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DOES *THE SHACK* PROMOTE "CHRISTIAN" UNIVERSALISM?

TAKING THE ROOF OFF THE SHACK

by Mark S. Witte

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PART 2: DOES THE SHACK PROMOTE UNIVERSALISM?

There are many doctrinal issues raised in *The Shack* that have drawn criticism. One of those is the charge that Paul Young is promoting Universalism. The following text often gets attention for its allusions to Universalism.

[Jesus] “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 followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. 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 my Beloved.”

[Mack] “Does that mean,” asked Mack, “that all roads will lead to you?”

[Jesus] “Not at all.” smiled Jesus as he reached for the door handle to the shop. “Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.” (p.182)

Paul Young’s litany of people groups create confusion with not only a mix of occupations, behaviors and nationalities—but also religious systems. The impression one can get is that God can be worshipped within any religious system, and that becoming *Christian* is irrelevant to becoming a child of God. Hopefully we can agree that a Christian cannot be an informed follower of Christ and adhere to a contrary religious system. However, his ambiguous statements make it difficult to determine what he actually believes.

While his statement could give the appearance of Universalism, we should notice that he speaks of those who “were” identified with non-Christian religions or criminal behavior, and those who “are” of different occupations and nationalities. This poses no problem from a biblical perspective. It simply demonstrates that God rescues people from any spiritual delusion and from any nationality. This is consistent with Rev. 5:9, “for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation”. Young’s paragraph gets a lot of attention from those who say the book teaches Universalism, but the statements here have little to offer in support of that charge.

It will be helpful to hear how Young has responded to those who believe this text teaches Universalism.

[Question] Can you explain what you meant regarding Muslims, Mormons, Buddhist? / Are you saying you can be Muslim and still believe in Jesus?

[Paul Young] I have friends who are Muslim Christians. I have friends who are Buddhist Christians who are probably more orthodox than you are. In the rest of the world, when you’re outside of America, you can be a Buddhist Christian, because Buddhism has nothing to do with religion, in that sense. / So, I’m not saying that the religion of Muhammad or Buddha will lead you into the embrace of the Father. For me all roads narrow down to one person—Jesus Christ. / [Changing “some *are* Buddhist” to “some *were* Buddhist”] was the last edit we put into the book because one of the guys we sent the story to said I like

everything about the book. But I've got a couple of friends who are going to think you're a Universalist. And so I put this paragraph in there.

— Paul Young, *Mariners Church, Irvine, CA.* (audio 02_20080702.m4a, 35:49-39:10)

But Young also has Jesus say, “I have no desire to make them Christian”. A *Christian* is a Christ follower. The label applies to those who receive Jesus as Savior, follow his teaching, and grow in their relationship with him. There would be a real problem with a Jesus who had no desire for people to follow him and approach life from a biblical perspective. On this point Paul says he is using the term “Christian” in reference to ones national identity rather than their individual belief system. Because Paul spent his early life in a cross-cultural context we can see how he may be inclined to use the term in this way. But another reason may be his antagonism toward institutions—including the church. And to make someone “Christian” implies becoming part of that institution. This antagonism will be explored later in the review.

Why is there so much debate over the question of Universalism in *The Shack*? First, our terms are not clearly defined. The term *Universalism* is too broad to be useful. General Universalism, such as we find among Unitarian Universalists, leaves it to the individual to determine their own spiritual path. Because one can be a Unitarian Universalist and deny Christian doctrine entirely, Universalism in this broad sense will be dismissed as irrelevant to the discussion. *The Shack* in no way teaches this form of Universalism. We need to be more specific. A more narrow form of Universalism is Christian Universalism; also called Universal Reconciliation. Universal Reconciliation believes Jesus is the only way to God, but also that all people will be saved. Everyone is already forgiven by God whether they realize it or not. Salvation is seen as the transforming work of God that eventually moves every individual to experience his love. If a person does not experience God's love in this life, then, in the next life God will continue his transforming work of reconciling that person to himself.

There is a second contributing factor to obscure Universalist themes in *The Shack*. The average reader is unaware of Paul Young's background and the deliberation that took place prior to the book's publication. Ambiguity in passages like the one above are the result of compromises between the author and the publisher. Paul Young's theology included the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation, while his friend and aspiring publisher Wayne Jacobsen rejected UR. The result is a book that maintains UR themes held by the author, but overt UR statements have been muted by the publisher.

[Paul Young] “Now, the original manuscript was worse, I mean it could have gotten me into a whole lot of more problems because I had the present tense. Some “are” Muslims. Some “are” Buddhist. Now, if you weren't Americans you would understand that. But because you are, the guys convinced me to put it in the past tense so it would be easier on you.

— Paul Young, *Mariners Church, Irvine, CA.* (audio 02_20080702.m4a, 35:49-39:10)

WHAT ARE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM AND UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION?

Universal reconciliation, also called (Christian) universalism and universal salvation, is the doctrine or belief that all will receive salvation due to the mercy of God. It states that all people will eventually experience salvation, asserting that the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ provides reconciliation for all humankind and atonement for all sins.

— *Wikipedia.com, Universal Reconciliation*

“Universal reconciliation” is the position that all of mankind will ultimately be saved through Christ whether or not faith is professed in him in this life. While most proponents may adhere to many tenets of traditional Christianity, they uniformly claim that God's qualities of love, goodness, and sovereignty require that all people will ultimately be saved and that eternal punishment is a false doctrine. Salvation is not from hell, but from sin.

— *Theopedia.com*

Other terms and euphemisms that are sometimes used to mean basically the same thing as Christian Universalism include: (Universal or Ultimate) Reconciliation, Restoration, or Restitution; the Larger, Wider, or Blessed Hope; (the Gospel of) Inclusion; the Victorious Gospel; and Irresistible Grace.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

[Universal Reconciliation] maintains that Christ's death accomplished its purpose in reconciling all humankind to God. The death of Christ made it possible for God to accept all humans, and he has done so. Consequently, whatever separation exists between a human and the benefits of God's grace is subjective in nature; it exists only in the human's mind.

— *Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, p. 1027*

The history of the doctrine goes back to the early centuries of the church. Universal Reconciliation was expressed by theologians such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the 3rd century, St. Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century, and has been held by influential leaders throughout the history of the Church.

The doctrine has worn several labels such as Universal or Ultimate Reconciliation, Christian Universalism, Universal Salvation and Gospel of Inclusion. Belief in the salvation of all humankind has been vigorously debated throughout Christian history but is rejected as heresy by most Christian denominations. However, with the present day shift toward relativism and its prized value of tolerance, some Christians have become more receptive to the inclusive nature of Universal Reconciliation.

DOES PAUL YOUNG BELIEVE IN UNIVERSAL RECONCILIATION?

We will start with comments from two of Paul Young's close friends. Then we will hear from Paul himself.

WAYNE JACOBSEN

Paul Young originally wrote *The Shack* as a gift to his kids to teach them about their relationship with God. It was also given to a few close friends including author and editor Wayne Jacobsen. Wayne liked the book and encouraged Paul to get it published. For 16 months they worked together on four rewrites. Because the manuscript was consistently rejected by publishers, Wayne Jacobsen created his own publishing company, Windblown Media, with *The Shack* as the company's first book.

Since *The Shack's* publication many Christians have noticed Young's allusions to Ultimate Reconciliation. Wayne Jacobsen has heard from many of them and offered this response.

[Question] Does The Shack promote Ultimate Reconciliation (UR)?

[Jacobsen] It does not. While some of that was in earlier versions because of the author's partiality at the time to some aspects of what people call UR, I made it clear at the outset that I didn't embrace UR as sound teaching and didn't want to be involved in a project that promoted it. In my view UR is an extrapolation of Scripture to humanistic conclusions about our Father's love that has to be forced on the biblical text.

Since I don't believe in UR and wholeheartedly embrace the finished product, I think those who see UR here, either positively or negatively are reading into the text.

I think the author would say that some of that dialog significantly affected his views. This book represents growth in that area for all of us. Holding him to the conclusions he may have embraced years earlier would be unfair to the ongoing process of God in his life and theology.

— *Wayne Jacobsen, Is the Shack Heresy?*, www.windblownmedia.com/shackresponse.html

“Three hearts weighed in on the theology to make it as true as we could muster. The process also helped shape our theologies in honest, protracted discussions.”

“At its core the book is one long Bible study.”

— Wayne Jacobsen, *Is the Shack Heresy?*, www.windblownmedia.com/shackresponse.html

Young and Jacobsen were intentional in crafting the theology of *The Shack*. When it came to Ultimate Reconciliation, Jacobsen rejected Young’s views as “unsound teaching” “that has to be forced on the biblical text”. In the “long and protracted discussions” it seems Jacobsen sought to edit out or compromise on Young’s allusions to this doctrine and apparently he was satisfied with the finished product. As we continue, we will see to what degree Young holds to the doctrine of Ultimate Reconciliation and how much of it remains in the book.

JAMES DeYOUNG

James DeYoung has been a close friend of Paul Young for many years. He recognized Paul’s inclination toward Christian Universalism long before *The Shack* was written. Below are excerpts from DeYoung’s review of the book.

[James DeYoung]

Paul [Young] 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.

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 others 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 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 discussions on universalism through the ages, and with a good foundation in what the Bible teaches, the reader becomes more and more aware of 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.

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.

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.

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.

— James B. DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack, Introduction*

Both DeYoung and Jacobsen say Paul Young believed in Universal Reconciliation before writing *The Shack*. Jacobsen says the doctrine was removed from the book and that Young should not be criticized for what he believed some years before. In the years following the book's publication has Paul Young denied or distanced himself from UR? What does Paul Young have to say about his beliefs after writing *The Shack*?

PAUL YOUNG

With the rise in book sales and controversy, Young has attempted to distance himself from the "Universalist" label. We see this in his June 2008 interview with New Man Magazine (NMM).

[NMM] There's a lot of theology in your book. You do seem to affirm Trinitarian doctrine and the divinity of Christ. However other passages are more controversial. At one point the character of God says, "In Jesus I have forgiven all humans of their sins against me."

[Young] That's directly out of 1 Timothy: "This is a statement true and worthy of full acceptance. That Jesus Christ is the savior of all mankind, especially of believers."

[NMM] You just worded it a little differently?

[Young] Exactly. I did that a lot because we wanted to get the preachy feel out of it. In the first draft I had God quoting Paul, which just doesn't work. But if you reform the same content and put it in a conversation people won't recognize them as Scripture, but they are.

[NMM] Yes, but some of the language you use sounds a little like Universalism, the doctrine that all will be saved. How do you respond to that?

[Young] Very simply. I'm not a Universalist. I've never said anything other than the road gets narrowed down to one man, that's the person Jesus Christ. I've been very clear about that. And it's very clear throughout the whole book, unless you want to find an agenda for Universalism in there.

— *www.newmanmagazine.com/e-magazine, Vol 15 No 24, June 12, 2008*

One of the major concerns about the book is not that it teaches *Universalism*, but *Christian Universalism*. Young has responded to this question many times and is very careful with his answer. In the above quote he separates himself from Universalism, but not from Christian Universalism. I agree with Young that, (1) he is not a Universalist and (2) the road gets narrowed down to Jesus Christ. But his answer seems intentionally vague. The statement denies Universalism but disguises any affirmation of Christian Universalism.

Generally speaking, false teachers couch their teaching in language, often carefully chosen, in order to preserve the aura of respectability and faithfulness to the divine revelation, while at the same time moving away from it. So in an underhanded way they smuggle in destructive heresies.

— *S. Lewis Johnson, 2 Peter 2:1-3 (audio)*

THE SHACK AND THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

With the testimony of Paul Young's close friends we have good reason to suspect some adherence to Universal Reconciliation (or Christian Universalism). To further explore Young's beliefs we will compare his theology with the doctrines of "The Christian Universalist Association" (CUA). Most of the following CUA quotes are taken from their web site at <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>.

