, William P. Young. I was amazed to see how much impact the book had had on so many people all over the world. After reading the book, many people were buying 20 to 30 copies at a time and giving it to friends to read. But I also came across the odd voices of dissention, calling the book a heresy and a misrepresentation of the Gospel and of who God really was.

I watched many interviews with the author on "You Tube" and other Internet platforms, and listened to podcasts of interviews and discussions with the author and his publisher friends Wayne Jacobson and Brad Cummings (called "The God Journey") , who took 16 months to hone and reshape the raw draft that Paul Young had written. I also went to the author's and his friends' web pages, and read articles that they had written there, as well as reviews and comments made by many fans.

By this time I had come to the conclusion that the triumvirate² of Young, Jacobson and Cummings had cobbled a theology together which was part heresy, part blasphemy and part disrespectful toward God, His stature, and His Holiness. I had read some excerpts, but not the whole book. An oft made comment by the triumvirate on their podcasts, and elsewhere, is: "... and he hasn't even read the book.", so I set out to read the book.

2 A group of three people who work together, especially when they are in charge of something.

I telephoned the Gospel artist and asked him if he would lend me his copy. He told me that he lent it to someone else, who had in turn lent it to someone else, who had lent it to someone else. For the next few days I tried unsuccessfully to get a copy but could not obtain one for love, or for money. Then I walked into a large Christian bookstore and asked if they had a copy. Not only did they have one, they had it on special. I bought it.

The hype around it had got me quite excited and I could not wait to get home and get stuck into it. I have been a Christian for over 40 years and am in the process of completing a doctoral degree in theology at the time of writing, so I felt pretty confident that I would ferret out any potential errant pieces of theology and be able to set the errors out in some sort of cohesive way for anyone who might be interested.

I sat down and read the book in one sitting, except for a dinner break, and was gob smacked. It was the most disturbing book that I had ever read in my life. I had been a flower child in the sixties, a professional musician in a rock band and purveyor of all the “delights” the world had to offer, so I was not exactly a prude, or an ultra-conservative, who could not conceive notions like: *creativity, freedom or relationships*.

I struggled to sleep that night. My head was spinning. Never had I seen such dichotomous and disparate notions juxtaposed alongside each other, often with such skill and believability, that they seemed almost compatible. The conceptual and philosophical ideas were crafted together in a rather fantastical way. I have to believe that it was constructed and executed with more than a just little help from a few friends. I am convinced that none of the triumvirate has that ability; jointly or severally, even though each of them would like to think they have, to produce such a crafty, enticing picture of who God supposedly is, and how one should be in relationship with Him. I also do not believe that that extra special assistance emanated from God. Young likes repeating in his interviews that he had very little to do with it and that it was in fact a “God thing”. Wayne Jacobson says that

Young was a “conduit from God’s heart to kinda put some things in print.”³

I came to see the insidious evil hidden between the warp and the woof of this amazing tapestry. Before I read the book I had become aware of some of the heresies from word of mouth, as well as from my readings of reviews on the Internet, and from comments made on various blogs. So I did not expect any, or much truth to be found in between the pages of the book, but to my surprise, and often, bewilderment, not only were there truths to be found between the pages, but also, those that where there, were often presented with amazing insights. I found myself constantly trying to shrug off a presuppositional attitude of suspicion when I came across a piece of doctrine that was not only biblical, but which was unpacked and presented in a way that even theologians would have extreme difficulty in articulating (that is if they understood it in the first place of course).

Nevertheless, the writer of “The Shack”, and his collaborators, also wittingly or unwittingly, skilfully force their readers to partake in such paradigm shifts, that they have no strength, or will, left to resist any upcoming changes that they have in store for them. The readers are also forced to break their previously held stereotypes about God, Christianity, Heaven and Hell. They are made, by means of example, to look foolish for holding onto stereotypes, viz. God the Father, being an old Caucasian man with a white beard; hence the author making the character of God, the Father, a large black woman who calls herself “Papa” (Young based the character mainly on a black co-worker who worked on staff at a large suburban church while he attended seminary in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada).

