

A REVIEW OF *THE SHACK*
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Each year I purchase a significant number of books. Most of these are related to Christianity — theologies, commentaries, spiritual life, church history, marriage, counseling, and the like — but I also will purchase other books as well — sports, gardening (for Raye Jeanne), histories, fiction, and books of interest to our girls.

But for all the thousands of books I have purchased over the years, a couple weeks ago, I experienced a first. I purchased a book at a local Christian bookstore, took it home, opened it up, and saw a piece of paper sticking out of the top of the book. It wasn't my receipt (as I initially thought it was). It was a warning. Never before had I purchased a book with a disclaimer added by the bookseller.

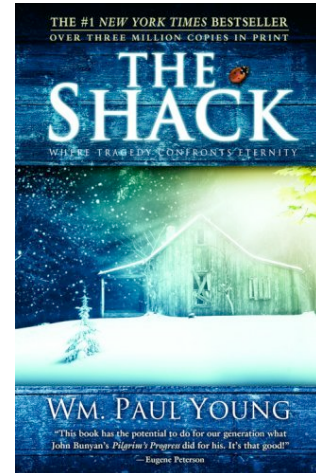
The book was *The Shack*, and the warning read in part,

The Shack...has been a great encouragement to many people dealing with broken relationships and personal tragedy. Some theological concerns, however, have been expressed about certain elements of this fictional story, and we therefore encourage you to read it with extra discernment...

So began my foray into this wildly popular book (more than 3 million copies are currently in print). *READ DISCERNINGLY!* It is a warning worth heeding. If you want my conclusion without reading the details, here it is: don't read the book. As a very best scenario, the book is confusing about the Godhead and Christianity, and at the worst, it is heretical.

Many years ago, a friend told me that he and his family watched a particular weekly program that I knew by reputation to be vulgar and profane. I asked why he watched, and even more why he allowed his children to watch with him. "Oh, we use it as an opportunity to talk about what is true and good and what isn't..." Whether that was true or not, I couldn't say. I was just left wondering, "Why would you even expose your mind to something impure, unrighteous, and untrue, just so you have to undo that thinking process? It seems a direct contradiction to the admonition of Philippians 4:8. And that's my final concern about this book as well — why subject yourself to reading something that will call into question so many truths about God?

Now for the details. I not only have highlighted and written in the margins of this book fairly extensively, but I have also taken many pages of notes to attempt to collate my thoughts. So in this review, I will offer first a brief overview of the story, then consider some of the benefits of the book, followed by some of the presuppositional mistakes the author makes, and finally



William P. Young, *The Shack*.
Newbury Park, CA: Windblown
Media, 2008, 256 pp.

consider some of the theological concerns.¹

AN OVERVIEW OF *THE SHACK*

The basic story line of the book is quite simple. The story is focused on Mackenzie (Mack) Phillips. He is in his mid-fifties, married for 33 years, father to five children, and somewhat skeptical about his faith — “Mack is not very religious. He seems to have a love/hate relationship with Religion, and maybe even with the God that he suspects is brooding, distant, and aloof.” [p. 10.]

The great event of Mack’s life occurred when he took his three youngest children camping and during that trip, his youngest daughter was abducted. Though her body was never found, her blood-soaked dress was found in a remote and long-abandoned shack. All indications were that it was the work of a serial killer.

For three years, Mack had lived with “*The Great Sadness*” of his daughter’s death, the guilt that he should have done more to avert it, and a growing disappointment with God who did not prevent and/or allowed this injustice to happen to his daughter and to their family.

...*The Great Sadness* had draped itself around Mack’s shoulders like some invisible but almost tangibly heavy quilt. The weight of its presence dulled his eyes and stooped his shoulders....He ate, worked, loved, dreamed and played in this garment of heaviness, weighed down as if he were wearing a leaden bathrobe — trudging daily through murky despondency that sucked the color out of everything. [p. 25]

In the mist of this overwhelming sorrow, one day — three years after the abduction — he went to his mail box and received an invitation: “Mackenzie, It’s been a while. I’ve missed you. I’ll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. Papa.” This “Papa” was a name Mack’s wife had used for God. And Mack believed that this small and short message, while perhaps a hoax, might very well be a real invitation from the real God of the universe.

So the next weekend, he alone makes the journey to the shack of his daughter’s disappearance to meet with God. And in the ensuing chapters, his conversations with the three members of the Triune God address the sorrow of his hurt and reconfigure his relationship with God.