Here is how those in The Christian Universalist Association describe themselves.

The Christian Universalist Association is an interdenominational organization connecting churches, ministries, and individuals who believe in Christian Universalism.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>*

Christian Universalism is a term that has gained currency as a way of explicitly expressing the close connection between original Christianity and original Universalism, and distinguishing between the Christian type of Universalism and Unitarian Universalism. Other terms and euphemisms that are sometimes used to mean basically the same thing as Christian Universalism include: (Universal or Ultimate) Reconciliation, Restoration, or Restitution; the Larger, Wider, or Blessed Hope; (the Gospel of) Inclusion; the Victorious Gospel; and Irresistible Grace. Most of these alternative expressions are used primarily by people in the conservative Christian community who believe in universal salvation, who wish to avoid confusing or losing their audience by calling their beliefs "Universalist"—a word that is negatively associated in the minds of some Christians today with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

The CUA teaches a view of the Gospel that is quite different from what has come to be known as mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic theology. In addition to the teaching that everyone will eventually be saved, we also teach that all people are the offspring of God, created in the divine image, and destined to be perfected and patterned after Christ as the ultimate outcome of salvation in the fullness of time. We see salvation as more of a process of growth and transformation of the soul to become one with the Christ Spirit, rather than being saved from God's anger and the threat of punishment.

— *The Christian Universalist Association*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

To my knowledge Paul Young has no formal association with this organization and there is no intent to imply that he does. However, as we shall see, Paul Young and the CUA do affirm similar beliefs. In the following pages we compare fifteen of Paul Young's theological views with corresponding statements from The Christian Universalist Association. What we find is that Paul Young both affirms and defends many of the basic and troubling doctrines of Christian Universalism. I sought to list these topics in a logical progression that suggests a starting point for the error and where that error can lead. Some topics addressed here are more crucial than others. Crucial doctrines are those that confuse and distort the message of the gospel. So, how far does *The Shack* go in deviating from sound doctrine? Does it promote Christian Universalism? Does it compromise the gospel? As we walk through these similarities we will learn about the doctrines of Christian Universalism and see how both Young and the CUA deviate from the teaching of Scripture.

GOD'S GREATEST ATTRIBUTE IS LOVE

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Universalism teaches that God's essential nature is Love, that all religions contain both truth and error, that the only commandment that really matters is to love other people as oneself, and that all souls will eventually be saved and perfected as part of God's unfailing plan.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Universalism*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Mack] "You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people." Mack observed with a suspicious look. "Are there any who you are not especially fond of?"

[Narrator] She lifted her head and rolled her eyes as if she were mentally going through the catalog of every being ever created.

[Papa] "I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I'm not."
(p.118-119)

Paul Young and the Christian Universalists speak much of God's love. On this point we agree. For how could anyone go too far in speaking of the love of God? We start here, recognizing that the motive is from a pure heart and with great sincerity. But problems can occur if we lose sight of God's other attributes and become imbalanced or skewed in our perception of Him.

Scripture tells us that God is love. We also find the phrase "God is..." followed by the words: just, holy, righteous, true, exalted, mighty, compassionate, good, faithful, and many others. In the following verses we see that God is love, spirit and light.

1Jn 4:8 NASB The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

1Jn 4:16 NASB We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Joh 4:24 NASB "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

1Jn 1:5 NASB This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

In the long list of God's attributes at least three of these are nouns; "love", "spirit" and "light". The rest of God's attributes are given to us in adjectives. Some may wish to place more significance on the fact that God is "love" (*n.*), than that he is "just" (*adj.*). Whether the attribute is a noun or an adjective should not affect the significance of the attribute. After all, I doubt anyone making this argument would claim God is more "light" (*n.*) than he is "holy, holy, holy" (*adj.*) Because God is perfect, he is not lacking in any of his attributes. Elevating God's love to the point of eclipsing his other attributes is to imply God has *lesser* attributes. And this would make God's other attributes somehow less than perfect and complete.

Rev 4:8 NASB And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."

[Wayne Grudem]

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God's character. For example, John can say that "God is light" (1 John 1:5) and then a little later say also that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is God *himself* who is light, and it is God *himself* who is also love.

It should be clear that each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's total character or being. God himself is a unity, a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in all of these attributes.

In terms of practical application, this means that we should never think, for example, that God is a loving God at one point in history and a just or wrathful God at another point in history. He is the same God always, and everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes. It is not accurate to say, as some have said, that God is a God of Justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament. God is and always has been infinitely just and infinitely loving as well, and everything he does in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is completely consistent with both of those attributes.

Moreover, the doctrine of the unity of God should caution us against attempting to single out any one attribute of God as more important than all the others. At various times people have attempted to see God's holiness, or his love, or his self-existence, or his righteousness, or some other attribute as the most important attribute of his being. But all such attempts seem to misconceive of God as a combination of various parts, with some parts being somehow larger or more influential than others. Furthermore, it is hard to understand exactly what "most important" might mean. Does it mean that there are some actions of God that are not fully consistent with some of his other attributes? That there are some attributes that God somehow sets aside at times in order to act in ways slightly contrary to those attributes? Certainly we cannot maintain either of these views, for that would mean that God is inconsistent with his own character or that he changes and becomes something different from what he was previously. Rather, when we see all the attributes as merely various aspects of the total character of God, then such a question becomes quite unnecessary and we discover that there is no attribute that can be singled out as more important. It is God himself in his whole being who is supremely important, and it is God himself in his whole being whom we are to seek to know and to love.

— Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 178, 180

Protestant liberalism favored love over holiness to the point of eliminating the idea of God's wrath. More recently, other theologians, like Karl Barth, have placed love and holiness in dialectical tension to one another. What this long discussion reveals is that both need to be affirmed—neither can be compromised—and that classical orthodoxy was correct to think that if holiness is God's moral perfection, and if love is a part of that perfection, then love is a part of holiness and can never be in tension with it.

— David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p.35

Isolating and elevating God's love over his other attributes is a crucial error and is part of the faulty foundation on which Christian Universalism is built. When there is a myopic focus on God's love, the attribute that typically fades from view is God's holiness. In the following pages we will see how this misperception spills over to distort other doctrines. If allowed to grow, this error can lead to a false gospel such as we find in Christian Universalism.

GOD IS OUR HEAVENLY PARENT AND ALL PEOPLE ARE HIS CHILDREN

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

We believe every person is the divine offspring of God, created in the image of the Heavenly Parent of all; and that every person is destined to be raised up from imperfection to maturity according to the pattern of the archetypal Christ, the Son of God, the Perfect Human in whose image all humanity shall be transformed.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith: Article 5*,

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Mack] "You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people." Mack observed with a suspicious look. "Are there any who you are not especially fond of?"

[Narrator] She lifted her head and rolled her eyes as if she were mentally going through the catalog of every being ever created.

[Papa] "Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is."

[Mack] Mack was interested. "Do you ever get mad at any of them?"

[Papa] "Sho 'nuff! What parent doesn't? There is a lot to be mad about in the mess my kids have made and in the mess they're in." (p.118-119)

We are told Papa (God the Father) is fond of every person ever created and refers to them as her kids. Young and the Christian Universalists both refer to God as the heavenly "Parent" of all people. This is the language of Christian Universalism and is not how God refers to himself in Scripture. Jesus does not consider all people as God's children. For example, he says to the Pharisees, "If God were your Father, you would love me" and "You are of your father the Devil, and you want to do the desires of your father" (Jn 8:42, 44). According to Scripture, "it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise" (Rom 9:8).

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

"I would like to share with you the Good News that ALL people are God's children and NO ONE will be left behind!" / "This uplifting understanding of the Gospel is called Christian Universalism."

— *Eric Stetson, Founder and Executive Director of the Christian Universalist Association*,

<http://www.christian-universalism.com/>

The idea of Jesus as the “Son of God” was intended not only to show his special status as the Messiah, but also the fact that all people are God’s children.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Human Nature and Destiny*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

A spiritual community that cares about what really matters: accepting you as the son or daughter of God you already are.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Home Page*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

In addition to the teaching that everyone will eventually be saved, we also teach that all people are the offspring of God, created in the divine image, and destined to be perfected and patterned after Christ as the ultimate outcome of salvation in the fullness of time.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, About Us / Frequently Asked Questions*,

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Mack] “May I ask what you’re listening to?”

[Papa] “Group called Diatribe and an album that isn’t even out yet called Heart Trips. Actually,” she winked at Mack, “these kids haven’t even been born yet.” “...they’re just full of vinegar and fizz. Lots of anger...” “They’re just some of my kids, showin’ and spoutin’ off. I am especially fond of those boys, you know.” (p.90)

This could be understood as God’s foreknowledge of those who would receive Christ and therefore Papa refers to those boys as “her kids”. They do not exactly love God or people, they name their group “diatribe” (a verbal attack), and they have no restraint in venting their anger. The underlying message may be that these are not the stereotypical choir boys one would *expect* God to love. In other words, when people sin God still loves them. That’s true. But on the other hand, the relationship being described is also consistent with a Christian Universalist perspective. These boys who *are* God’s kids “haven’t even been born yet.” John 1:12 says those who receive Jesus “become” children of God. That means prior to receiving Jesus they were *not* children of God. The condition for becoming a child of God is that one must receive Jesus Christ and that cannot happen before one exists. But according to Christian Universalism and Paul Young, all people are God’s children by virtue of simply being human. On this matter, belief, faith and regeneration are irrelevant. This blurs the distinction between believers and unbelievers and sends a very confused message. And as we shall see, this Universalist theme surfaces again and again throughout the book.

Joh 1:12 NASB But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

Gal 3:26 NASB For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

2Co 6:17-18 NASB “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “and do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. (18) “And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” Says the Lord Almighty.

Rom 8:14 NASB For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

To assure people they are reconciled to God when they are not is misleading and can have serious spiritual consequences. In fact, this is why the doctrine of Christian Universalism is a potentially damning heresy.

Christian Universalism begins by isolating and elevating the attribute of God’s love. The next step is to assume God never judges or punishes sin. What do the Christian Universalists say about unbelievers

who reject Jesus? They absolve them from God's judgment by including them among God's children. And after all, a loving God would never abandon his children to eternal punishment. The dominos begin to fall as this false teaching goes on to affect our understanding of the atonement and how we define hell.

GOD WILL NEVER CONDEMN HIS CHILDREN TO HELL

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

God would never abandon anyone to eternal punishment. God has a plan to rescue and transform even those who turned away from truth and goodness in this mortal life. Our Heavenly Father will find every lost sheep and forgive every prodigal son!

— *Eric Stetson, Founder and Executive Director of the Christian Universalist Association,*
<http://www.christian-universalism.com>

We believe in the ultimate triumph of divine mercy and grace: that no being ever created will be condemned or allowed to suffer forever, but God has arranged through a benevolent plan of learning and growth for all souls to attain salvation, reconciliation, restoration, and reunion with the Source of All Being, in the fullness of the ages.

— *The Christian Universalist Association: Statement of Faith: Article ,*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

God does not decide to condemn some people to hell because they sinned too much or they chose the wrong religious beliefs.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Universal Salvation,* <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

All God's Children, No One Left Behind.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Masthead,* <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Sophia] "I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does."

[Sophia] "You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from His presence and apart from His love. Is that not true?"

[Sophia] "Come now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell?"

[Narrator] How could God ask him to choose among his own children? There was no way he could sentence Katie, or any of his other children, to an eternity in hell just because she had sinned against him.

[Sophia] "And now you know Papa's heart," she added, "who loves all his children perfectly." (pp.162-163)

Young fashions a scenario where, just as Mack has his biological children, God's children are the entire human race. And just as Mack would never condemn his children to hell, neither would God condemn the human race. The quotes above are taken from the chapter "Here Come Da Judge" which lays out an emotionally persuasive argument for Christian Universalism. We will look more closely at this chapter and Mack's encounter with Sophia later in this review.

