

In My Father's House Are Many Shacks?

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE THERE ARE MANY SHACKS?

A CRITICAL ESSAY OF WM. Paul Young's "THE SHACK"

It is my desire to undertake this brief essay in order to discuss some of the pertinent elements found within the best-selling book that is the center of so many discussions amongst sincere Christians, as well as prominent pop-culture figures. WM. Paul Young's therapeutic fable is well-intentioned, but I intend to demonstrate that its end-result is not the constructing of either SHACKS or Mansions, but rather the deconstructing (in typical post-modern/emergent fashion) of the concept of the church, the authority of the Word of God, and just about anything else the reader thought they knew about God as revealed in Holy Scripture; something Young's "god" constantly refers to as "religious conditioning". Jesus said in the Gospel of John 14:1-2: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." It is my prayer that no one who happens to read this work will give in to the temptation to exchange the glory of God's Mansions for Mr. Young's existential SHACK.

First of all, the cover itself yields our first point. What is this book? Is it testimony, mystery, theology, Christology... or does it make any such assertions at all? Eugene Peterson (of "The Message" Bible fame), at the very bottom of the book's cover makes the statement: "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress did for his. It's that good." Let me simply say that after reading it I sincerely hope that it does not. John Bunyan wrote his truly Christian classic while in prison for the sake of the Gospel, and every word was rooted in the Scriptures, and each person and place represented within the story was an archetype of orthodox Christian doctrines rooted in the revelation of God that we call The Bible. "Pilgrim" becomes "Christian" at the foot of the cross and begins his journey towards "the Celestial City"; his ultimate goal. On his way he encounters much temptation, personified in his detour into places such as "Vanity Fair". Pilgrim's Progress remains one of the most profound allegory/parables in the history of the church. However, Bunyan never took concrete, propositional truths of Scripture and morphed them into hip, existential discussions between a questioning man and a godhead consisting of two women and a middle-eastern carpenter.

"FACTION NOVEL"

During the "DaVinci Code" furor a few years ago, I discovered a new word that encapsulated that particular debate perfectly; the word was "faction". Dan Brown used places like Rome and Paris, names such as Leonardo DaVinci and the Pope, as well as historic works of art to frame a "fiction" book that made serious accusations against the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, the integrity of the Apostles, and the veracity of the Bible. Since Brown employed literal people and places, his "fictional" thesis became entwined with them, thus creating "faction"; an indistinguishable blend of truth and untruth. This is what I believe Wm. Paul Young has done within the story line of "The Shack". On page 14, he begins by setting the wintry scene by describing how "A cold front out of Canada then descended and was held in place by a swirling wind that roared down the Gorge from eastern Oregon." Later on in chapter two, the reader is told about the last trip made by the family to their favorite Labor Day camping area. He recounts, "Nan (headed) north up Interstate 205 to Washington, and Mack and the three amigos east on Interstate 84" (p.27). In the next paragraph he mentions the natural beauty of the Columbia River Gorge. Why is this important? Simply because Young purposes to give us an inspirational story that is intertwined with actual reality. However, when authors of such "faction" novels make substantive theological assertions within their stories, they cannot simply retreat into the magical forest of make-believe, hoping to sidestep the scrutiny of Scripture.

One sincere believer recently told me that they thought the book was just like "The Wizard of Oz"; meant only to encourage and entertain people. I am so glad that analogy was raised! Let's take a look at it for a moment before going any further with our discussion. In "Oz", we find a real little girl on a farm somewhere in the state of Kansas in the world of black and white. However, after encountering a massive twister, she is struck on the head by a window sill, rendering her unconscious. When she awakens and opens the door of "mobile home", she finds that she is "not in Kansas anymore", but rather a magical kingdom (not to mention a Technicolor one!) inhabited by munchkins, witches, and three special friends that embody the human quest for a brain, a heart, and courage. Down the yellow brick road they go, encountering and overcoming untold challenges on their way to see the Wizard in The Emerald City. When they