SOME VALUE IN *THE SHACK*

While there are grave concerns about this book, there are also some benefits to the book. It is the desire of the author to address very real and painful life issues. Paul Young, the author of *The*

¹ There are several other reviews and resources of this book that I have found helpful, including:

* Tim Challies' review at: <http://www.challies.com/archives/book-reviews/the-shack-by-william-p-young.php>

* Al Mohler's analysis at: http://www.albertmohler.com/radio_show.php?cdate=2008-04-11

* The Briefing: "We Need More Shack Time," at: <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/5395/>

Shack, is not immune to those life issues.² He himself suffered sexual abuse as a child in New Guinea while there with his Canadian missionary parents; and many years later he had to attempt to re-win the trust of his wife and family after his extra-marital affair. This book is Young's attempt to help people re-establish relationship and fellowship with God after catastrophic events have enticed them to flee from God.

In conjunction with renewing fellowship, Young also attempts to demonstrate the trustworthiness of God. As an aftermath of tragedy, Mack, bearing the voice of many, is suspect of God. Throughout the multiple conversations in the book, Young attempts to demonstrate that God is not only trustworthy, but that man is inadequate to stand in judgment of God's actions. God makes that clear when He says to Mack,

The real underlying flaw in your life, Mackenzie, is that you don't think that I am good. If you knew that I was good and that everything — the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives — is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me. But you don't. [p. 126]

This is a helpful theme that is interwoven in conversations throughout the book — God is good, wise and trustworthy.³ God is good even when tragedy — unexplainable and unjust tragedy — occurs.

In attempting to demonstrate the relational and trustworthy nature of God, Young is also attempting to synthesize and make available to a wide audience, truth about the nature and character of God. This is a good desire. He yearns to have people love Christ with the renewed fervor he himself has.

For me, everything is about Jesus and Father and the Holy Spirit, and relationships, and life is an adventure of faith lived one day at a time. Any aspirations, visions and dreams died a long time ago and I have absolutely no interest in resurrecting them (they would stink by now anyway). I have finally figured out that I have nothing to lose by living a life of faith. I know more joy every minute of every day than seems appropriate, but I love the wastefulness of my Papa's grace and presence. For me, everything in my life that matters, is perfect!⁴

PRESUPPOSITIONAL PROBLEMS IN *THE SHACK*

Yet for his good intentions, Young starts with a number presuppositions that prevent him from communicating truth clearly and accurately.

He begins in the Foreword by saying, "Mack would like you to know that if you happen upon this story and hate it, he says, 'Sorry...but it wasn't written primarily for you.'" [p. 13] With those words there is a tone of our culture's prevailing mantra — "the only truth is my truth." That is, "you may not like this book, but it's my story, so you can't critique it." Just because it is

² Eric Young, "The Shack' Author Insists Bestseller 'is a God Thing'," accessed at:

http://www.christianpost.com/article/20081027/-the-shack-author-insists-bestseller-is-a-god-thing_pageall.htm on 12/29/08.

³ A more profitable reading for those wrestling with the question of God's trustworthiness would be Jerry Bridges' book, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008).

⁴ Accessed from "Willie's Personal Journey" at: <http://www.theshackbook.com/willie.html>, on 12/29/08.

his story does not mean it is a true story. Christians are people of truth and what is most important is aligning our hearts to the truth of God. Because of that, every form of doctrine must be examined,⁵ even our own hearts must be examined to determine whether we have saving faith in Christ.⁶

Additionally, for all the various emphases in this book, two ideas dominate — God is approachable and relational and He desires a relationship with you, and secondly, the dominant attribute of God is His love. Now it is true that God is relational. And it is true that one of His attributes is love. But neither of those qualities is *dominant* in God. They are present, but they work in concert with all His other attributes and characteristics.

The question that remains at the end of the book is: “Okay, God is relational. He desires relationship with me. *But how can I have that relationship with Him?*” It appears that Mack’s father — a drunkard and a physical abuser — is in heaven. And Mack is given an opportunity to forgive and be forgiven by his father. But there is no statement about whether or how Mack’s father, who early in the book is clearly not a Christ-follower, became a Christ-follower. Was there repentance and an application of Christ’s blood, or was he generically “assumed” into heaven? This will be discussed in more detail when Young’s Soteriology is considered, but for now, it is adequate to simply say that the book leaves many questions about the means by which one comes to have a relationship with God.

