

‘Burning Down the Shack’ Exposes Greatest Deception to Blindside the Church in Last 200 Years

Editor's note: William P. Young has been asked repeatedly if he is a universalist, and no one has record of him denying or confirming his theology. According to an article in Christianity Today, Young does not believe the Father poured out His wrath on Jesus, but rather that "the human race (poured) out their wrath on the Son."

My wife and I recently enjoyed an evening together in our home viewing *Anne of Green Gables*, produced on VHS in 1985. There is a scene in which Anne Shirley rehearses the Highway Man before a literary society. Anne's dramatic presentation earns an encore. As this scene drew to a close, I turned to my wife and said: "This is what people did before there were TV and the movies."

We may smile at the simplicity of those days around the turn of the 20th century. It seems that the older I get, the more I am moved by a film like *Anne of Green Gables*. Why is this? I think that it is because our life experiences have identified with the values expressed in this film. Or, rather, this story has reinforced the values of mainstream Judeo-Christian America.

The issue I want to address is how the media influence our understanding of God and how this impacts ideology. In *Anne of Green Gables*, there are at least a dozen references to God. The most powerful line is when Anne departs for college, and Marilla and Matthew are left standing alone on the train platform after saying goodbye, and Marilla says: "Providence

knew we needed her.” She was referring to how their orphan girl had impacted their lives for good, for kindness and for love. Themes of judgment, accountability, confession of sin, forgiveness and innocence prevail in the film. We understand that God holds us accountable for our sins, but we also experience the cleansing of conscience and guilt that confession brings. The name “Jesus” is even used with reverence.

So what media influenced the author of *Anne of Green Gables*? There were no radio, TV, films, CDs, DVDs or iPods. Certainly the No. 1 source would be the Bible, since the concept of God in *Anne of Green Gables* parallels how God is presented in the Bible. All Christians would agree.

Another influence may well have been John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. John Bunyan began his Christian allegory while in prison for more than 12 years (1660-1672), and again for six months, right after writing his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Because he was a Puritan Non-conformist and a Baptist, Bunyan refused to stop preaching and thus suffered in prison for holding church services without the consent of the Anglican Church of England. He published his work in 1678. It is regarded as one of the most significant works of English literature. Virtually every colonial home in New England had a copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It has been translated into 200 languages and has never been out of print. Next to the Bible, this fictional allegory has been the greatest seller of all time.

Bunyan took the teaching of Scripture and allegorized it. He took the pilgrim Christian and set him on the narrow road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He made metaphors out of all the potential difficulties and other people Christian (and any Christian) would face. The Slough of Despond, the Hill of Difficulty, the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death are examples of the struggles the pilgrim endured.

There can be little doubt that Bunyan's work reinforced the Bible in its disclosure of the nature of God. The way to the Celestial City is straight and narrow and passes through the Wicket Gate kept by Goodwill (who is Christ Himself). Ignorance tries to get to the Celestial City in his own way, but when he arrives without a "certificate," God as the King orders that he be bound and cast into hell. There is also the Flatterer, a deceiver who leads Christian out of the way. The Holy Spirit is the Interpreter. There is a real devil with real companion "archdevils" called Beelzebub and Apollyon (the "destroyer"), the lord of the City of Destruction. There is no doubt that Bunyan's work significantly reinforced our Judeo-Christian ethic, our public morality.

Bunyan had three purposes or themes for writing *The Pilgrim's Progress* (from Barry Horner, *The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan*, p. 10):

1. "The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ's saving, substitutionary righteousness," as the ground of Christian's justification and sanctification
2. Progressive sanctification
3. "Church fellowship under faithful pastoral leadership, as the only sure place of earthly refuge and support for pilgrims in transit"

Now almost 330 years after Bunyan, how do the media portray the nature of God? Contemporary films demean God by putting Him in a human form; music becomes idolatrous; and pseudo-theologians make Jesus into a non-offensive social worker. The media has the potential for the greatest good and for the greatest evil in our society.

Modern fiction is also used to teach about the nature of God. Some authors are presenting unorthodox views of God because they reject Him as a God of judgment. Brian McLaren of the Emergent church movement has authored a trilogy of novels. *The*

Shack, by William P. Young, has been a blockbuster.

Both of these authors use fiction as the servant of the theology. To teach doctrine is the purpose of the fictional story; thus, the genre is theological fiction. It would be fair to characterize *Pilgrim's Progress* this way. But the theology promoted in Young's novel is of a particularly sinister and heretical variety, in contrast to Bunyan's story.

An early endorser of *The Shack*, who is a Bible translator, has made the audacious claim that *The Shack* "has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's (*The*) *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good." Is this evaluation true? Is it good?

There can be no doubt about the current success of *The Shack*. For over 100 weeks, *The Shack* has occupied the best-sellers list. It has sold over 14 million copies, according to the author, as recently as March, and has been translated into scores of languages. The author is writing a script for a movie of the novel which will employ the latest 3D technology. Thus, by print and film, *The Shack* has the potential to make a big impact. But will it be a good impact?