ultimately discover the Wizard to be simply smoke and mirrors, they are told that they already possessed and exhibited the very character traits for which they were questing! The little girl then wakes up in her bed back in black and white world with the revelation that “there’s no place like home”. Why do I risk boring you with a summary of a story that you all already know? BECAUSE I WANT TO DEMONSTRATE TO YOU THAT IT IS JUST THAT... A STORY! If the writer of “OZ” had been a Christian attempting to write the new “Pilgrim’s Progress” for his generation, he would have faced the same questions we are asking Mr. Young. “Is Dorothy a type of the church?” one might say. Someone else may ask, “Hey, if you meant the Wizard is meant to be a type of God, are you saying that He’s all smoke and mirrors?” Or, “Is the Cowardly Lion a picture of Christ?” The author of “OZ” would simply stare at you blankly and say, “It’s just a fairy tale that contains some universal lessons; I never represented it as theology!” At that point we would have to stop, take a deep breath, and just drop it.

The Shack, however, is not couched in a land far, far away with a princess longing for her prince to come and take her to his kingdom; Mr. Young hides behind the rules of fiction while dabbling in the dangerous issues of the REAL WORLD of God, man, sin, suffering and redemption. If one takes Mack’s path of subjective, existential self-discovery, I fear they will find themselves “over the rainbow” in a land from which no amount of heel clicking can ever return them.

UNIVERSALISM

This post-modern/emergent fantasy’s first stumble takes place on page 27. Right after setting a very real picture of The Columbia River Gorge, Mack’s family stops off at Multnomah Falls for crayons and refreshments. After their respite, Missy, Mack’s daughter, who would eventually be horribly killed by a violent criminal, asked for her daddy to tell her the tragic story of the Indian Princess of the Multnomah tribe who died at the falls. The story (in brief) was that there was a plague that came to the Indians that began to wipe them out. An old prophecy recounted by a medicine man stated that the beloved daughter of a chief must give her life to stem the advance of the wasting plague. Eventually (“After praying and giving herself to the Great Spirit...”), the selfless princess threw herself to her death on the rocks below (p.28). Young reflects that the story “had all the elements of a true redemption story, not unlike the story of Jesus” (Ibid). Much later after arriving at their campsite, Missy asks Mack: “Daddy, how come she had to die?” The surprised Mack answers, “Honey, she didn’t have to die. She chose to die to save her people. They were very sick and she wanted them to be healed” (p.30). Mack’s inquisitive children go on to ask, “So, it (the story of the princess) didn’t really happen?” Mack answers, “It might have sweetie. Sometimes legends are built from real stories, things that really happen.” “So is Jesus dying a legend?” she asks. “No honey, that’s a true story; and do you know what? I think the Indian princess story is probably true too”, her daddy answers back. At the end of the exchange, we hear Mack summing up the discussion by stating, “Jesus chose to die because he and his daddy love you and me and everyone in the world. He saved us from our sickness, just like the princess” (p.31). JUST LIKE THE PRINCESS??? A Native American legend of a girl’s ritual human sacrifice/suicide is now validated and elevated to the same level of the atoning death of Jesus Christ! Not only that, but when Missy asked earlier, “Is the Great Spirit another name for God—you know, Jesus’ papa?” her befuddled dad answered, “I would suppose so. It’s a good name for God because he is a Spirit and he is Great” (Ibid). Native American spirituality is now equal to that of Biblical Christianity! What wonderful news! We don’t need to send any more missionaries to the far-flung tribes of the world... they’re doing just fine without Jesus!