Moreover, the idea that the pervading attribute of God is His love is false. All that God is, He is both perfectly and infinitely. That means that whatever attribute He has, in cannot be in conflict with but must be in harmony with every other attribute. And whatever attribute He has, it is infinite, so it can neither be added to nor detracted from. Yet for Young, God’s love dominates. Papa gives voice to this sentiment: “The God who is — the I am who I am — cannot act apart from love....This weekend is about relationship and love.” [p. 102.] Later Papa adds, “...our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me. 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. And I do love you.” [p. 126.] The Papa character is also prone to saying to all the characters in the book, “I am especially fond of you...” [e.g., p. 216.]

Now it is true that God loves — but that love is always consistent with His other attributes like holiness and wrath and justice. And God’s love further does not mean that He loves all men with equality. He has a general love for all His creation, but a particular love for those who are redeemed. This apparently is not understood or believed by Young: “I don’t like a lot of choices [my kids] make, but that anger — especially for me — is an expression of love all the same. I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I’m not.” [spoken by Papa, p. 119.] So those who are under the divine wrath of God and suffering from His anger are loved by God in the same manner as those who have had God’s wrath appeased by the atoning blood of Christ? Young’s concept of God’s love seems to be shaped more by cultural values than Biblical truths.

Another presuppositional problem in the book is that it appears to be more anthropocentric than

⁵ 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:16ff; 1 Jn. 4:1-6.

⁶ 2 Cor. 13:5.

Theocentric or Christocentric. As an example, Mack says at the end of the book, as he is preparing to return home, “‘God, the servant,’ he chuckled but then felt a welling up again as the thought made him pause. *‘It is more truly God, my servant.’*” [pp. 236-7; my emphasis.] This too echoes our cultural clarion — “I am supreme, and God is subservient to me. He serves me to accomplish my aims.” And while this theme is not overt in the book, it is subtly evident in many of the conversations — God is present to accommodate our needs, rather than we are present to worship and serve and delight in Him above all things.

One question every communicator must answer is, what medium he will choose to attempt to relate the concepts in his mind? Writers have many options: narrative stories, didactic instruction, apologetic discourse, plays, and allegories among them. Now what is the best means of communicating Biblical truth? Young has chosen fictional story. This is still another presuppositional problem. He has made the assumption that the best way to communicate eternal and living truth is with a story. The best way to communicate the very words of God is not to quote and explain what He has already said, but to create fictional fantasies about what He might say and do, Young has decided.

So, in places, Young paraphrases the words of Scripture with some measure of effectiveness. But then in other places, the character Papa says things like (speaking of the male gender): “Men! Such idiots sometimes.” [p. 192.] Does God violate His own Word by cursing men?⁷ How then will the reader separate between fact and fiction? What is the truth about God? What portion of this book is what has been revealed to us in the Word of God and what is merely the supposition and imagination of the author? Fictional writing can be and has been used effectively to communicate truth; but it still remains one of the more “dangerous” modes of relating theological truth (and make no mistake, this book is Young’s theological *opus*), for it offers too much opportunity for unsanctified imagination to overwhelm the communication of eternal truth. And Young’s story in particular has allowed creativity to supersede doctrinal precision — leaving open the possibility of much confusion for the reader.

One final note about presuppositions. In the acknowledgements at the end of the book, Young gives thanks to those (both dead and living) who have influenced his thinking — and he lists a diverse group of writers and musicians, including conservative evangelicals, Roman Catholics, mystics, charismatics, and a variety of unbelieving artists and writers. When I was in seminary, a favorite professor liked to say, “you can always tell when Bossie the cow has been in the onion patch” [it will be evidenced in the flavor of her milk]. So it is for all of us who think about God — you can always tell what someone is reading and what is influencing him by his words. The reality of Young’s eclectic, tolerant, and inclusive reading is evidenced in his writing. He is prone to embracing all ideas to the point that he embraces no truth. This book is yet another warning to be oh so very careful about the books we read and websites we surf and TV shows and movies we watch. What we read will influence what we think, and what we think will produce a manner of living. And what the believer wants is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.⁸

⁷ James 3:8-10.

⁸ See Romans 12:1-2.