What is *The Shack* all about? The novel depicts one man's spiritual struggle—his journey, if you will—against God. Mack has suffered great personal loss: the murder of his daughter. Yet the author weaves his character's way out of despair and rebellion not by his personal changing—by repentance and confession—but by changing his understanding of God.

This is where *The Shack* ceases to be good. William Young departs from an evangelical understanding of God, in whom holiness and love are equally balanced, to a universalist understanding of God, in whom love is paramount and judgment and holiness are considered to be in conflict with his love. In comparison with Bunyan, Young denies that there is future punishment and that God punishes sin.

So what portrayal of God does *The Shack* make? The author creates three fictional characters as metaphors to represent the Trinity: a large, African woman, and later an old, grey-haired man, to portray God; a Jewish carpenter to portray Jesus Christ; and a small Asian woman to portray the Holy Spirit.

But there is doctrinal confusion, not only about the Trinity and who God is, but about other evangelical doctrine.

So is *The Shack* worthy of comparison with Bunyan's work?

I believe that the novel and the movie are becoming the greatest deception to blindside the evangelical church in the last 200 years. This is not overstatement.

In a perceptive article in *Books & Culture* (Jan/Feb, 2010), Katherine Jeffrey recently evaluated the idea of comparing *The Shack* to *Pilgrim's Progress*. Whereas Bunyan on virtually every page championed by metaphors orthodox theology and the great doctrines of the Bible, including both heaven and hell, Young speaking as God repudiates biblical faith and seeks to redefine God as someone other than we think. He has God say: "I am not who you think I am"; and has the Holy Spirit say: "Perhaps your understanding of God is wrong." Jeffrey points out that the whole purpose of *The Shack* is to "change the way we think of God forever." Such words restate those of the Tempter at the first instigation of sin in the universe when by his discourse the serpent sought to redefine God as Adam and Eve had known him ["Did God really prohibit the eating of the fruit?" and "You will not surely die"; and "God knows that your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:1-5)]. Jeffrey notes that *The Shack* is "self-consciously post-biblical" and makes "heretical assertions." Jeffrey concludes that comparing *The Shack* to *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a "category mistake."

From another perspective, we get insight into the kind of

doctrine presented in *The Shack*. Timothy Beal in his article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1-15-2010) reviewed *The Shack* from the viewpoint of a sympathetic, self-identified liberal (although even he does not rank it with *The Pilgrim's Progress*). He praises *The Shack* as the first significant book to break into the evangelical world with "liberal, even radical theology" (these are his words) that is finding wide acceptance! He identifies the radical theology as involving the use of metaphors to represent God (for example, the black woman and the Asian woman), a nonhierarchical, non-authoritative communion of love within the Trinity, and universalism. He cites several features of the universalism: salvation for all whether or not they believe; no hell for unbelievers; the reconciliation of all of creation; all, even murderers, are children of God. Beal calls such inclusivism and universalism "alternative theology." He concludes: "We can hope" that *The Shack* will lead many into even "more-recent radical theology." He appropriately titled his article "Theology for Everyone."

Now the question is: Are these and other reviewers on the right track when they find liberal theology, even heresy, in *The Shack*, or are they biased and in error? It helps to settle such questions about a book by knowing the author. We understand *The Pilgrim's Progress* better by knowing the biography of the author—how he and his family suffered great deprivation in their commitment to stand true to the gospel and to God. The metaphors represent actual struggles and temptations.

I have known the author of *The Shack*, Young, for more than a dozen years. In 2004, Young wrote a lengthy document in which he rejected his evangelical faith and embraced universalism. I expose these in my book. He said then: that evangelical faith and its teaching about judgment makes God "grossly unjust"; that "Jesus is a million times more vicious and vindictive than Pharaoh, Nero or Hitler put together"; that

Jesus Christ is “not the Savior from sins”; that Jesus died “a failure and in vain and never saved anyone”; thus Jesus “is not even a good man but a liar, a rogue and a deceiving rascal”; that “Calvary is a farce, a travesty and a sham.”

Young began work on a novel proclaiming universalism for his children. Then three years later Young rewrote the fiction and published it as *The Shack*, in part his autobiography. Since its publication, I have sought to expose the aberrant theology on a website, in various articles and, most recently, in my book *Burning Down ‘The Shack’* by WND Books. In my introduction, I cite the many statements that Young wrote in 2004 and compare them with the claims made in his novel, *The Shack*. The parallels with 2004 are several: “God puts Himself on our human level and limits himself”; “When We three spoke Ourselves (sic) into human existence as the Son of God, We became fully human”; “Although Jesus is fully God, he has never drawn upon His nature as God to do anything”; “God cannot act apart from love”; “I don’t need to punish people for sin”; The Father and Jesus were crucified together; “God cannot send any of His children to an eternity of hell just because they sin against Him”; “mercy triumphs over justice because of love”; and Jesus is “a path of reconciliation.”

These are just some of the distortions of Christian truth that Young puts into the mouth of his characters speaking as the Trinity.