Young describes himself, through the character of Mack in “The Shack”, as follows:

“In a world of talkers, Mack is a thinker and a doer. He doesn’t say much unless you ask him directly, which most folks have learned not to do. When he does speak you wonder

3 Wayne Jacobson & Brad Cummings’ Pod-cast; The God Journey. The Quest for Significance.

if he isn't some sort of alien who sees the landscape of human ideas and experiences differently than everybody else.”⁴

The writer drops little “pearls of wisdom” of language, theology, history, and philosophy etc. into his narrative to intimidate the reader into believing, mistakenly, that he has quantitative or qualitative knowledge in any, or all those areas, ‘so he must know what he’s talking about.’ As it says in the book:

“With respect to God, Mack is no longer just wide, he has gone way deep.”⁵

The manipulation and eradication of the readers’ defence mechanisms is done by stealth. As the writer, Paul Young says: “A story has a way of getting past our defences.”⁶ he also said in another interview: “Parables by-pass our filter systems.”⁷ When an outlandish proposition is posited, which elicits a reaction of caution from a Christian reader, a notion of irrefutable biblical truth is sometimes inserted to calm the reader down. Then an extrapolation is made to an erroneous conclusion, and a lie is inserted as a gospel truth, something not dissimilar to the switchboard operator, Annie, in “The Shack”, of whom Mack says:

“Wouldn’t be the first time that her sense of humor morphed into a good story that soon became ‘fact’.”⁸

The moving of the deckchairs on this ship is done so deftly, and so often, that the reader could quite easily doubt all of their previously held beliefs. By then they are also convinced that there is an inherent error in holding onto *any* stereotype, without qualification. It becomes clear that the writer and his associates want the readers to wipe their ontological⁹ and epistemological¹⁰ slates clean so that they (the writers) may indelibly rewrite their own theological worldviews onto the hearts and minds of the readers.

4 Young, W.P. *The Shack*. Pp9 Windblown media. Calle Norte: California

5 Young, W.P. *The Shack*. Pp.122. Windblown media. Calle Norte: California

6 <http://www.newmanmagazine.com/e-magazine/061208/Shack.php>

7 Wayne Jacobson & Brad Cummings, Paul Young’ Pod-cast; *The God Journey “A Visit to The Shack”*

8 Young, W.P. *The Shack*. Pp20 Windblown media. Calle Norte: California

9 Ontology, in Philosophy, is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being, and in Logic, it is a set of entities presupposed by a theory.

10 Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, especially the critical study of its validity, methods, and scope.

What makes this book especially evil is that, like the Titanic, people who take a trip (a “journey”) on this boat, and who apply the underlying doctrines about God, Christianity, Heaven and Hell, as espoused in “The Shack”, to their lives, will find themselves sinking into the abyss of Hell itself, according to biblical Soteriology¹¹, unless they acknowledge their sin, repent, and are rescued by the Saviour.

People’s souls are at stake. One of the threads which permeate through this book, and through the theology of Jacobson and Cummings, as well; is one of “*The Journey*” being the important thing in a person’s life on earth. In Buddhism, “*The Journey*” is also the goal. Young says in a podcast interview with Jacobson and Cummings: “I’ve come to believe that God loves the *process*; He’s not interested in the end product”.¹² In “The Shack”, the character Mack says to Jesus:

‘Well to be honest’ he admitted, ‘I’m not too disappointed that the ‘street of gold’ thing isn’t the big prize. It always sounded a little boring to me, and not nearly as wonderful as being out here with you.’”¹³

In 1982, Chris De Burgh brought out a song called “Don’t Pay the Ferryman (until he gets you to the other side)” The same *de facto* sentiment of that song is being expressed here. It is not about *where* you are going to end up, according to them; it’s all about *the journey*. The sentiment is: “Do not unequivocally buy into conventional Christian epistemology until you have reached the other shore.” The only problem with that is that when you arrive on the shore of eternity, and you find that their propositions were wrong, there is *nothing* you can do about it to change your situation. “It is appointed unto man once to die but after this the judgment.” (Hebrews 9: 27)

11 The Doctrine of Salvation.

12 Wayne Jacobson & Brad Cummings’ Pod-cast; The God Journey “*Meet the Author of The Shack*” 18th May 2007

13 Young, W.P. *The Shack*. Pp 178, 179 Windblown media. Calle Norte: California