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN *THE SHACK*

This leads us to the final consideration — what does Young teach about God in this book? What theological positions does he espouse and hold up as truth? And this is the most disturbing part of the book. At best he confuses many truths; at worst he perverts truth. Among the doctrines that are obliterated are theology proper (the doctrine of God), Christology (Christ), Pneumatology (Holy Spirit), Anthropology and Hamartiology (man and sin), Soteriology (salvation), and Bibliology (Scripture). Add to that his confusing statements about submission and authority along with confession and forgiveness, and there isn't much left that Young hasn't tangled.

Let's start with the most obvious problem — the doctrine of God (theology proper). The problems begin with Young's concept of the godhead in general, and the Trinity in particular. The Godhead, according to Young is composed of three members:

- ✓ God the Father — Papa — an African-American woman
- ✓ Jesus — a Middle-Eastern man who appears to bear more humanity than deity
- ✓ the Holy Spirit — an Asian woman named Sarayu

Additionally, Papa is not exclusively female; late in the book he appears as a male, and in explaining his nature to Mack, he says,

I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to *appear* to you as a man or a woman, it's because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.... There are many reasons [why Scripture emphasizes God's fatherhood], and some of them go very deep. Let me say for now that we knew once the Creation was broken, true fathering would be much more lacking than mothering. Don't misunderstand me, both are needed — but an emphasis on fathering is necessary because of the enormity of its absence.

In other words, the revelation of God's character differs according to the need of the creature rather than according to the nature of the Creator? Were that true, would it not be reasonable to assume that at least once in Scripture that God would reveal Himself as a woman? And would not Christ address His Father as mother? Yet those very things are absolutely absent in Scripture. Young has made a tremendous leap in order to emphasize the relational aspect of God — an action that is completely unwarranted by Scripture.

Numerous other problems relating to the Godhead exist. Young denies that there are authoritative and submissive roles within the three persons of the Trinity:

Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of friendship, not a chain of command or 'great chain of being' as your ancestors termed it. What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours. [p. 122]

Now it is true that no member of the Trinity needs to coerce, manipulate, or overpower another member into some action. All three persons of the Godhead are unified and of one mind and

purpose. Yet there is hierarchical structure. That is why Jesus repeatedly said in the Gospels, “the Father sent Me” (e.g., Jn. 3:17; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-38; 6:38-39, 44, 57; 7:16, 28-29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 11:42; 12:44-45, 49). And why He explicitly says, “I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge, and My judgment is just because I do not seek my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn. 5:30; also Jn. 4:34; 6:38; 14:31; 15:10). And why He says that after He leaves, He and the Father will send the Holy Spirit (14:26; 15:26; 16:7). If there were no authoritative structure within the Godhead those statements would be replaced by more simple statements: “I came,” or “He will come...”

In fact, this error is compounded all the more when later Jesus says to Mack “Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not about obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.” [p. 145.] God submissive to man? How can Young make such a claim? Not because of Biblical teaching, but because “we want you to join us in the circle of relationship. I don’t want slaves to my will...” So Mack then draws out the obvious application — neither is there any authority and submission in relationships between husbands and wives or parents or children. [p. 146]

The implications for Young’s error about submission are far ranging. In an effort to make relationship and love the foundation of all things, he has undermined the clear teaching and instruction of Scripture.

Young’s God is also a very loving God, but he lacks sovereignty. More accurately, Young says that God voluntarily limits His sovereignty (sounding very much like an open theist) so that man can choose voluntarily to love and embrace him out of the exercise of his free will. God is not active in ordering events, but responsive to them; He never takes control of our choices, and does not orchestrate tragedies. [See pp. 106-7, 125, 145, 185, 222] From this perspective, Young’s God does not sound all-together different from Harold Kushner’s God [*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*] — God is a good and benevolent God who thinks quickly and wisely, but is incapable of controlling the universe He created. He’s a nice God who just can’t pull off all that He planned, so He has to make the best of the situation gone awry.