These statements from both 2004 and 2007 conflict with the theology of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The distortions of truth flow from the basic error of universal reconciliation that Young embraced in 2004. This is the belief that those who die without Christ will repent in hell and go to heaven. Even the devil and his angels will go to heaven so that one day hell ceases to exist.

Another anti-Bunyan trait is Young’s view of the local church. Clearly Bunyan affirmed the existence of the local church. He

pastored one. In his allegory, he pictured the church as the House Beautiful. He did not try to subvert the institutional church. But *The Shack* considers that the "House Beautiful" is a diabolical institution (along with government and even marriage) and part of a "trinity of terrors."

If Young is subversive of the institutions of the church, government and marriage, what would his view be of Christian media?

In light of these statements, how could someone ever compare *The Shack* to *The Pilgrim's Progress*?

The Pilgrim's Progress has promoted a Judeo-Christian ethic for more than 325 years. And for the last 200 years its theology and influence have been in conflict with universalism.

You see, universalism is not a new phenomenon in American churches. John Murray brought universalism to America in 1740, and began espousing it in 1770. It spread like fire among the Puritan and Baptist churches of New England. Virtually every New England Baptist church had defections to universalism. Universalism opposed the Great Awakening that began in 1741 that transformed the political and moral landscape of America. The Great Awakening and subsequent spiritual renewals in American history helped preserve the political freedom of this country. For the faith of a people determines their morality, and their morality determines the laws that govern a people. Yet, universalism opposed such movements.

During the Colonial period, as universalism grew, the Lord raised up Isaac Backus, the Baptist champion of freedom of conscience and separation from state churches. He did more than any other American to bring us freedom of worship, of religion. He saw clearly that universalism threatened our freedom of faith because it opposed the evangelical church in early America. Thus, he wrote a short book against it in 1782

titled *The Doctrine of Universal Salvation Examined and Refuted*. I recently finished reading this treatise, and it is as current as the day it was written. Universalists rejected the authority of the State then, as they do now.

There were others who spoke out against the deception of universalism. In 1847, Matthew Hale Smith, who was born into a universalist home and preached it for 12 years, wrote a book to describe how he was wonderfully converted. He warns of the pernicious attempt by universalism to overthrow evangelical churches and even use children's books and fiction to do so! "There is nothing new under the sun!"

But now, 200 years later, thanks to *The Shack* and other media, universalism is experiencing a resurgence as never before. Recent polls show that 50 percent of young Christians do not consider that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. A recent check of shows that currently four books are being marketed that champion universalism.

In conclusion, I maintain that *The Shack* represents the greatest deception foisted on the church in the last 200 years! Not since the time of the Colonies and Isaac Backus has universalism been in such ascendancy in the public psyche. "The Shack" is not a new "Pilgrim's Progress" for our day but a house of deceit deserving destruction. *The Shack* is not only antibiblical but anti-family, anti-church and anti-American because it is anti-government. The stakes are great!

Anne of Green Gables is a great story because it promotes an understanding of God that is anchored to the Bible, just like the all-time best seller *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The novel, *The Shack*, is not in the same league.

Appropriately, how can Christian media affect this and the next generation for Christ? Meeting the challenge laid down in *The Shack* is a place to begin. If we are to rescue this generation of America we must engage in the sometimes

unpleasant task of exposing error. *Burning Down 'The Shack'* seeks to inform the church with the truth and be a catalyst for renewal. *Burning Down 'The Shack'* will enable people to critique *The Shack* with fuller understanding based in biblical truth.

Throughout its history, it was the conservative, evangelical churches that stood as obstacles to universalism. Out of the mercy of God, one spiritual awakening after another has swept through this country, and each has stymied the influence of universalism and helped preserve our political freedom.

Media and other gatekeepers of Christian truth, including pastors and Christian institutions, need to sound the alarm. If God does not bless us with national repentance and renewal, we are doomed as the City of Destruction (Bunyan's term for this world) and even fewer will find the straight and narrow path to the Celestial City. The doom of this country will be assured.

Major Christian publishers have failed to rush in and sound the alarm regarding how *The Shack's* story has captured the imagination of millions of readers who gullibly swallow bad theology within the framework of a mystery story. And, where they have published evaluations, they take up Young's view of God and the Bible by saying it seems to agree with their experience of being mistreated by an abusive father (of all things!) (see Roger Olson, *Finding God in the Shack*, by IVP). What about agreeing with the Bible?

So here we media people are faced with one of the greatest challenges in our nation's history. Will God grant once again to us a revival and a new reformation of biblical truth to withstand the onslaught of the inclusivism and universalism of our day, represented by *The Shack*, or will we be overwhelmed by false teaching? Will we influence the church to become a "complete man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so we may no longer be children, tossed here and

there by waves and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, by craftiness with deceitful scheming, but, speaking the truth in love, we may grow up in all things into Him, who is the head, Christ Himself” (Eph. 4:13-15)?

May it be said of us, in the apostle Paul’s words to other Christians struggling to discern the truth and live godly lives: “But you did not learn about Christ in this manner, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:20-21). Christian media need to be at the forefront of leading a new awakening.

This article originally appeared on . Want to know what God’s doing in Hollywood?