

What 'The Shack' Has to Do With Revelation 2:4-5

I've always wondered what "losing your first love" meant in Revelation 2:4-5:

"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (Rev. 2:4-5, NIV).

Jesus said this to the church at Ephesus—a church He praised for hard work, perseverance, endurance of hardship for His name, not growing weary, intolerance of wicked men and accurately testing false apostles.

That church had it going on, but in God's eyes, it had a potentially fatal flaw. Indeed, if you visit Ephesus today, that church is in ruins. It appears that Christ did indeed remove its lampstand because the church would not repent of having forsaken love.

Leon Morris, in his commentary on Revelation, says that the word "forsaken" (*aphekes*) "is a strong term; they had completely abandoned their first fine flush of enthusiastic love. They had yielded to the temptation, ever-present to Christians, to put all their emphasis on sound teaching. In the process, they lost love, without which all else is nothing."

This was no less a revolting development in light of the fact that the church at Ephesus had earlier been praised for their love: "Therefore I also, after hearing of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers" (Eph. 1:15-16).

Jesus had always been sensitive to those who used doctrine to bludgeon others. He had serious words with the Pharisees of His day, who exalted themselves through their learning:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven against men. For you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who are entering to go in. ... You travel sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. ... You tithe mint and dill and cumin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone. You blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matt. 23:13, 15b, 23b-24).

Note that Jesus did not throw out doctrine. His point was that the greater part of the law was justice, mercy and (in Revelation) love. When doctrine supersedes love, then doctrine has been perverted and is worse than useless.

Paul wrote about the importance of sound doctrine, (1 Tim. 1:3-11; 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; Titus 2:1), but began his comments in 1 Timothy 1:5 by saying, "Now the goal of this command is love from a pure heart, and from a good conscience, and from sincere faith."

Then he adds an important condition to the use of doctrine: "But we know that the law is good if someone uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8).

Paul also wrote of the proper motivation for the use of doctrine: "For Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14a, NIV), echoing his earlier word to the Romans "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, tolerance, and patience, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4, MEV).

In all my learning, at the very best seminary, and under the

world's finest scholars, I was always afraid that I would become puffed up and think more highly of myself than I ought. And sure enough, it came to pass. By the end of my three years in seminary, I was a "TR"—a proud self-designation for those of us who were 5-point Calvinists. We could argue our way around anyone who might assault the doctrines of almighty John Calvin (some of which he never actually taught).

I had already forgotten my first love. I had forgotten from where I had come. I now looked down on "sinners" and deftly excoriated them with sound doctrine every chance I got, believing all the while that I was doing God a favor, that I was serving Him, that I was doing His will. I had forgotten what had led me to Christ and what had caused me to fall in love with Him and repent of my sins.

I had begun using my "sound doctrine" to shame and condemn those who had little to no doctrine. I began to expect that they should be drawn to Christ because of the reasonableness of what I now knew and judged them as rebellious and lost for rejecting it.

When I came to Christ, it was as the worst of sinners. I had been raised in a Christian home from a long line of pastors. Yet I rejected God because He didn't do what I wanted Him to do. He didn't set me free from my homosexual feelings. He didn't rescue me from a distant father who did not know how to love me (who thought he was doing the right thing by harshly punishing me). And so I became a sex addict, a male prostitute and a mocker of all things holy, and I did so deliberately in order to show God how much I hated Him.

What did He do in return? Once I had taken my rebellion to its state of maximum expression and found it empty, I came down from my high horse, admitted my need of Him, and He saved me. He poured out His love into my heart and forgave me of all my sins. He did not hold my ignorance, hatred and rebellion against me. Instead, He loved me. And it was that love which

caused me to fall into His arms, repent of my sins and follow Him.

I was not won by doctrine. I was won by His love, expressed through the death of His Son Jesus Christ. I was won by the fact that despite my best efforts to hate Him and do the very things that I knew He hated, He loved me anyway.

After winning my heart through His love, He then began schooling me in sound doctrine, so that I could know Him more accurately and love Him more deeply in the knowing.

But like so many of us, I forgot about the primacy of love and began using doctrine to judge, shame and criticize others. I reversed the proper ordering of things because it made me look good.

No one is going to love a God based on doctrines they do not understand and don't want to follow! They need to fall in love with Him first. They need an experience of Him.

The one thing I did get right while in rebellion against God was the day I challenged Him to keep the promise He made in Jer. 29:11-14: to reveal Himself to anyone who sought Him with all their heart. I began seeking Him earnestly, and sure enough, He supernaturally revealed Himself as a river of living love and poured Himself directly into my heart. It was an experience so powerful and profound—and so exactly what I had been searching for in all of my rebellious pursuits—that I was won in an instant.