BELIEF AND REPENTANCE ARE UNNECESSARY FOR RECONCILIATION

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Christian Universalists believe...an inclusive view of salvation in which all people—even the sinful and unbelieving dead—will eventually find reconciliation with God by repenting of their sins and going through a transformation process, so that nobody will spend eternity in hell. God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism*,
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

Universalism teaches that God's essential nature is Love, that all religions contain both truth and error, that the only commandment that really matters is to love other people as oneself, and that all souls will eventually be saved and perfected as part of God's unfailing plan.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism*,
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Papa] “Honey, you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world.”

[Mack] “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?”

[Papa] “The whole world, Mack.” (p.192)

[Papa] “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship.” (p.225)

Let's pause for a general observation. When critiquing the theology of *The Shack* the number one rebuttal from fans is, “IT'S FICTION!” Yes it's fiction, but it's also intensely theological. We have already cited several quotes from Paul Young and Wayne Jacobsen about their efforts to make the book theologically accurate; including Jacobsen's statement, “At its core the book is one long Bible study.” Here Papa says, “listen to me carefully” as she proceeds to teach Mack, and you the reader, the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation. This type of *teaching* dialogue occurs throughout the book and the only reason for waving the “fiction” banner is to defend an emotional attachment to an emotional book. When a fiction book is used as a tool to teach theology then the content of that theology matters. Sadly, much of the church has shifted from having Scripture as its foundation for assessing truth, to a foundation of feelings. The result is an epidemic loss of discernment. This is not an empty accusation. The evidence is the overwhelming number of Christians who have accepted or endorsed *The Shack*, while being oblivious to the fact that it includes an abundance of poor doctrine, heretical doctrine, and even a false gospel.

Getting back to Papa's claim of being fully reconciled to an unbelieving world, James DeYoung says this:

“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.

—*James B. DeYoung, At the Back of The Shack*

Act 2:38 NASB Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Luk 13:3-5 NASB "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (4) "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? (5) "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Eze 18:32 NASB "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."

2Co 5:20 NASB Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Papa's declaration makes it seem that, as far as God is concerned, reconciliation is a done deal—that peace between God and man has been secured when in fact it has not.

If everybody stands "now fully" reconciled to God, then Paul's plea [be reconciled to God] is unnecessary. But in the cross, God is simply saying to man, "These are the terms by which you may be reconciled to Me. Now, it's your move."

Absent repentance for sin and faith in the Gospel, persons will remain un-reconciled to God. Though God extends the olive branch of peace to people, many refuse to accept the divinely initiated overture thereby imploding the whole reconciliation process.

— *Larry DeBruyn, The Shack & Universal Reconciliation Pt 2*

Both Young and the Christian Universalists consider belief in God as unnecessary for reconciliation. Reconciliation occurs when two parties in conflict establish an agreement from which they can begin to restore their relationship. In our relationship to God we must confess (i.e. agree with God) that we are sinful and need to be forgiven. Agreement with God about our sin is evidenced by repentance which leads to reconciliation. As long as there is denial on the part of the sinner, reconciliation is not possible.

Joh 8:24 NASB "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

Joh 3:18 NASB "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Several writers here weigh in on the idea of being reconciled to God apart from belief in Him.

[Universalism] undermines belief in the atoning death of Christ. For if all sin will ultimately be overlooked by a gracious deity, Christ never should have died. It was not only unnecessary, it was surely the greatest error in history... Universalism... demands a view of the death of Christ as having some purpose other than as an atonement for sin.

— *Robertson McQuilken, The Great Omission, A Biblical Basis for World Evangelism, p. 41*

Thus in the salvific scheme of universalism, Jesus died for some reason other than that we might be forgiven for our sins.

Beginning with Abelard (1079-1142), liberal Christianity proposes that Jesus died to provide mankind with an inspiring and sacrificial example. Though His death does give us that (John 15:13), the implications of His atonement are far more profound.

As I see it, the atonement theory of The Shack seems to be that Jesus died to provide a sacrificial example of love for individuals to induce and inspire them to become more selfless as they seek "relationship and reconciliation" with God and with others.

— *Larry DeBruyn, The Shack and Universal Reconciliation Pt 3*

Reconciliation is changing for the better a relationship between two or more persons. Theologically it refers to the change of relationship between God and man. We are naturally children of wrath (Eph. 2:3), and are at

enmity with God (Eph. 2:11-15); but, "...we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son..." (Rom. 5:10). Because of the death of Jesus, the Christian's relationship with God is changed for the better. We are now able to have fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3) whereas before we could not. So, we are reconciled to Him (Rom. 5:10-11). The problem of sin that separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2) has been addressed and removed in the cross. It was accomplished by God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18).

— *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, Dictionary of Theology*

The Bible clearly teaches that not all are going to heaven. Some have their crimes paid for by someone else (Jesus), and some pay for their own crimes. And the place where the payment is made is called hell. The atonement is limited, not in its potential (the payment was adequate for all sin), but in its application. It is applied to those who meet the condition, which is faith in Christ. The atonement is sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect. This is the accepted orthodox view regardless of one's view on election; being contingent on God's choosing (Calvinism), or man's choosing (Arminianism). To claim the atonement is applied to all and therefore all are ultimately reconciled to God is to deny the clear teaching of Scripture. Some are saved, and some perish.

— *Greg Koukl, Stand to Reason radio, 07-06-08*

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

We believe in the ultimate triumph of divine mercy and grace: that no being ever created will be condemned or allowed to suffer forever, but God has arranged through a benevolent plan of learning and growth for all souls to attain salvation, reconciliation, restoration, and reunion with the Source of All Being, in the fullness of the ages.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith: Article 4,*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Mack] "You mean what Jesus did?"

[Papa] "He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love. Would you instead prefer he'd chosen justice for everyone?" (p.164-5)

This is likely a paraphrase borrowed from James 2:13.

Jas 2:13 NASB For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

The last half of James 2:13 says, "mercy triumphs over judgment." But when we look at the immediate context we discover a different meaning from what is assumed by Young. The first half of the verse says, "judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy". And the preceding verse says, "so speak and so act as those who are to be judged". Young might have us believe that because of mercy there is no judgment.

James 2:13 is a summary statement for the first half of the chapter. James was admonishing believers for showing favoritism to the rich and neglecting the poor. By making distinctions these believers were passing judgment. Rather than judging, we are to show mercy. James brings in a parallel idea a few verses earlier; "Love your neighbor as yourself". Young takes this principle of equality and fairness among humans and applies it to God. The implication being; it's wrong for people to judge, therefore it would be wrong for God to judge.

The message put forward by Young and the CUA is that God's justice is subordinate to his mercy. But as we have seen, a perfect God does not have lesser and greater attributes. God's mercy is perfect, and so is his justice. We see his mercy in that "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" We see his justice in that "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8). God's attributes are applied fully and perfectly "so that He would be *just* and the *justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus". (Rom. 3:26)

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.

— James B. DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

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" (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." It means just the opposite of what Paul's universalism affirms—that mercy limits God's justice. The part of the verse that affirms "mercy triumphs over justice" is speaking about what Christians do.

— James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

"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."

— James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

THOSE WHO DIE REJECTING JESUS CAN STILL BE SAVED

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

God would never abandon anyone to eternal punishment. God has a plan to rescue and transform even those who turned away from truth and goodness in this mortal life. Our Heavenly Father will find every lost sheep and forgive every prodigal son!

— Eric Stetson, *Founder and Executive Director of the Christian Universalist Association*

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Christian Universalists believe...an inclusive view of salvation in which all people—even the sinful and unbelieving dead—will eventually find reconciliation with God by repenting of their sins and going through a transformation process, so that nobody will spend eternity in hell. God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?*,

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

God does not decide to condemn some people to hell because they sinned too much or they chose the wrong religious beliefs.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Article 4: Universal Salvation,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

PAUL YOUNG

In March 2009 Paul Young was interviewed by Pastor Kendall Adams on KAYP radio in Burlington, Iowa. The following is an abridged transcript of that interview. For the unabridged version see appendix B.

[Adams] "But you don't believe all men will be saved, right?"

[Young] “I believe that everyone was included in the finished work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit upon the cross.”

[Adams] “But I mean, do you believe everyone, the Muslim who rejects Christ, who doesn’t believe he’s the Son of God, will they be ultimately saved?”

[Young] “I don’t know. I don’t know that.

[Adams] “You mean, you don’t know whether a Muslim who dies rejecting Christ will be saved?”

[Young] “No. What I’m saying is that salvation was accomplished on the cross once for all. He died once for all. And it was finished. So it’s not the issue of salvation that prevents people from eternal life. It’s the issue of making a choice to be in relationship or not.”
“...here’s the deal. Salvation is accomplished by what he did. Not by even our choice to believe it.”

[Adams] “So you mean if they don’t believe it in this life...it sounds like you’re saying they can be ultimately saved.”

[Young] “I don’t know. I don’t know that. And I don’t think anybody knows that. But my point about the salvation issue is, it is what Father, Son and Holy Spirit accomplished in Christ that saves anyone. It’s not our ability to choose that. It’s not my ability to choose that saves me. It’s what God has done.”

— Paul Young interviewed by Kendall Adams, March 2009,
<http://rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>

To Paul Young salvation has already been accomplished and bestowed on all mankind. And responding to the gospel with belief in Christ is good but not necessary. But what does the Bible say?

Joh 3:18 NASB "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus said, “unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24). So, will a Muslim who dies rejecting Christ be saved? From an orthodox understanding of the gospel the answer is simple. No. While Young would affirm that salvation is available only through Christ, he denies the *means* of salvation has anything to do with faith, belief or repentance. Instead he believes in a gospel where one who “dies rejecting Christ” and “does not believe” can still be saved. This is the false doctrine of Christian Universalism.

It is a *different* gospel.

[Mack] “So how do I become part of that church?” he asked. This woman you seem to be so gaga over.”
[Jesus] “It’s simple, Mack. It’s all about relationships and simply sharing life. What we are doing right now—just doing this—and being open and available to others around us. My church is all about people and life is all about relationships. (p.178)

Young’s idea of becoming part of the church (i.e. salvation) is primarily about experiencing relationships. This is a sentiment that could be found in any religious tradition and has little if any content that is uniquely Christian. The biblical gospel has content that calls for a response. It is an appeal for trust and repentance that brings one from spiritual death to life in Christ.

PENAL SUBSTITUTION IS A FALSE DOCTRINE

Penal substitution defined:

The doctrine of penal substitution states that God gave himself in the person of his Son to suffer instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin. This understanding of the Cross of Christ stands at the very heart of the gospel.

— *Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, Pierced for Our Transgressions, p. 21*

[The doctrine of penal substitution demonstrates] the wisdom of God in conceiving so perfect a plan to save a fallen world, the love of God the Father in sending his Son, the love of God the Son in going willingly to his death for our sake, the justice of God, which was vindicated at Calvary as the sin of his people was paid for, and the confidence that we can have to approach such a God, imperfect as we are, on account of the One who was ‘pierced for our transgressions’. (Isa. 53:5)

— *Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, Pierced for Our Transgressions, p. 32*

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

The Christian Universalist Association web site says nothing about penal substitution. However, within religious liberalism there is often an inclination to deny penal substitution and at some level affirm Universalism. This could very well be a source for some of Paul Young’s theological views.

PAUL YOUNG

Again, we hear from Paul Young in his interview with Pastor Kendall Adams.

[Adams] “...when it says, ‘Mackenzie, I don’t need to punish people for sin’. I guess when people read the Scripture my question is, Hasn’t God, and doesn’t He...punish sin?”

[Young] “...here’s an underlying question. Do you believe that God does anything that is not motivated by love?”

[Adams] “Well I think in Scripture we have wrath, we have justice, we have mercy...”