Young would do well to do consider the extensive revelation of God’s sovereignty in Scripture:

- ✓ God is sovereign in the act of creation (Col. 1:16-17)
- ✓ God is sovereign over nature (Job 37:3, 6, 10-13; Ps. 147:8, 16-18) — a truth further demonstrated by every Biblical miracle
- ✓ God is sovereign over Satan (Ezk. 28:14; Job 1-2; Lk. 10:17-18)
- ✓ God is sovereign in Himself (1 Chron. 29:11-12; Job 23:13; Prov. 21:30; Ps. 115:3)
- ✓ God is sovereign over human history — including the times of birth and death (Gen. 16:2; 1 Sam. 1:5; Dt. 32:39; Ps. 139:13ff)
- ✓ God is sovereign over every human government (Is. 44:28 – 45:7; Dan. 2:21; Ps. 75:6-7)
- ✓ God is sovereign over the “blessings” of life (Mt. 10:29-31; Eph. 1:11)
- ✓ God is sovereign over the “troubles” of life (Is. 45:7; Gen. 45:1-5; 50:20; Ex. 9:16; Dan. 4; Jn. 9:3; 16:33; Acts 2:23)

Not only is God not dependent on responding to circumstances, but He is also sovereignly

ordering and/or controlling *every event of life*.⁹

Additionally, there is confusion about the members of the godhead themselves. So Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, appears as a spirit throughout the book, and not a person — “She is Creativity...Action...a *common* wind.” [p. 110; my emphasis] And later, “Her nature was ethereal.” [p. 128.] So not only is the Holy Spirit made a non-person by Young, but she is also made common — not holy.

Even more than confusing the personhood of the members of the Godhead (male and female, person and non-person), Young also confuses their identity. So not only does Jesus bear the marks of the crucifixion, but so does Papa, the Father (pp. 95, 222). In fact, Papa even says, “I am truly human in Jesus.” [p. 201] So the Father also took on humanity? He also is an eternal God-man? Nowhere does Scripture even hint at such an idea. Not only does Young appear to be on the brink of, if not embracing, the ancient heresy of modalism, but he seems to take it a step further.

Were these the only problems in the book, it would be enough to discount it and deem it unworthy of being read. Unfortunately, the problems run much deeper.

Young also has a skewed view of Christ. He misunderstands the hypostatic union of Christ (how the divine and human natures of Christ relate so that He is both fully God and fully man), and the kenosis of Christ (how Christ “emptied Himself,” Phil. 2:7). The overwhelming view of Christ in the book is that He appears much more human than divine — so that as the resurrected Christ he still clumsily drops things like a human (p. 104) and can’t (or won’t) catch fish (p. 176). Even worse are the statements that while on earth, Christ operated apart from His deity:

[Papa speaking:] “Although by nature he is fully God, Jesus is fully human and lives as such. While never losing the innate ability to fly, he chooses moment-by-moment to remain grounded....

“Mackenzie, I [Papa, the Father] can fly, but humans can’t. Jesus is fully human. Although he is also fully God, he 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....”

“So when he healed the blind?”

“He did so as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.” [pp. 99-100; emphasis his.]

Jesus had no power within himself to heal anyone? Then why did the Pharisees and religious leaders in Israel hate Him so? It was for the very reason that He equated Himself with the Father and claimed that deity. Were Jesus simply a human miracle worker, their opposition would never have been so great. Their anger with Him was over the fact that He claimed to be doing these things on the basis of His authority as God (e.g., Jn. 5:33ff; 6:35; 10:30-31).

Another curious statement is about Christ and Christianity:

⁹ An excellent resource on this subject is John Piper’s book, *Spectacular Sins and Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ*. The book, sermon audio, and sermon transcripts are available at www.desiringgod.org.

“Is that what it means to be a Christian?”... [Mack asks]

“Who said anything about being a Christian? *I’m not a Christian.*” [Jesus said]... 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.” [p. 182; my emphasis]

Jesus is not a Christian? Jesus has no desire to make His followers Christians? The word “Christian” is simply a diminutive — a little Christ. So Jesus is not interested in making His followers into likenesses of Him? Young contradicts Scripture when he says “no.”

- *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)*
- *We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. (Col. 1:28)*
- *Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 Jn. 3:2-3)*

The very point of our salvation is that we would be freed from the dominion of sin by the power of the cross so that we might be like our very Savior. This is a fundamental tenet of the faith that is denied by Young.

Perhaps it is not so very surprising that he denies this, given his faulty doctrine of the Trinity and God Himself — and considering His view of man and sin.

As noted above, Young suggests that Jesus was not superior to men and that men can live in fellowship and power with God in the same way Christ did on earth (p. 100). Further, children are innocent, undeserving of death and hell (p. 164). The means of coping with problems and sin is “learning to live loved.” [p. 175 — at least he didn’t say to love ourselves!] And concerning sin, it “is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it.” [p. 120.] And what is God’s attitude toward those who sin or have problems? “I don’t do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. They don’t produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness, and that is why they were nailed into Jesus on the cross.” [p. 223.]