This passage should stop the Biblical Berean dead in his steps (you remember them, the ones who searched the Scriptures daily? [Acts 17]). If Young was trying to communicate Christian theology, he could have simply written, “Well sweetie, God has revealed Himself in Jesus, who died even for the American Indians. That’s why we need to tell them the true story of how Jesus died on the cross so God could forgive them so that they can go to heaven; even if they happen to die from a sickness like in the fable of the princess!” Instead, we find Young’s “jesus” proclaiming on page 182: “Who said anything about being a Christian? I’m not a Christian”. “Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don’t vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions... I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into by Beloved.” By transformation, is “jesus” referring to the new birth as stated in John 3? Or is he simply referring to an endless cycle of self-discovery via new age spiritual meditation, astral projection, and inner healing? Once again, the Scriptures help us understand that: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

GOD MADE IN OUR OWN IMAGE

In today's post-modern/emergent "discussion", we constantly find a sentiment that all that has ever been known or understood about God must be done away with; or at least questioned. I'm all for each generation searching out the reasons why they "believe", but just not casting off the Bible, which will serve as the cornerstone of their search! When we are finally introduced to the author's "godhead" in chapter 5 entitled "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner", Mack (on his way to his meeting with "Papa" at the Shack) tells his friend Willie, "I've always sort of pictured him (God) as a really big grandpa with a long white flowing beard, sort of like Gandalf in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings" (p.73). This is actually a very wonderful point of reference for the reader, since we all probably have our own image of what God might look like (Charlton Heston maybe?). I appreciate Young's transparency here, but when Mack actually arrives at his appointment with the deity, we are introduced to a scene that serves to further distance the reader from Scripture, ushering them even closer to a subjective, existential image of a god who refuses to be governed even by his/her/it's own word. Young records the details of their first meeting: "... the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman" (p.82); "I have really been looking forward to seeing you face to face", gushes the female "Papa". My mind immediately leapt to the Scriptural encounters with God experienced by the Apostles Paul and John. Paul's meeting was with a glorious being who revealed "I am Jesus"; an experience that left the bloodthirsty rabbi fasting and blind for three days (Acts 9). In John's case (recorded in Revelation chapter 1) when the glorified Christ appeared to him, the exiled Apostle "fell at His feet as though dead"! These Scriptural accounts are a far cry from Young's hermaphroditic deity that gives bear hugs and bakes pies. Mack is then introduced to an oriental woman named "Sarayu" (meant to be the Holy Spirit), and finally a "jesus" figure, who "appeared Middle Eastern and was dressed like a laborer, complete with tool belt and gloves" (p.84). As Mack's spiritual eyes continue to adjust the glare of the new "light" of this "god's" nature, Papa instructs: "Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature... For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning" (p.93). Mr. Young, do you mean religious conditioning like the words of the Bible? I thought so. One more statement from the same page gives us even deeper insight into the overall philosophy that permeates the entire fabric of the book. "Hasn't it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father? And after what you've been through, you couldn't very well handle a father right now, could you?" So here it is! Papa changes Himself into a feminine persona because of Mack's fragility. If it helps someone feel better, this "god" will become what the human wants him/her/it to be, instead of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and ultimately Christ, whose very being is the answer to every human sin and ill. Does this mean that for victims of sexual abuse at the hands of men we must now make God feminine? What of lesbians? What of homosexuals? What of those who... on and on it goes without end. The power of The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it stands permanent and reliable for all human beings, no matter where they come from or whatever they may have suffered through in this fallen world. Please allow me to quote "jesus" once more as he describes both the holy spirit and Papa to Mack. "(Sarayu) is Creativity; she is Action; she is the Breathing of Life; she is much more. She is my Spirit... (Sarayu) is a simple name from one of our human languages. It means 'Wind', a common wind actually. She loves that name" (p.110). Of God the Father, "jesus" says: "Once you begin to know the being behind the very pretty or very ugly face, as determined by your bias, the surface appearances fade away until they simply no longer matter. That is why Elousia is such a wonderful name. God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things—ultimately emerging as the real—and any appearances that mask that reality will fall away" (p.112). Since what was just described is a textbook definition for pantheism, Young should have called his god "Elusive" instead of "Elousia", since that is exactly what he/she/it insists on being throughout the book.