[Young] “I believe in the wrath of God, absolutely, but the wrath of God is...revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. It’s NOT against the men. It’s against everything that is damaging them, hurting them, causing them to sin against each other, everything that is contrary to his nature.”

[Adams] “Here’s my question, ...if Jesus took our punishment on the cross, if he died for our sins, he was taking our punishment. If God doesn’t punish sin it seems like that demeans the whole concept of the cross.”

[Young] “Oh, not at all. Look, the cross is the plan of God from before the foundation of the world, to redeem us back from being lost.

[Adams] “So you do believe that Christ was punished for our sin?”

[Young] “I believe that Christ became sin for us.”

[Adams] “I mean that he was a sacrifice, that he was punished, he took...”

- [Young] “Punished by who?”
- [Adams] “The Father.”
- [Young] “Why...why would the Father punish His Son?”
- [Adams] “Many see that as Christ being the agency of our reconciliation...that Christ was taking the wrath of God upon him. I take it that you wouldn’t agree that the cross was a place of punishment for our sin?”
- [Young] “No. I don’t. I am not a penal substitution...reformation...point of view.”
- [Adams] “But isn’t that the heart of the gospel?”
- [Young] “NO! ha, No. The heart of the gospel is that we are so pursued. The heart of the gospel is in Ephesians 1:5. He predestined us before the foundation of the world to be adopted as sons and everything is by, for, and through Jesus,
- [Adams] “But if you reject a penal substitution, that Christ died as a penalty for our sins, it seems like that *is* the Christian faith.”
- [Young] “I don’t know if you’re aware, but that’s a huge debate that’s going on in theology right now within the evangelical community.”
- [Adams] “It is, and I would say everything hangs on that.”
- [Young] “I don’t see that it’s necessary to have the Father punish, in that sense, the Son.”
- [Adams] “Ya...we could...this is...I think this is an important issue.”
- [Adams] “...’Pierced for our Transgressions’, a book that I highly recommend, if you haven’t read it, ‘Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution’, it’s full of the love of the Father. Cuz if we...”
- [Young] “And I would recommend Brad Jersak’s book...that he edited which has got maybe 30 different theologians who are opposed to the penal substitution.”

— Paul Young interviewed by Kendall Adams, March 2009, <http://rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>

The two books mentioned above are:

Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution

By: Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach

Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ

By: Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin

Paul Young makes himself perfectly clear. He does not believe Jesus died for our sins. He does not believe Jesus was “pierced for our transgressions” or that “the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa. 53:5-6). He does not believe “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” or “by His wounds you were healed” (1Pet. 2:24). And, he does not believe “Christ also died for sins once

for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God" (1Pet. 3:18)

To reject these truths is to reject the gospel.

PENAL SUBSTITUTION WOULD MAKE GOD A CHILD ABUSER

Paul Young knows something about child abuse. In the Forward of *The Shack* we are given some of Mack's history.

THE SHACK

[Willie] Although externally religious, his overly strict church-elder father was a closet drinker. (p. 7)

His daddy was...a vicious mean beat-your-wife-and-then-ask-God-for-forgiveness drunk. (p. 8)

[Mack was] for almost two days, tied to the big oak at the back of the house, he was beaten with a belt and Bible verses every time his dad woke from a stupor and put down his bottle". (p. 8)

Young was asked at one of his speaking engagements about this incident. He said:

"My dad never tied me to a tree and beat me. But I know the guy whose dad did that to him. That's a true story. My dad is not an alcoholic. But my dad was abusive. He hit way too hard. When I was growing up my father would fly into a rage, which was not uncommon."

— *W. Paul Young, Testimony at Mariner's Church, 2008-07-02, 28:00*

It seems these images of child abuse, whether Young's or someone else's, could be related to his perception of penal substitution.

PAUL YOUNG

"It's kinda like you know, God the Father says, 'You know Paul, you and I have this problem. But I have a solution. You know, you keep messing up, but I can fix this. So, what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna take the person I love the most, and I'm gonna take him to the wood shed and beat him to death. And then you and I, we're gonna be okay.' 'And by the way, trust me.' — It doesn't make any sense."

— *W. Paul Young interviewed by Willard Theissen on It's a New Day, Part 4 of 4, July 2009,*
<http://www.newday.org/ontheair/index.php?program=34125>

We have these kind of caricatures. Worse than that, how about this one. The Father comes to talk to me, you know, this is Jesus' dad. And he says, now Paul, you know you and I have a problem. You keep messing up, okay. It's a sin problem. And I know there's not a lot you can do about it, but I've got a solution for us, okay. Because of you, I'm going to take my Son who is the most precious thing to me, my little boy. I'm going to take my little boy, I'm going to take him out to the wood shed and I'm going to beat him to death. And then you and I, we're going to be okay. Okay? By the way, trust me.

We have these weird ideas of who God is.

— *W. Paul Young, Testimony at Mariner's Church, 2008-07-02, 1:05:05*

As we saw in the previous dialogue with Kendall Adams, Young asks, "Why would the Father punish the Son?" Paul Young cannot accept the idea that God is just and sin must be judged. And especially that Jesus would voluntarily offer himself to suffer on our behalf at the hand of God the Father. One reason Young rejects penal substitution and equates it to child abuse is because he does not understand the gospel. As he says in the above quote, "It doesn't make any sense".

Rejection of a penal substitutionary atonement is not uncommon within the Liberal and Emergent Church movements. Here are two more examples from those with a similar perspective of the atonement.

[T]he god whose moods alternate between graciousness and fierce anger ...the god who exacts the last drop of blood from his Son so that his just anger, evoked by sin, may be appeased, is not the God revealed by and in Jesus Christ. And if he is not the God of Jesus, he does not exist.

— Brennan Manning, *Above All*, p. 58-59 (Quoting William Shannon)

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love." If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.

— Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, p. 182.

Those who oppose penal substitution sometimes push their argument along with rhetoric that portrays God the Father as *torturing* his innocent Son and is therefore committing *cosmic child abuse*. When we are selective with God's attributes to the extent that love nullifies justice, Jesus taking the punishment for man's sin doesn't make sense. This is how the simple error of elevating God's love over his other attributes can lead to the denial of essential doctrine. And in this case a denial of penal substitution.

According to the doctrine of penal substitution, Jesus went willingly to his death, in the full knowledge of what would be entailed.

Child abuse is carried out against the will of the victim for the sole gratification of the abuser; Jesus willingly went to his death to save his people and glorify his name. The label [child abuse] is misleading, disturbing—even blasphemous—and should be abandoned.

— Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 230

An understanding of the atonement that does not include penal substitution is a serious departure from the gospel. If sin is not paid for, God is not just. Sinful people can pay for their own sins through death and eternal separation from a just and holy God. Or they can trust in Christ' substitutionary death on the cross which provides the way for salvation and reconciliation. To be accepted by God, the price had to be paid.

Rom 3:23-26 NASB for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; (25) whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; (26) for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Propitiation: A sacrifice that bears God's wrath and in so doing changes God's wrath toward us into favor.

Atonement: The work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation.

The apostle [Paul] has set forth for us the true nature of the cross-work of Christ. It is found in the voluntary, penal substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God who, uniting us with Himself, has died our death under judgment and has raised us up with Him in His resurrection. Thus, any notion of the atonement that avoids penal substitution ends up with an equally distorted understanding of Christ's resurrection.

— Gary Johnson, *The Shack and the Atonement*

GOD THE FATHER DIED ON THE CROSS WITH CHRIST

We read in 2 Cor. 5:19 that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” This verse is a favorite proof text for the Christian Universalist because of the phrase “reconciling the world”. In Paul Young’s testimony and interviews he frequently uses this verse to support the idea that all are ultimately reconciled to God. But Young’s misinterpretation goes a step farther. From this verse he argues that God the Father died on the cross.

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

This view is based on the New Testament declaration that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not accusing it for its sins, and that God sent His Son to save (heal and restore) the world, not to condemn it.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?*,
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

PAUL YOUNG

[Young] “but where was [the] Father when the Son was on the cross?”

[Adams] “In your book, when it says Mack had a problem with ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ and God basically says, ‘Mack, I never left him’...”

[Young] “That’s right.”

[Adams] “When Jesus said ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ it...”

[Young] “Jesus first says, but into your hands I commit my spirit, so he’s still saying, you’re here. And Paul says, where was God the Father? For God the Father, 2 Cor. 5:19, was IN CHRIST reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them. So where was God the Father? ...and where did reconciliation happen? I believe it happened on the cross. And it says that God the Father was IN HIS SON reconciling the world to himself.”

— *Paul Young interviewed by Kendall Adams, March 2009*,
<http://rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>

2Co 5:19 NASB ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Young is quoting Scripture, but as we will see there is a serious problem with his interpretation.

THE SHACK

[Narrator] Papa didn’t answer, only looked down at their hands. His gaze followed hers and for the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his. (p. 95)

[Narrator] Nodding agreement, he looked up and noticed again the scars on her wrists. (p. 102)

[Mack] “You mean what Jesus did?”

[Sophia] “Haven’t you seen the wounds on Papa too?” (p. 164)

- [Papa] “There was no way to create freedom without a cost, as you know.” Papa looked down, scars visible and indelibly written into his wrists. (p. 222)
- [Papa] He [Jesus] is the very center of our purpose and in him we are now fully human (p. 192)
- [Papa] “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood. (p. 99)
- [Papa] “I am truly human in Jesus” (p. 201)
- [Mack] “I’m so sorry that you, that Jesus, had to die”
- [Papa] “I know you are, and thank you.” (p. 103)
- [Papa] “We were there together”... Mack was surprised. “At the cross? Now wait, I thought you left him—you know—”My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” ... Regardless of what he felt at that moment, I never left him.” ... “Don’t forget, the story didn’t end in his sense of forsakenness. (p. 96)

In the book there are four references to the Father (Papa) bearing the scars of crucifixion, one reference to the Father dying, and three references to Father becoming human. These references are so numerous, and so clear, and so foreign to the teaching of Scripture, that they should raise concern for any thinking Christian. If we do not keep proper biblical distinctions between the Father and the Son, we open the door to the heresies of modalism or patripassianism. *The Shack* does not teach pure modalism or patripassianism, but it very clearly includes elements from both of these heresies. For example, the Father becoming human (modalism) and dying on the cross with Jesus (patripassianism). This has no basis in Scripture whatsoever and is considered heresy because it eviscerates an essential aspect of the atonement.

The term “patripassianism” comes from the Latin words *pater* for “father”, and *passus* from the verb “to suffer” implying that the Father suffered on the Cross. Patripassianism is related to Modalism which teaches God appears in three different modes; Father, then Son, then Holy Spirit. Since the 3rd century these doctrines have been considered heresies and are rejected by the majority of Christian churches. The orthodox view known as Trinitarianism is defined as three distinct, co-equal, co-eternal persons.

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. 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). The Father was not crucified with the Son. 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.

—James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*, p.11

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) These words mark the climax of the suffering of Christ for a lost world. Here He drank to the dregs the cup of sorrow, grief, and pain on our behalf. In these hours when the sun refused to shine upon suffering deity, Jesus found fitting expression to His feeling of desolation in the words of the Psalmist. Isaiah had given a vivid portrayal of the suffering Servant who was to be “wounded for our transgressions.” John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as “the Lamb of God that taketh away the collective sin of a world of sinners.” Christ gave Himself a “ransom for many.” Him who knew no sin God “made sin” for us. On the cross Christ became a “curse for us” and so redeemed us from the curse of the law. We are “redeemed by the precious blood of Christ” shed on Calvary. He gave

Himself a “ransom for all.” The writers of the Gospels make it plain that Jesus “had a baptism to be baptised with” and a “cup to drink.” Paul and other writers of the epistles lay out clearly the same plan of redemption. Jesus had to pay the price alone and tasted death—spiritual death—for every man. Spiritual death is broken communion. Jesus had a taste of such a broken communion, the first and last He ever experienced—in those desolate hours when darkness lay upon the earth and upon His soul. That is the reason He used the words of distressed astonishment: Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani (Hebrew)—“my God, my God, to what end or purpose hast thou forsaken me?”“

— J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*, p. 602

Because Scripture teaches that the Father is both in Christ and separate from Christ, we must be very careful in how this truth constitutes our theology. When we read in 2 Cor. 5:19 that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” we must not use this in a way that violates other scriptures. Errors result when we unevenly distribute the weight of our theology on a single verse. Also, when theological questions like this arise it is often helpful to ask, in what sense is this true and in what sense is this not true. It’s the task of interpretation. Let’s consider some scriptures that speak to both sides of this question.