I did not know doctrine at that point, other than that I needed Him, was willing to surrender my sins to Him and that His name was Jesus. Like the thief on the cross, forgiven by Jesus at a word, I knew nothing of the doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, that Jesus was the only way to the Father, salvation by faith alone or a need for sanctification. I didn't even know at that point that homosexual behavior was sinful in His eyes. Yet He saved me.

Recently, much has been made of the “lack of sound doctrine” in the book and film *The Shack*. It is a fictional tale using allegory, metaphor and simile about a man whose daughter is brutally murdered and the journey he must go through to be reconciled to the God who allowed it to happen. It bravely addresses one of the biggest objections nonbelievers have about the doctrine of God’s love, and yet the author of the story (William Paul Young), who is a believer, though flawed like the rest of us, has been excoriated by many of the “theological gatekeepers” of our evangelical culture for not crossing every theological “t” correctly. They have cruelly demonized him as a heretic and a deceiver.

Indeed, the story hints at a mistaken belief that Paul has, that over the eons of time, everyone will eventually be saved by virtue of the work of Christ loving them into the Kingdom. This is a doctrine called “universalism,” and it is not found in the Bible. In fact, the Bible teaches that only those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and who surrender to Him as Lord during their life here on earth will be saved from the consequences of their sin, (which is eternal separation from God). It also teaches that He is on a rescue mission to save us from that hell, but that He will not go against our freely chosen decision to accept or reject His offer. Why? Because He is love, and love is not love unless it is freely chosen.

The critics contend that Paul Young’s mistaken theology is going to result in people becoming heretics rather than getting saved. Funny—I don’t recall having a correct view of the doctrines of salvation when God knocked me to the ground with His saving love as I surrendered to Him. He subsequently taught me sound doctrine, of course, but that came second.

I contend that at least some of Paul Young’s critics have forgotten their first love, as I have and sometimes still do. They have forgotten what first drew them to Christ. They have forgotten what draws anyone to Christ. Some of the critics

seem to believe that it is doctrine that saves rather than the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. They are wrong, and worse, may have fallen into the same trap fallen into by the Ephesians. They have forsaken love.

I recently saw the movie made from the book, *The Shack*. It was powerful. I went through several handkerchiefs. It was amazing how many difficult questions about God's love amid tragedy, His silence, His call to forgive those who have done unspeakable things to those we love and more were fleshed out and answered in such a powerful and biblical way. Yes, there were those hints at universalism, but they were very brief and subtle, and I doubt that most unbelievers will even have the theological sophistication to notice or remember them.

But I do know what they will remember! I believe this movie will be used by God to bring many into the kingdom. It is one of the bravest and most penetrating attempts to flesh out the love of God that I have ever seen. It offers incredibly honest answers to the most important questions that keep most people from turning to Christ. And once turned, God is more than capable of refining and correcting their mistaken notions about how salvation works. Ultimately, He is the author and finisher of our faith.

It greatly distresses me that fellow Christians are crucifying Paul Young for this incredibly vulnerable working out of the tragedies of his own life. (He was sexually abused repeatedly from the age of 5 by the tribal people his missionary father was trying to reach, and more). He is a good man—a Christian man—who is imperfectly stumbling through life like the rest of us—but a man who understands what his critics have forgotten—that it is the grace and love of God that rescues us from this present darkness and that compels us to live godly lives (Titus 2:11-14).

As for those of us who are theologically well-trained and who are throwing grenades at Paul Young for not being more perfect

in his fictional tale, we need to ask ourselves, if in the midst of our great learning, we haven't lost our first love—for God, for each other and for the lost. It is so easy to do.

Indeed, I wouldn't have made that one theological error if I had written *The Shack*. It would have been theologically perfect. And I would have basked in the "Atta boys" and pats on the back from my evangelical peers. I'd have been very proud of myself, but I doubt very many people would have gotten saved with the story I would have written.

The fact is, God didn't choose me to write it. My love has been too set on my reputation, my ministry and myself. I didn't have the sensitivity to answer the questions the lost are actually asking and put them into a form they're paying attention to. I've become too separated from what a lost person is looking for and needs from God.

In light of this book and film, I believe God is far more interested in giving His first attention to winning the lost. Sanctification and theological training beyond the basics of what is necessary for salvation come second. That was the message of Jesus to the theological giants of His day, and it remains the message for us today. {eo}

Dr. David Kyle Foster is the producer of *Pure Passion TV* and the documentaries, *Such Were Some of You* (), *How Do You Like Me Now? When a Child, Parent, Spouse or Sibling Says They're Gay* () and *Tranzformed: Finding Peace with Your God-Given Gender* () (coming June 2017). He is also the author of *Love Hunger (Chosen)*, *Sexual Healing (Regal)* and *Transformed Into His Image: Hidden Steps on the Journey to Christlikeness (Laurus Books)*.