Papa then proceeds to reconstruct the crucifixion for the anguished Mack. The grieving protagonist lashes out at "god" with the accusation: "At the cross? Now wait, I thought you left him—you know—'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" Papa calmly rewrites Holy Scripture by giving a very "Oprahesque" answer: "You misunderstand that mystery there. Regardless of what he felt at that moment, I never left him" (p.96). The reason that Young's "god" sees things this way is that he/she/it doesn't believe in the substitutionary/sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinful man. According to Scripture, Christ is the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) Who actually became accursed upon the cross as He bore the sins of the entire human race (Galatians 3:13). By doing so he became something that an absolutely holy God couldn't even look upon. In fact, the very words misapplied by Mack are not originally those of Jesus at all, but rather it was His declaration (from His religious conditioning no doubt) of the prophecy inspired by the true Holy Spirit through King David in Psalm 22:1. Our Lord knew everything that was going on around Him, as well as everything that was being fulfilled through Him at Calvary. However, Mr. Young's "Elousia/Papa" god appears to forget his/her/it's own prophecies, and instead psychoanalyzes Jesus as having only "felt" alone... just an emotional, scared son in need of a hug.

Mack finally achieves a catharsis, of sorts, for his pain when he is taken to a representation of "paradise" where there is a

variety of brilliant auras, and little children from all the nations of the world running and playing together. The colors begin to change as one is discovered who has a different color; one who is in distress. It turns out to be Mack's father with whom he had serious unresolved issues. As Mack embraces his estranged (and deceased) father, the brilliant colors return and all is well. The ultimate "healing moment" however, takes place when "Papa" (now a man since Mack can finally handle that form) takes the grieving father down a rocky path leading to a cave where the body of his little girl, Missy, was hidden by her killer. Mack gently scoops up the battered remains of his precious little one and returns to the Shack where Jesus and Sarayu are waiting with a custom crafted casket in which to bury her. The most intriguing part of this story is however, that when Mack decides to return to the "real world", he awakens only to find that he is once again in the same cold, dilapidated shack that he had found in the beginning of his "meeting"; the whole experience had been a dream... or something. This is the final point I will attempt to make. If "The Shack" is fiction and fable, so be it. But if it is a treatise on inner healing that Young purports it to be, then we must judge it by God's unchanging revelation of reality, The Holy Scriptures. There are countless people who have lost loved ones to violent and untimely deaths, whether by disease, car accidents, drowning, even murder. What does God offer those of us who have to stand by faith when we have hot tears running down our faces? We can hope for a psychic visitation, vision, or perhaps a visit to our local "Witch of Endor" to conjure up the dead. Or perhaps we can simply look to the words of the Bible.

1 Corinthians 15:51-57. "51 Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? 56 The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. "13 But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. 15 For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. 16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Romans 8:18-19. "18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God."

Revelation 21:1-5. "1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. 2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. 4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. 5 And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."

As you have no doubt gathered by this time, I am not a fan of Wm Paul Young's "faction" fable; but I completely understand why self-proclaimed new age pilgrims like Oprah Winfrey are. The story is touching, even heartrending at points (I couldn't help but stop and think of my own dear children when Mack lost his little girl). However, as a theological work that is being taken much too serious by Christians who ought to know better, it is weighed in the balances and found lacking. The Bible is set aside as a source of revelation, and the atoning death of Christ is replaced by out-of-body therapy and a cosmic group hug. Frankly, I would rather have people gleaning lessons from pure fantasy stories like "The Wizard of Oz", than to dabble with a story that entwines itself with accepted Christian terminology, only to subtly twist it into a poisonous brew much more lethal than anything the wicked witch of the west ever dreamed of. My final recommendation? Pick up a copy of Pilgrim's Progress... or even better; read your Bible!