The Scriptures teach that God the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father.

2Co 5:18-19 NASB Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, (19) namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

*Joh 14:8-12 NASB Philip *said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." (9) Jesus *said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (10) "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. (11) "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. (12) "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.*

Joh 14:20 NASB "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

The Scriptures also teach that God the Father and God the Son are separate. The Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus relating to and speaking of the Father. We also see that Jesus has a special mediating role between the Father and mankind.

1Jn 2:1 NASB My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

1Ti 2:5 NASB For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

Rom 8:33-34 NASB Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; (34) who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Heb 7:25 NASB Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Jesus is referred to as our “advocate” and “mediator” who “intercedes” for us with the Father. All of these terms speak of a role between two parties. In this case, Jesus is the mediator between God the Father and mankind. This function *requires* that Jesus to be separate from the Father.

Paul Young's error is that he uses 2 Cor. 5:19 to place God the Father on the cross where he is crucified with Jesus. This not only lacks biblical support, it makes the atonement impossible. A sacrifice cannot be made *to* the Father, and at the same time the Father *be* the sacrifice. For Young, instead of the cross being the ultimate and final place of atonement foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament, the cross must be reinterpreted as something very different. As we have seen, he does not believe in penal substitution and recommends a book that opposes this doctrine. He has backed himself into a theological corner where he must deny, or through hermeneutical gymnastics, reinterpret verses such as the following.

Isa 53:5-6 NASB But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. (6) All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

Isa 53:10-11 But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.

1Pe 1:18-19 NASB knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, (19) but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

1Jn 4:10 NASB In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Rom 3:24-26 NASB being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; (25) whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; (26) for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

GOD DOES NOT PUNISH THOSE WHO SIN

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

God does not decide to condemn some people to hell because they sinned too much or they chose the wrong religious beliefs.

All God's Children, No One Left Behind.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Article 4, Universal Salvation,*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

This view is based on the New Testament declaration that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not accusing it for its sins, and that God sent His Son to save (heal and restore) the world, not to condemn it.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?,*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

PAUL YOUNG

[Young] “I believe in the wrath of God, absolutely, but the wrath of God is...revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. It’s NOT against the men. It’s against everything that is damaging them, hurting them, causing them to sin against each other, everything that is contrary to his nature.”

— Paul Young interviewed by Kendall Adams, March 2009,
<http://rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>

[Young] “This is where I understand the wrath of God. I believe the wrath of God is set against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of man. But it’s not set against the man. And I think that’s a huge difference. We think it’s set against us. That God just doesn’t like us. It is set against everything that is preventing us from becoming whole. ...it’s against everything that’s keeping us in bondage.”

— William P. Young interviewed by Jim Burns on HomeWord, Part 1
http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/HomeWord_with_Jim_Burns/archives.asp?bcd=9/11/2008

Young says when a man is unrighteous, God judges the unrighteousness but the man is not judged. Does that also mean when a man is righteous, God blesses the righteousness but the man receives no blessing? This is not only unbiblical, it’s irrational. When a child misbehaves, how do you punish the behavior without punishing the child? Or when someone commits murder, how does the justice system punish the crime without punishing the criminal? Certainly sin has its natural consequences and there is always some price to pay when we turn from God’s ways. But sometimes God intervenes to multiply his blessings on the righteous and bring destruction on the unrighteous. Also, we have a system of laws and governing authorities that help to maintain a civil society—imperfect as they may be. Punishment of a transgression can serve as a deterrent, it can stimulate correction, or it can isolate the offender from harming others within the society. Ultimately, God, who is perfect in his justice, will judge every transgression; through the cross of Christ for those who receive Him, or through hell for those who don’t. We pay the penalty for our own sin, or Christ takes the penalty in our place. With the God of *The Shack* this is not so. According to Young, a God who is all loving would never punish anyone for sin; and, Jesus would not be punished in our place.

God is merciful and just. And in both cases he is good. Sometimes God’s goodness is expressed in showing mercy and sometimes his goodness is expressed in righteous judgment.

THE SHACK

[Papa] “I’m not who you think I am, Mackenzie. I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment,”

“It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it.” (p.119-120)

Norman Geisler offers this observation:

“It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it”. As welcoming as this message may be, it at best reveals a dangerously imbalanced understanding of God. For in addition to being loving and kind, God is also holy and just. Indeed, because He is just He must punish sin.

— Norman L. Geisler and Bill Roach, *The Shack: Helpful or Heretical?*

In Sodom and Gomorrah did God judge the people’s sin, or the sinful people?

Gen 18:20 NASB And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.

Gen 19:24-25 NASB Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, (25) and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

When the people of Noah's day became thoroughly wicked, God destroyed them with a flood.

Gen 6:5, 17 NASB Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (17) "Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish.

God did not reconcile with the corrupt antediluvian race or with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They were judged and destroyed. But God demonstrated his love and mercy toward Noah and Lot because they obeyed the word of the Lord.

But wasn't that just the wrathful God of the Old Testament? Since Jesus came are we not in an age of grace? Surely Jesus would not judge people like the God of the Old Testament—would he?

Luk 17:26-30 NASB "And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: (27) they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. (28) "It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; (29) but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. (30) "It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

Rev 19:11-15 NASB And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. (12) His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. (13) He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. (14) And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. (15) From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.

Jesus is the Word of God and in righteousness He judges and wages war. With fierce wrath and a sword He strikes down the nations who persist in their rebellion against God. This image of Jesus is entirely foreign to the doctrines of Christian Universalism.

HELL IS GOD'S LOVE BURNING AWAY OUR SIN AND CORRUPTION

We have seen that Paul Young believes God will never condemn his "children" to hell; that belief and repentance are unnecessary for reconciliation; and those who die rejecting Jesus can still be saved.

These false ideas also affect our understanding of hell and judgment. Both Young and the Christian Universalists believe God's purpose for judgment is to bring reformation and would never result in damnation.

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Another thing the Bible makes clear is that the purpose of "hell" or suffering is not to torture people, but to cause them to learn from their mistakes and grow closer to perfection. Divine judgment is reformatory, not vindictive.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>*

Christian Universalists believe...an inclusive view of salvation in which all people—even the sinful and unbelieving dead—will eventually find reconciliation with God by repenting of their sins and going through a transformation process, so that nobody will spend eternity in hell. God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?*,
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

Another thing the Bible makes clear is that the purpose of “hell” or suffering is not to torture people, but to cause them to learn from their mistakes and grow closer to perfection. Divine judgment is reformatory, not vindictive.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

It is through purgatorial “fires” of tests and trials that the human spirit is cleansed of negative attributes and attains a character that is compatible with the Presence of God. This is the goal, the essence of salvation.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Universal Salvation*,
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

[Papa] “one day you will pray for [the Little Ladykiller’s] wholeness and give him over to me so that my love will burn from his life every vestige of corruption.” (p.227)

[Sophia] “Mackenzie, judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.” (p.169)

PAUL YOUNG

[Young] “The clearest passage in scripture is that those who are in the lake of fire as it were, are in the presence of the lamb and his angels. And uh, so to me it’s not an issue of separation, it’s, it’s an issue of relationship; whether they want it or not. And to me, fire is always a process of working out the stuff in our lives that actually damages us and damages relationships and damages people. And uh, and that that’s part of what the wrath of God is.

— *Paul Young interviewed by Kendall Adams, March 2009*,
<http://rock-life.com/files/shakcomp.mp3>

The imagery and purpose of hell are identical for both Paul Young and the Christian Universalists. The CUA speaks of purgatorial fires and Young refers to the lake of fire. In both cases the purpose of this fire is to remove sin. Scripture, on the other hand, teaches that sin is covered and forgiven by being in Christ.

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.

— *James DeYoung, At the Back of The Shack*

Scripture has much to say about hell and to claim adherence to the Bible while denying hell’s existence would be futile. Therefore Christian Universalism and Paul Young do not deny the existence of hell—they simply redefine it.

Paul Young portrays God as watching over the lake of fire as his love burns away every vestige of corruption from those who failed to experience reconciliation during their life on earth. He cites

Revelation 14 and he is right; the fire is “in the presence of the Lamb”.

Rev 14:10 NASB ... fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb...

But does the following scripture sound like the loving scene described by Young?

Rev 14:9-11 NASB Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, (10) he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. (11) And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

In the lake of fire are those who have worshipped the beast and received his mark. But according to Revelation 20, there are more who will one day find themselves in the lake of fire.

Rev 20:11-15 NASB Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. (12) And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. (13) And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. (14) Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (15) And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Anyone whose name is not found written in the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire. And what do they experience? They are tormented with fire; their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night.

But what do those in hell experience according to Paul Young and Christian Universalism? God's love burning from their life every vestige of corruption; their human spirit is cleansed of negative attributes; they work out the stuff in their lives; and they learn from their mistakes and grow closer to perfection. And why do they make this interpretation? They have elevated God's love over his holiness. Therefore, mercy triumphs over judgment—even for those who reject Jesus. And since all people are God's children he would not allow any of them to suffer eternally. Paul Young and the Christian Universalists are imagining a God who conforms to their preferences and in doing so they have rejected the God of the Bible.

“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.”
— James DeYoung, At the Back of The Shack

Since we have looked at some of what God says about hell, consider again the following statements and how the Christian Universalists view is contrary to Scripture.

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Christian Universalists believe...an inclusive view of salvation in which all people—even the sinful and unbelieving dead—will eventually find reconciliation with God by repenting of their sins and going through a transformation process, so that nobody will spend eternity in hell. God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage.

— The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?,

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

God would never abandon anyone to eternal punishment. God has a plan to rescue and transform even those who turned away from truth and goodness in this mortal life. Our Heavenly Father will find every lost sheep and forgive every prodigal son!

— *Eric Stetson, Founder and Executive Director of The Christian Universalist Association*

<http://www.christian-universalism.com>

We believe in the ultimate triumph of divine mercy and grace: that no being ever created will be condemned or allowed to suffer forever, but God has arranged through a benevolent plan of learning and growth for all souls to attain salvation, reconciliation, restoration, and reunion with the Source of All Being, in the fullness of the ages.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Article 4,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

God does not decide to condemn some people to hell because they sinned too much or they chose the wrong religious beliefs.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Universal Salvation,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

All God's Children, No One Left Behind.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Masthead, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>*

The cornerstone of Universalism is belief in universal salvation, the idea that there is no such thing as eternal hell or annihilation because God has planned the universe to produce a positive outcome for all.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Universal Salvation,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE HISTORIC VIEW OF HELL MAKES GOD A TORTURER

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Another thing the Bible makes clear is that the purpose of “hell” or suffering is not to torture people, but to cause them to learn from their mistakes and grow closer to perfection. Divine judgment is reformative, not vindictive.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Divine Justice and Life After Death,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

Christian Universalists believe...an inclusive view of salvation in which all people—even the sinful and unbelieving dead—will eventually find reconciliation with God by repenting of their sins and going through a transformation process, so that nobody will spend eternity in hell. God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, What is Christian Universalism?,*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

The Christian Universalists say “God's judgments work for the purpose of correction and reform; they are not the expression of vindictive rage”. In this assertion there are two things to observe. First, this is a logical fallacy called a false dilemma. A false dilemma allows only two choices when in fact other options exist. Second, suggesting God's judgments are vindictive is to set up a straw man that is easily knocked down. In Scripture we see that wrath often accompanies God's judgment, but that does not make God vindictive, spiteful, or capriciously mean. The argument suggests either God's judgments are

positive and produce reform, or they are negative and merely expressions of vindictive rage. The rhetoric of this statement makes only one choice acceptable.