No one is innocent — even at birth, all individuals are under the curse because of indwelling sin (Rom. 5:12ff). And sin is not its own punishment. *Death* is the consequence of sin (Rom. 6:23) and God does punish it — and punishes it so that those who see it will rejoice in Him at its punishment (Jn. 3:36; Rev. 19:1-5; a quick reading of the last half of Revelation will make this clear). And what was nailed to Christ on the cross was not humiliation and guilt, but (praise God!) sin was nailed to the cross — the debt incurred because of sin was nailed there and canceled out!¹⁰

¹⁰ Col. 2:14.

The tragedy with this faulty theology of sin and man is that it will pervert the doctrine of salvation as well. So Young makes statement like:

- ✓ Jesus “didn’t hold on to any rights [as God]...so that by his dependent life he opened a door that would allow you to live free enough to give up your rights.” [p. 137]
- ✓ Sophia [wisdom], speaking to Mack: “You have judged [people] worthy of love, even if it cost you everything. That is how Jesus loves.” [p. 163]
- ✓ “Judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.” [p. 169]
- ✓ “...let’s not make more of [sin] than it is.” [p. 186]
- ✓ “What did Jesus accomplish by dying?” [Mack asked]...“through his death and resurrection I am now fully reconciled to the world.” “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?” “The whole world, Mack.” [pp. 191-2]
- ✓ “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship.” [p. 225]

These statements combine to leave the reader with a very confused perspective of salvation. Yes, God has created man to be in eternal fellowship with Him, but the introduction of sin through Adam (Gen. 3) has placed all men and all creation under the curse of death (Rom. 3-5). On what basis, then, shall men be related to God? Does He just absolve sin? Out of the goodness of His love, does He merely overlook sin, content to never be angry against it and never condemn man for it? Does God need to be reconciled to men, or do men have to be reconciled to God? And is the entire world automatically reconciled to Him? And does a man have to choose *relationship* with God (p. 225)? Just what does that mean? How might one choose that relationship? On what basis does a man have a right to claim that relationship?

Young fails to adequately address any of these questions in His book. He fails to articulate that man has *no* right to presume or demand or expect a relationship with God (Rom. 3:9-20). Young fails to recognize that the infinite love of God does not supersede the infinite justice and wrath and holiness of God. They work in concert together. So God poured out His eternal wrath against His Son, so that those who believe in the completed work of Christ on the cross will have their unrighteousness placed on Him and likewise will have His righteousness credited to them. He gets their sin; they get His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Scripture is also clear that this is the means by which men are reconciled to God (it is not a mutual reconciliation — God did nothing that demands that He be reconciled to us; 2 Cor. 5:18-19). And those who believe that truth are the ones who can then lay claim to fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1). Only the blood of Christ will ever enable man to be in sweet fellowship with Christ. Nothing else. And this truth Young fails to communicate with any kind of clarity. That is not to say that Young does not believe in salvation by grace through faith in Christ’s cross work. It is to say that he does not articulate that most fundamental tenet of the Christian faith.

And this is the great weakness of this book. Yes, men suffer under various consequences of sin and sorrow; yes, men yearn for fellowship with God; yes, God is infinite in His grace and love. But how will an individual be made to be in fellowship with God? This is the most fundamental question that Young obscures in his book. So while further questions remain about what he believes about Scripture (Bibliology), truth, the function of the Law, the role of the church, confession and forgiveness (both with God and between men), and the purposes and plans of

God and His sovereignty, the great weakness of this book is that the truth of the gospel has been obscured.

As I finished the book, I asked myself two questions:

1. If someone who knows very little about the Christian faith reads this book, would he be led to a Biblical, orthodox, and articulate explanation of God and His character?
2. If someone who does not currently follow Christ reads this book, will he clearly understand what it means to be a Christian after he reads this book? Will he clearly understand salvation?

For every believer, this is the test. Believers are guardians of the truth.¹¹ This is no mere exercise or playful practice. It is a *real battle* for eternal life. For to leave the truth of the gospel unguarded or to be sloppy with the truth of the gospel is to mislead people away from Christ so that they end up knowing the condemnation of Christ rather than the salvation of Christ. And this is the tragedy of this book. Many will read it and be led away from Christ and His cross — to their eternal condemnation and sorrow.

¹¹ 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 1:9; Jude 3.