Like the Christian Universalists, Paul Young also uses a combination of the false dilemma and a straw man. Though not as succinct as the CUA, Young laces the rhetoric into his narrative. Mack's encounter with Sophia is an example. Young begins with Mack's assumption that God is a torturer, knocks down that scandalous idea, then persuades the reader to accept the positive option; a God who would never allow his "children" to go to hell.

THE SHACK

[Mack] "Could I go instead? [If you need someone to torture for eternity, I'll go in their place.](#)"
"Please let me go for my children," (p.163)

Matt Slick of the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry is very familiar with Christian Universalism and makes the following observation.

Universalists often use the most negative terms to represent historic positions they disagree with. For example, regarding the damnation of the unsaved, instead of saying that historic Christianity teaches that those who reject Christ will suffer eternal damnation, they frequently say that historic Christianity teaches that "God can't save everyone and wants to torture most of humanity forever." Or, it is often implied that God will not torture people forever because "God is not sadistic enough to send people to hell." Such emotionally slanted words reveal a hostile bias against historic doctrines and is an unfair description of those beliefs. It is a surprisingly common tactic among universalists which demonstrates their lack of objectivity and sheds an automatic cloud of doubt upon their observations.

— *Matthew J. Slick, Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, Intro to Universalism*

The word for "torture" appears one time in Scripture and it's within a parable. Here is how it is rendered in four translations.

Mat 18:34-35 NASB "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Mat 18:34-35 ESV And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Mat 18:34-35 NIV In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Mat 18:34-35 NKJV And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. (35) "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

The parable is speaking of a debtor who was incarcerated until he paid his debt. Albert Barnes notes the distinction between debtors and criminals.

The word "torturers" here probably means keepers of the prisons. Torture was inflicted on criminals, not on debtors. They were inflicted by stretching the limbs, or pinching the flesh, or putting out the eyes, or taking off the skin while alive, etc. It is not probable that anything of this kind is intended, but only that the servant was punished by imprisonment until the debt should be paid.

— *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible*

...the sense may be, that he was delivered over to proper judges of his case, to be treated as the nature of it required, to be cast into prison, and there endure all the severities of law and justice:
— *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible*

A related word is "torment", sometimes rendered as pain, sorrow, grief, or anguish. And sometimes it is the Lord who brings the torment. We saw this in Revelation 14.

Isa 50:11 NASB Behold, all you who kindle a fire, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: You will lie down in torment.

2Co 12:7 NASB Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself!

Lam 1:5 NASB Her adversaries have become her masters, Her enemies prosper; For the LORD has caused her grief [torment] Because of the multitude of her transgressions; Her little ones have gone away As captives before the adversary.

Lam 1:12-13 NASB "Is it nothing to all you who pass this way? Look and see if there is any pain like my pain Which was severely dealt out to me, Which the LORD inflicted [tormented] on the day of His fierce anger. (13) "From on high He sent fire into my bones, And it prevailed over them. He has spread a net for my feet; He has turned me back; He has made me desolate, Faint all day long.

God has the right to inflict torment as he sees fit. For those who are his, he does so for their good. For those who rebel against him, he does so in judgment.

GOD COMPELS ALL PEOPLE TO LOVE HIM

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

God would never abandon anyone to eternal punishment. God has a plan to rescue and transform even those who turned away from truth and goodness in this mortal life. Our Heavenly Father will find every lost sheep and forgive every prodigal son!

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Article 4, Universal Salvation,*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

In a few places Paul Young says the opposite. That God will not force himself on people.

[Papa] "I'm not a 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." (p.126)

[Jesus] "To force my will on you," Jesus replied, "is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission even when your choices are not helpful or healthy." (p.145)

[Papa] “The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two way street, and I have done my 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.” (p.192)

The Christian Universalists say God has a plan to transform all people—including those who reject Jesus Christ. Therefore God must go against the will of those who don't want to be reconciled to God. In the above quote from *The Shack*, Paul Young says the opposite; that God doesn't force his relationship on anyone. But this is not consistent with the rest of Young's teaching. He is clear that God would not abandon *any* of “his children” to eternal separation in hell. Ironically, in Paul Young's system where all must be reconciled, God actually *is* a demanding bully forcing himself on everyone; even those who are adamant in their rejection of Him.

What does the Bible say? Rather than all being forced into reconciliation, those who go to their grave rejecting God will die in their sins. They will not have a second chance. On this point Scripture is clear.

Joh 8:24 NASB “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”

Mar 16:16 NASB “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”

1Ch 28:9 NASB “As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.”

Heb 9:27 NASB And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.

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.

Universal reconciliation follows Jesus in understanding God's love, but it rejects Jesus for teaching the eternal suffering of those who reject him. 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.

— James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

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.

— James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

Ultimate Reconciliation is fatalistic. Freedom of choice is violated to such a degree that even atheists are forced to spend eternity with a person they do not like in a place where they did not want to go—with God in heaven.

— Larry DeBruyn, *The Shack and Universal Reconciliation Pt 3*

Universalism perverts the gospel of the love of God into an obscene scene of theological rape quite unworthy of the God whom we encounter in the face of Jesus Christ.

— Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, p. 106

If Hebrews 6:6 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.

—James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

...people can and do reject “relationship” with God, even after extensive pleading to be reconciled... If any person refuses relationship based upon the terms of the Gospel, they will remain un-reconciled to God—forever.

— Larry DeBruyn, *The Shack and Universal Reconciliation Pt 3*

JESUS CAME TO DEMONSTRATE OUR OWN DIVINE POTENTIAL

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

We believe every person is the divine offspring of God, created in the image of the Heavenly Parent of all; and that every person is destined to be raised up from imperfection to maturity according to the pattern of the archetypal Christ, the Son of God, the Perfect Human in whose image all humanity shall be transformed.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Article 5*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

If we desire to conform ourselves to Christ, the archetypal pattern of divinity in human form, we are thereby divinized in his image (John 12:36, 17:22-24, 2 Cor. 3:18, Eph. 1:3-6). This enables us to fulfill our original potential when we were first created in the image and likeness of God

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

In addition to the teaching that everyone will eventually be saved, we also teach that all people are the offspring of God, created in the divine image, and destined to be perfected and patterned after Christ as the ultimate outcome of salvation in the fullness of time.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, About Us / Frequently Asked Questions*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

The cornerstone of the original Christian faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Divine-Man, the perfect example of what it is to be truly and fully human.

...and therefore our divine potential which was manifested in the person of Jesus Christ.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

The Bible makes it clear that God should be regarded as the Father of all people; that the Light or Spirit of God is within us; that we are literally God's offspring, and in a sense are “gods”; and that someday we will actually be able to manifest the powers of gods, as Jesus was already able to do.

This is the glorious destiny of all people! No one is excluded from this amazing divine plan.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

Christ is the one who empowers other people to rise out of their sinful, imperfect condition and become divine.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

In the early Greek church, divinization through the pattern of Christ was called theosis (literally: becoming godlike or one with God). Early Christians understood salvation not merely as escaping hell, but as a total transformation of one's being in conformity with the divine image. We today in the Christian Universalist Association share this greater understanding of salvation, based on a recognition of the essentially divine nature of human beings and therefore our divine potential which was manifested in the person of Jesus Christ.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

All beings will manifest the attributes of God to their fullest possible potential. Life...is about striving and advancing toward ever-greater levels of divine manifestation, until every trace of selfish separation is purged from us and we are transformed, made anew, as Christ already was from the foundation of the world.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Human Nature and Destiny*
<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

The doctrine of man's "divinization" is a major tenet in Christian Universalism. Along with this is a focus on Jesus' humanity, or his example to man for becoming divine. This teaching is not nearly as pronounced in *The Shack* but there are substantial allusions to the concept.

THE SHACK

[Mack] "But what about all the miracles? The healings? Raising people from the dead? Doesn't that prove that Jesus was God—you know, more than human?"

[Papa] "No, it proves that Jesus is truly human." (p. 99)

[Papa] "... he [Jesus] has *never* drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost" (p. 99-100)

[Mack] "So, when he healed the blind?"

[Papa] "He did so as a dependent, limited human being... Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone." (p. 100)

[Papa] "That's how he lives and acts as a true human, how every human is designed to live—out of my life." (p.100)

[Sophia] "No one reaches their potential in your world. It's only preparation for what Papa had in mind all along." (p.167)

Young so emphasizes Jesus' humanity that he sounds like no more than a model and foreshadow of what humans can and will become. For example: Jesus "had no power within himself". But when he "lives and acts as a true human", "how every human is designed to live", he is able to do miracles, healings and raise the dead. Jesus reached his potential and was "just the first to do it to the uttermost". Every human reaching this potential is "what Papa had in mind all along".

Scripture describes a different purpose for Jesus' miracles. They were the fulfillment of prophesy and validated his identity as the promised Messiah.

Joh 20:30-31 NASB Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; (31) but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Joh 5:36 NASB "But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish--the very works that I do--testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.

Act 2:22 NASB "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--

Joh 10:37-38 NASB "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; (38) but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."

THE SHACK

[Jesus] ["I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu. \(p.110\)](#)

If Jesus is no more than an ultimate example of how to live in relationship with the Father, and was no more than a conduit for the power of the Father, and every human is designed to live in the same way, then every person has the potential to become as "divine" as Jesus. This is clearly stated by the Christian Universalists and implied by Paul Young.

Without saying it, the author leaves open to the reader the concept that although Jesus might be the "best way" to God, He might not be the ONLY way. In Scripture, Jesus claims to be the only way to God the Father – John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." There are a couple of passages in The Shack that open the idea that "all roads lead to God" – this is one of them and the reader must ask not only if this is what the author intends, but also if this is how many people will read this passage and will walk away from The Shack with a very critical misconception about the path of salvation.

— *Dan Panetti, An Examination from a Christian Worldview of The Shack*

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (Jn 14:6). Wayne Jacobsen said, "at every point we sought to be true to the way God has revealed himself in the Bible." There are few things the Bible teaches that are more central than the fact that Jesus is "THE Way". And yet even in this most basic truth Young and Jacobsen can't seem to be "true to the way God has revealed himself in the Bible." This distortion of having Jesus say he is the best way implies there are other ways that are simply not as good.

IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU

THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

If a person wishes to succeed in growing closer towards God and attaining a fuller measure of salvation, ... God will make this possible for all of us—each at one's own pace, in one's own way—through the outpouring of divine grace.

— *The Christian Universalist Association, Statement of Faith, Universal Salvation*

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

THE SHACK

- [Papa] “If you could only see how all of this ends and what we will achieve without the violation of one human will—then you would understand. (p.125)
- [Papa] “everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will.” (p.125)
- [Papa] “Not ready?” she responded. “That’s okay, we’ll do things on your terms and time. (p.83)
- [Sarayu] “We carefully respect your choices, so we work within your systems” (p.123)
- [Narrator] Mack simply lay still...and the thought that everything was about him...about the human race...that all this was all for us. (p. 113)

Christian Universalism makes little of God’s sovereignty and much about man—an emphasis on God’s love for us and little about our love and obedience to God. When man is made central we imagine a God who capitulates to our schedule and desires. Besides the specific and serious theological errors, Christian Universalism is, generally speaking, a man centered religion in which man is sovereign and God is the servant. This is largely the kind of God portrayed in *The Shack*. Yes God cares for and serves his children, but we must respect and honor His supremacy. He is central, he is sovereign, and everything is about Him.

Dan 4:35 NASB "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'

Pro 16:9 NASB The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.

Pro 21:1 NASB The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.

Isa 45:9b NASB ... "Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'?"

REVIEW: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE SHACK AND CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM

To summarize, both Paul Young and The Christian Universalist Association believe that:

- God’s greatest attribute is love
- God is our heavenly Parent and all people are his children
- God will never condemn his children to hell
- Belief and repentance are unnecessary for reconciliation
- Mercy triumphs over judgment
- Those who die rejecting Jesus can still be saved
- God does not punish those who sin
- Hell is God’s love burning away our sin and corruption
- The historic view of hell makes God a torturer

- God compels all people to love him
- Jesus came to demonstrate our own divine potential
- It's all about you

There seem to be some significant parallels between Christian Universalism and what Paul Young teaches through his characters in *The Shack*. The average Christian reading the book may not see these subtle themes. And unless one knows something about Christian Universalism they are unlikely to notice some of the connections listed above. Before reading *The Shack* I knew very little about Christian Universalism or Universal Reconciliation. However, as one who has a basic knowledge of Scripture it was easy to see some of the book's troubling statements and recognize that something was amiss. As it turned out, the theological errors are substantial.

Remember Young's publisher Wayne Jacobsen and his statement about Ultimate Reconciliation? He said, "Some of that was in earlier versions because of the author's partiality at the time to some aspects of what people call Ultimate Reconciliation". Apparently some of Young's more overt affirmations of Universal Reconciliation were removed or edited into ambiguity. But as we have seen, many elements of Christian Universalism remain in the book. And even though the doctrines are not explicitly taught, the message can still be powerfully communicated in narrative fiction. Paul Young intended for his theological views to influence his readers and this was affirmed by Wayne Jacobsen.

"Three hearts weighed in on the theology to make it as true as we could muster. The process also helped shape our theologies in honest, protracted discussions."

"At its core the book is one long Bible study"

"The book uses some characterizations of God to mess with the religious stereotypes only to get people to consider God as he really is,"

— Wayne Jacobsen, *Is the Shack Heresy?*, www.windblownmedia.com/shackresponse.html

"Part of the problem is that, unfortunately, intentionally or unintentionally, we've had a lot of bad theology that has created a God that is also not on our side ... and that's the separation I wanted to get past. I wanted to bridge that gap and say, you know what, he's not like that. he's on our side of the table."

— William Paul Young, interviewed on CBN's *The 700 Club*

Young's goal is to correct "bad theology". Jacobsen says they wanted to "get people to consider God as he really is." But when the discerning reader compares the teaching of *The Shack* to Scripture they will find problems on many levels.

When applied to Christianity, Universal Reconciliation (UR) behaves like a computer virus that first invades, and then infects the whole body of biblical Truth. Contradicting distinctive Christian teachings, UR proposes a dialectic that changes biblical beliefs about God's love and justice, Jesus' atonement, heaven and hell, and the balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

— Larry DeBruyn, *The Shack and Universal Reconciliation Pt 3*

It is clear that Paul Young affirms many elements of Christian Universalism and it is therefore no surprise to see hints of this woven throughout his book. In fact, we see this from chapter 2 where the sacrifice of the Indian Princess saves the entire tribe, to chapter 16 when Papa anticipates ultimate reconciliation with the Little Ladykiller. But while these doctrines appear in the book, is it fair to say Christian Universalism is actually *taught* in *The Shack*? I believe it is. And it's taught most clearly and persuasively when Mack encounters Sophia in the chapter "*Here Come Da Judge*".

MACK'S ENCOUNTER WITH SOPHIA

A SUMMARY OF "HERE COME DA JUDGE"

The foundation has been laid in previous chapters that all humanity are Papa's "children" whom she loves perfectly. A substantial part of that means she does not judge or punish sin. Upon this premise the reader enters chapter 11, *"Here Come Da Judge"*, where Mack encounters Sophia. This is a turning point for Mack and may be the climax of the book. In this scene Sophia puts Mack on trial. What follows is an emotionally charged encounter designed to teach Mack, and you the reader, something about God. Mack is shown that, just as he loves his children and would not allow them to suffer in hell, God loves his children and would not allow them to suffer in hell. Do you see where this is going? The whole chapter is a subtle but persuasive argument for Christian Universalism.

Let's go into the courtroom and watch the argument unfold. The following text is an abridged version of Mack's encounter with Sophia.

p.154

[Sophia] "Today is a very serious day with very serious consequences:" She paused, as if to add weight to her already tangibly heavy words. "Mackenzie, you are here, in part, because of your children,

[Mack] "My children?"

[Mack] "Of course I love my children. Every parent loves their children," Mack asserted. "But why does that have anything to do with why I'm here?"

[Sophia] "So then, Mackenzie, may I ask which of your children do you love the most?"

[Mack] "I don't love any one of them more than any of the others. I love each of them differently,"

p.155

[Mack] "Come to think of it, it's like when Papa says she is especially fond of someone. When I think of each of my children individually, I find that I am especially fond of each one."

[Sophia] "Well said, Mackenzie!"

[Mack] "even when they act badly, they are still my son or my daughter,...and they will be forever."

[Sophia] "You are wise in the ways of real love, Mackenzie."

p. 156

[Sophia] "And now you love your children much the way the Father loves his."

[Sophia] "You don't believe that Father loves his children very well, do you? You don't truly believe that God is good, do you?"

[Mack] "Is Missy his child?" Mack snapped.

[Sophia] "Of course!" she answered.

[Mack] "Then, no!" he blurted, rising to his feet. "I don't believe that God loves all of his children very well!"

p. 157

[Sophia] "Earlier, I began to tell you why you are here today. Not only are you here because of your children, but you are here for judgment."

p. 158

[Sophia] But *you* are not on trial here.”

[Sophia] “*You* will be the Judge!”

[Mack] “I don’t have any ability to judge.”

[Sophia] “Oh, that is not true,” returned the quick reply, tinged now with a hint of sarcasm. “You have already proven yourself very capable, even in our short time together. And besides, you have judged many throughout your life. / By all accounts, you are quite well-practiced in the activity.”

p. 159

[Mack] “I confess that when I made those judgments I felt quite justified, but now...”

[Sophia] “Of course you did.” She said it like a statement of fact, like something routine; not playing for even a moment upon his evident shame and distress. “Judging requires that you think yourself superior over the one you judge. Well, today you will be given the opportunity to put all your ability to use.”

[Mack] “And ... just what will I be judging?” he asked, turning to look up at her.

[Sophia] “Not what.” She paused and moved to the side of the desk. “Who.”

p. 160

[Mack] “So, who is it that I am supposed to judge?”

[Sophia] “God,” she paused, “and the human race.” She said it as if it was of no particular consequence. It simply rolled off her tongue, as if this were a daily occurrence.

[Sophia] “Surely there are many people in your world you think deserves judgment.”

p. 161

[Sophia] “And what about the man who preys on innocent little girls? What about him, Mackenzie? Is that man guilty? Should he be judged?”

[Mack] “Yes!” screamed Mack. “Damn him to hell!”

[Sophia] “Is he to blame for your loss?”

[Mack] “Yes!”

[Sophia] “This legacy of brokenness goes all the way back to Adam, what about him? But why stop there? What about God? God started this whole thing. Is God to blame?”

[Sophia] “Surely, a father like you can judge *the* Father!”

[Mack] “Yes! God is to blame!”

p. 161-62

[Sophia] “Then,” she said with finality, “if you are able to judge God so easily, then you certainly can judge the world.” Again she spoke without emotion. “You must choose two of your children to spend eternity in God’s new heavens and new earth, but only two.” “And you must choose three of your children to spend eternity in hell.”

Mack asserts that some people should be condemned to hell and accuses God of injustice for not executing that judgment. Sophia then turns the tables on Mack to see how he would feel about condemning some of his own children to hell. In other words, if you believe God can condemn most of his children to hell, surely you, Mack, can condemn some of yours to hell too. If you can not; you must conclude that God will not.

p.162

[Sophia] “Mackenzie.” Her voice now came as calm and wonderful as first he heard it. “I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does. / You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from His presence and apart from His love. Is that not true?”

[Mack] “I suppose I do.”

[Sophia] “So you suppose, then, that God does this easily, but you cannot? Come now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell?”

Sophia implies Mack is wrong to assume that some people are eternally separated from God’s presence in hell. But what does the Scripture say?

2Th 1:7-9 NASB and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, (8) dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (9) These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

Mat 7:13-14 NASB "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. (14) "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Mat 10:28 NASB “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

There are many references in Scripture about hell. Jesus is passionate with his warnings of hell and calls people to himself to receive eternal life. Hell is a place of eternal judgment away from the presence of God. Sophia asks Mack if he believes this and he affirms the truth of Scripture answering, “I suppose I do”. To Sophia, that was the wrong answer. She then begins to turn Mack away from God’s Word and toward her new doctrine. And along with Mack, the undiscerning reader is having their concept of God’s love and judgment shaped by the doctrines of Christian Universalism.

[Sophia] “So you suppose, then, that God does this easily, but you cannot? (p.162)

Sophia mocks the thought of God judging the wicked by suggesting he does so “easily”. Scripture says differently. Suggesting God condemns the wicked “easily” makes the biblical concept of His judgment easier to reject. This is an additional spin to get the reader to accept a different kind of God.

Eze 33:11 NASB "Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'

p.162-63

[Sophia] “Come now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell?”

[Narrator] How could God ask him to choose among his own children? There was no way he could sentence Katie, or any of his other children, to an eternity in hell just because she had sinned against him. Even if Katie or Josh or Jon or Tyler committed some heinous crime, he still wouldn’t do it. He couldn’t! For him, it wasn’t about their performance; it was about his love for them.

p. 163

[Mack] “Could I go instead? If you need someone to torture for eternity, I’ll go in their place.”

“Please let me go for my children, please, I would be happy to...Please, I’m begging you. Please...Please...”

[Sophia] “Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well, Mackenzie. I am so proud of you!”

[Sophia] “And now you know Papa’s heart,” she added, “who loves all his children perfectly.”

p. 164-65

[Sophia] “He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love. Would you instead prefer he’d chosen justice for everyone? Do you want justice, ‘Dear Judge?’” and she smiled as she said it.

[Mack] “No, I don’t,” he said as he lowered his head. “Not for me, and not for my children.” (p.164-65)

Mack is willing to die as a substitute for three of his five children who would otherwise be sentenced to hell. The parallel in Christian Universalism is that Jesus, by dying as a substitute, saves all God’s “children” from hell. For God to not choose everyone makes him sound capricious and uncaring. Because God is love, he must spare everyone from the torments of hell. If some of God’s “children” reject Jesus, God will still save them. If someone follows Jesus in this life and experiences his love, that is much better. But if they don’t, that’s okay. God still loves them and will spend all eternity reconciling these lost children to himself. Within this scenario there essentially is no hell; at least not as it’s described in Scripture. And Jesus’ warnings of hell were not about judgment, but rather missing out on relationship. There is nothing to be saved from but an unfulfilling life. And the good news believers are to share with the lost world is that everyone is already loved and accepted by God whether they realize it or not. This is the new gospel; the gospel of Christian Universalism.

Comparing Mack’s children to God’s children (meaning all humanity), is foundational to the argument being made in this chapter. Many who have read *The Shack* say they come away with a better understanding of God. If that means they affirm what Paul Young is teaching here, they may actually be affirming the doctrine of Christian Universalism whether they realize it or not.

In light of Scripture this is a serious heresy for it is a different gospel. The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul condemns this teaching, and yet millions of Christians who endorse *The Shack* are taking steps toward accepting and spreading this heresy. To read such an artfully persuasive argument and to watch so many Christians be taken in by the lie, makes *The Shack* feel sinister. I don’t know if Paul Young realizes it or not but the chapter in “*Here Come Da Judge*” is *The Shack*’s magnum opus for teaching Christian Universalism.

[The chapter *Here Come Da Judge*] 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”.

— James DeYoung, *At the Back of The Shack*

REWRITING “HERE COME DA JUDGE”

The next couple of pages may be a stretch as far as an argument goes, but I offer it as an observation. In one sense I’m having some fun with the story. But in another sense, and in a creative way, I believe this further reveals how Christian Universalism is implicitly taught in *The Shack*.

In the book Sophia presses Mack to assume the role of Judge.

[Mack] “So, who is it that I am supposed to judge?”

[Sophia] “God,” she paused, “and the human race.” (p.160)

Sophia questions Mack about his love for his children and her questioning turns into an interrogation.

[Sophia] “I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does.”
“You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from His presence and apart from His love. Is that not true?” (p.162)

MACK JUDGES GOD

To the Christian Universalists it's appalling to think God would allow some of his children to suffer eternally in hell. But the same is true for those who hold to the traditionally orthodox view. Neither view believes God sends his children to hell. The difference goes back to the question “Who are God's children?” And how we answer that question makes all the difference in the world.

In the chapter “*Here Come Da Judge*” Young skillfully makes the argument that all are God's children and He would not send anyone to hell. It's interesting to note that when Mack entered Sophia's cave and was asked what he believed, he presented the orthodox view (p. 162). Mack believed those who reject God will suffer the torments of hell. Young then characterizes that view as believing God sends *his children* to hell, thereby making the view sound absurd and easy to reject.

But, how would the narrative sound if we maintained the orthodox view that only those who receive Jesus Christ are God's children?

Let's try an experiment. Since much of Paul Young's argument is based on comparing how Mack and God feel about their respective children, what if Mack and God switched places? We will rearrange the characters in the trial by placing Mack in the role of Sophia, and God will take Mack's place on the witness stand.

We will see two things in the following exercise. First, when we look at this through a biblical lens we see the absurdity of suggesting God sends his children to hell. Second, we bring attention to the haughty attitude of Sophia as she deconstructs Mack's orthodox view God. In our rewrite, Mack has stepped into Sophia's role and also assumes her haughty spirit. If the following narrative sounds awkward or uncomfortable then you are reading it correctly. It should be uncomfortable. The point is simply to look at the argument and attitude from a different perspective.

[Mack] “Today is a very serious day with very serious consequences.” He paused, as if to add weight to his already tangibly heavy words. “God, you are here in part because of your children; those who have repented of their sin and received forgiveness in Christ.”

[God] “As The Father I will always love My children,” God asserted. “But why does that have anything to do with why I'm here?”

[Mack] “So then, God, may I ask which of your children do you love the most?”

[God] “I don't love any one of them more than any of the others. I love each of them differently,”
“Come to think of it, it's like when you, Mack, say you are especially fond of one of your children. When I think of each of My children individually, I find that I am especially fond of each one.”

[Mack] “Well said, God!”

- [God] "even when they act badly, they are still my son or my daughter,...and they will be forever."
- [Mack] "You are wise in the ways of real love, God."
"And now You love Your children much the way I love mine."
- [God] "So, who is it that I am supposed to judge?"
- [Mack] "Those who have repented of their sin and are trusting in your Son Jesus to save them." He said it as if it was of no particular consequence. It simply rolled off his tongue, as if this were a daily occurrence.
"Surely there are many of your children who still deserve judgment even though their hope is in Christ."
- [Mack] "Then," he said with finality, "if you are able to judge those you hate you so easily, then you certainly can judge those who love You yet continue to sin." Again he spoke without emotion. "You must choose one-third of those who worship You to spend eternity in Your new heavens and new earth, but only one-third." "And you must choose two-thirds to spend eternity in hell."
"Come now, God. Which of your children who worship You will you sentence to hell?"

When we define the "children of God" in a biblical sense and we allow Mack to judge God, we expose the absurdity of suggesting God sends some of his children to hell. There is a very basic fact to keep in mind if we are going to compare Mack and God. For Mack, there are those who are his children and others who are not. The same is true for God. Some are His children, and others are not.

Christian Universalism carries a banner proclaiming God's love; a love that would never send anyone to hell. But beneath this celebration of God's love lies a heart in rebellion against God's holiness. They have determined for themselves which of God's attributes they will embrace, and which they will shun. Those who affirm Christian Universalism seem to have no trouble putting God and his Word on trial. They usurp God's right to judge as he chooses and impose on the text of Scripture the notion that God must save all humanity. If he does not, their verdict is that God is a vindictive torturer of his own children.

MACK JUDGES THE WORLD

There is another angle to this trial when Sophia presses Mack to judge the world. In the book Mack has just accused God of injustice for not condemning Missy's killer to hell. Now Mack will be asked to judge the world.

- [Sophia] "Then," she said with finality, "if you are able to judge God so easily, then you certainly can judge the world." (p.161)

But Sophia follows up with a twist. If you can judge God, believing he should condemn most of his children to hell, surely you, Mack, can condemn some of yours to hell too.

- [Mack] "You must choose two of your children to spend eternity in God's new heavens and new earth, but only two." "And you must choose three of your children to spend eternity in hell". (p.162)

If we are going to compare God's children with Mack's children, then again, our comparison needs to be fair. If *all* are God's children, then *all* are Mack's children. If God must accept as his children those who are not, then Mack should have to do the same. Mack must accept not only those who recognize and

love him as their father, but also those who don't. Therefore, to truly test Mack's love for people, the choice should not be only among Mack's biological children; but between his child Missy, and his unreconciled "child"—the Little Ladykiller. After all, since Christian Universalism says God should receive those who reject him, should not Mack do the same? So, now that we have a fair comparison that represents a spectrum of humanity, let's play out the scenario.

[Mack] "So, who is it that I am supposed to judge?"

[Sophia] "The Little Ladykiller. The one who is your child though he doesn't accept you as his father. The one who wants to prey on innocent little girls." She said it as if it was of no particular consequence. It simply rolled off her tongue, as if this were a daily occurrence. "Surely you think he deserves judgment."
"What about him, Mackenzie? Is that man guilty? Should he be judged?"

[Mack] "No!" screamed Mack. "He is one of my children. Therefore he deserves to spend eternity in the new heavens and new earth. It would be unloving to damn him to hell!"

[Sophia] "But isn't he to blame for your loss?"
"Come now, Mackenzie. Both Missy and the Little Ladykiller are your children. So, which of your children will you sentence to hell?"
How could God ask him to choose between Missy and her killer? There was no way he could sentence the Ladykiller to an eternity in hell just because he had sinned and murdered Missy.
Even though the Ladykiller had committed a heinous crime and would use a knife on another of Mack's children if he had the chance, he still wouldn't condemn him to hell. He couldn't! For Mack, it wasn't about the Ladykiller's performance; it was about his love for him.

[Mack] Finally he looked at her, pleading with his eyes. "Could I go instead? If you need someone to torture for eternity, I'll go in his place." Would that work? Could I do that? He fell at her feet, crying and begging now. "Please let me go for the Ladykiller who wants to kill more of my children, please, I would be happy to...Please, I am begging you. Please... Please..."

[Sophia] "Mackenzie, Mackenzie," "Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well, Mackenzie. I am so proud of you!" "You have judged worthy of love, the Ladykiller who still wants to slaughter children made in God's image, even if it costs you everything."
"And now you know Papa's heart," she added, "who loves those who would murder his Son Jesus and insult the Spirit of grace. After all, God loves all his children perfectly."

DOES THE SHACK PROMOTE "CHRISTIAN" UNIVERSALISM?

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that no one is innocent. All are guilty and deserve judgment from a righteous God. Salvation is realized through faith and trust in Jesus Christ. But according to Paul Young, even though someone may deserve punishment, God is so loving that "mercy triumphs over justice", and therefore no one will experience eternal punishment. Not even those who go to their grave rejecting Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us God is love, his judgments are righteous, and there is a hell. Nobody likes the idea of hell. But there are those who accept what God says whether they like it or not; and there are those who exchange the God of the Bible for one more to their liking. That is, a God who is especially

fond of everyone regardless of their relationship to Jesus. Those who have a low regard for God's words and don't like hell, happily redefine it out of existence. To build on this new paradigm they make every person a child of God who, because there is no hell, will all be in heaven. For them, now, there is no distinction between those who are children of God and those who are not. All are children of God. But this is contrary to Scripture which is clear; some are God's children and others are not. And those who are not will spend eternity separated from God in what the Bible calls hell.

So is Ultimate Reconciliation or Christian Universalism taught in *The Shack*? Explicitly? No. Implicitly? Absolutely. *The Shack* teaches that all people are God's children and this heavenly Parent will never abandon his children to eternal punishment. The Christian Universalist Association refers to this as the "Gospel". Paul Young is not as forthright as the CUA about his Universalist beliefs, but it's a very small step from the doctrine of *The Shack* to the teachings of The Christian Universalist Association. The primary difference is that the CUA outlines their beliefs in a doctrinal statement. *The Shack* promotes this doctrine in the form of a story. What makes *The Shack* dangerous is the subtlety with which it introduces this heresy. Readers are drawn in by the emotional story and walk away with distortions about God and the gospel. Christians well grounded in Scripture will not exchange orthodox doctrine for Universalism based on an entertaining read of one fiction book. However, those not well grounded can easily adopt Young's views and follow him down the path of a Universalist heresy.

Notice that the Christian Universalists refer to their message as "the Gospel". Yet this "Gospel" is clearly contrary to what we have received from the Apostles.

"I would like to share with you the **Good News** that **ALL people are God's children** and **NO ONE will be left behind!**" / "This uplifting understanding of **the Gospel is called Christian Universalism.**"

— Eric Stetson, *Founder and Executive Director of The Christian Universalist Association*,
<http://www.christian-universalism.com/>

The CUA teaches a view of the Gospel that is quite different from what has come to be known as mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic theology. In addition to the **teaching that everyone will eventually be saved**, we also teach that all people are the offspring of God, created in the divine image, and destined to be perfected and patterned after Christ as the ultimate outcome of salvation in the fullness of time. We see salvation as more of a process of growth and transformation of the soul to become one with the Christ Spirit, rather than being saved from God's anger and the threat of punishment.

— *The Christian Universalist Association*, <http://www.christianuniversalist.org>

A syllogism helps demonstrate the relationship between the false gospel of Christian Universalism and its parallel doctrines in *The Shack*.

- A) Christian Universalism promotes a false gospel.
- B) Christian Universalism is promoted in *The Shack*.
- C) The Shack promotes a false gospel.

The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul says this:

Gal 1:8-9 NASB *But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, **he is to be accursed!** 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, **he is to be accursed!***

Gal 1:8-9 NIV "let him be eternally condemned!" ... "let him be eternally condemned!"

Paul condemns those who teach such things in the strongest terms; "he is to be accursed!" or "let him be eternally condemned". That is a very sobering message and I would not wish this on Paul Young or anyone else. But this is God's warning. A false gospel has eternal consequences for those who proclaim it and those who receive it.

Sharing a book like this with friends while unaware of its false gospel message does not mean you will be eternally condemned. However, it is participating in the spread of a false gospel and no Christian should ever take part in this. Spreading a false gospel is a serious offense to God and if I came to realize I had done such a thing I would repent and grieve over the damage I may have caused. I would also do whatever I could to correct that mistake. Thankfully, God understands that we sometimes sin out of ignorance and is quick to forgive those who repent (Num 15:28). On the other hand, those who are shown the truth yet persist in the promotion of this false gospel are either biblically uninformed or deceived. Either way, their actions undermine the gospel of Jesus Christ and could have eternal consequences. To those inclined to defend the *The Shack*, I appeal to our higher calling to defend the gospel. When we are doing the first, we are not doing the second.

Error is like leaven, of which we read, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” Truth mixed with error is equivalent to all error, except that it is more innocent looking and, therefore, more dangerous. God hates such a mixture! Any error, or any truth-and-error mixture, calls for definite exposure and repudiation. To condone such is to be unfaithful to God and His Word and treacherous to imperiled souls for whom Christ died. — *H. A. Ironside*

