

## Truths We Believe about God 11

### A Biblical & Theological Rejection of Wm. Paul Young's book, "Lies We Believe About God" (Eleventh *in a series*.)

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the Lord. They continually say to those who despise Me, "The Lord has said, 'You shall have peace"; And to *everyone* who *walks according to the dictates of his own heart*, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"  
—Emphasis added, Jeremiah 23:16-17, NKJV

### Conclusion: Part 1

#### Evangelicalism Anarchy & Chaos

Wm. Paul Young admits *The Shack* is a story, but that it's wrapped in theology. Readers are thus challenged to discover the theology behind *The Shack*, and this has been the purpose of interacting with Young's book *Lies We Believe About God*. "Strictly, theology is that which is thought and said concerning God." [111] So what does Young think and communicate about God? What is his underlying theology?

God's Word, it has been demonstrated, is not core to Young's beliefs. The assumption of Young's story which contradicts Scripture is that God is reconciled to everybody and everybody's reconciled to God—that from time immemorial all people either had, now have or will develop a loving relationship with God. That *The Shack* has sold upwards of twenty-two million copies and the movie has attained star status indicates the "feel good" message of universalism has become popular among evangelical Christians. So what's going on here? It begins with authority because theology must be based on authority, on God's Word, the Bible.

#### Pan-Evangelicalism

As they look at the development of American pan-evangelicalism over the last decades, conservative Christians try to understand and explain the phenomena of both the book (2007) and movie *The Shack* (2017). Beliefs that were subtly implied and peddled by author Wm. Paul Young in *The Shack* are now openly declared in his non-fictional work *Lies We Believe About God*, in which he claims to expose lies commonly accepted as truths among evangelicals. To expose the twenty-eight lies he believes plague evangelicalism's psyche, the author cleverly frames arguments around his life experiences, impressions, conversations, questions, convictions and understanding of the Bible. In his "conversation" with his readers, he intends for his core beliefs to influence theirs and bring them to along with him reject lies he claims to reveal about God. After all, if what Young exposes are really lies, shouldn't his readers embrace his truths?

So as he wrote *The Shack* to explain to his children what he grew to believe about God, ten years later he's written a theology, well sort of, *Lies We Believe About God* to make credible to his followers what he believes about God. Many pastors and Christian leaders have spoken out and written against *The Shack*, and their criticism has not been well received by those who love the book and movie.

### Universalism Undeterred

Wayne Jacobsen, who collaborated with Young in writing the writing of *The Shack*, did so knowing that Young's belief in universal reconciliation not only contradicted what he believed about salvation but also would offend, at least initially, mainstream evangelicals who possessed a nodding acquaintance with the Gospel. So Jacobsen attempted to help Young clean up obvious and offensive references to universalism in *The Shack's* first manuscripts. Through their discussions, Jacobsen thought he had influenced Young to move away from universalism toward a more traditional view of salvation. So in the editing process overt evidences of Young's universalism became obscured. But when critics arose who rejected the book's humanization of God and undertones of universalism, Jacobsen pejoratively labeled them hostile conspirators and defended Young and his religious allegory he helped to edit. After all, criticism of Young was indirectly criticism of him. Thus one of the questions Jacobsen addressed to defend Young was: "Does *The Shack* promote Ultimate Reconciliation (UR)?" [112]

Jacobsen admitted the theme of universal reconciliation "was in earlier versions because of the author's partiality at the time to some aspects of what people call UR," but that both he and Young came to an understanding which he thought "affected" the author's view of salvation. In other words, in the give and take of the editing process Young grew out of believing in UR. So Jacobsen excused Young as follows: "Holding him [Young] to the conclusions he may have embraced years earlier would be unfair to the ongoing process of God in his life and theology." [113] So in answer to the question, "Does *The Shack* promote Ultimate Reconciliation (UR)?" Jacobsen categorically denied, "It does not." [114] Yet a decade later in his book *Lies We Believe About God*, in refuting what he calls the lie "You need to get saved." (Chapter 13), Wm. Paul Young "outs" his personal belief in universalism. In the chapter he poses a question which his readers might be asking,

Are you suggesting that everyone is saved? That you believe in universal salvation?  
That is exactly what I am saying!  
This is real good news! (LWBAG, 118)

So we look at what is happening in the religious conglomerate called evangelicalism and ask, how has the movement grown so insensitive to the Gospel which it once accepted? That TBN (the *Trinity Broadcasting Network*) recently completed a 20 episode series "Restoring The Shack" featuring Wm. Paul Young, who also appeared on the Oprah show, indicates that amidst entertainment the authority of the evangel has been lost. [115] As he rides the wave of celebrity, Young appears comfortable in peddling his synthesis of quasi Christianity and New Age and New Spiritual beliefs, and it appears that professing Christians are eating, or should I say buying, it up. How did evangelicalism transition from Bible teachers like Dr. M.R. DeHaan

(1891-1965) of the *Radio Bible Class* and Theodore Epp (1907-1985) of *Back to the Bible* to evangelists like Billy Graham (1918- ) and now to faith innovators like Wm. Paul Young (1955- )? **[116]** Along with others in the movement, did these early Bible teachers help create a climate for evangelical lies about God to grow?

### **A Question of Authority**

“Ideas have consequences” is an oft-repeated phrase, and nothing is more consequential and devastating to the Christian faith than thinking that *one*, the Bible, though it may contain the word of God or be a record of people’s experiences with God, is not the transcendently sourced, God inspired and authoritative Word from of God; and *two*, that the Scriptures are not determinative as to what Christians should believe, what they should not believe, how they should not behave, and how they should behave (2 Timothy 3:16). When Christians jettison the idea that Scripture’s authority resides without and external to themselves, spiritual anarchy results. Much group Bible study involves participants saying, I feel this verse means this or that. But the Bible means what it means and says what it says despite what I might personally think or feel about it. Preachers have popularly proclaimed, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!” I would change this to: The Bible says it, that settles it! God's Word is God’s Word independent of whether I believe it or not. If people believe whatever might suit a contemporary whim or fancy (and we fundamentalists and evangelicals are not immune from doing this), then what they believe about God is sourced within them. Such individualism is consistent with naturalism. Absent coherence provided by the external authority of God in His Word in life, then all humans will believe and do whatever . . . whatever . . . they want. “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). About such a condition of faith and life, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) wrote:

The choice for us today is really as simple as it was for those first Christians in the early days. We either accept this authority [i.e., The Scriptures] or else we accept the authority of ‘modern knowledge’, modern science, human understanding, human ability. It is one or the other. **[117]**

We, all of us, need to quit philosophizing, legalizing and legislating our faith and get back to God’s Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Gospel and the Bible!

### **God’s Immanence, God’s Transcendence**

For centuries naturalism has asserted itself against Christianity in western civilization, and the church, more or less, has been influenced by the philosophy. Naturalism demands that the Christian faith be adapted to fit nature (i.e., the culture, society or science), because nature interprets and influences man’s understanding of God. (To a point nature has a place in our understanding of God, Romans 1:18-20; Psalm 19:1.) But earth is not the replica of heaven, “As above, so below.” (See John 8:21-24) When naturalism takes over, God is no longer viewed as transcendent over or independent of the material universe (dualism), but rather immanent and dependent upon the material universe (monism). When as promoted in *The Shack*, this monistic worldview becomes mainstream, then the biblical God and His truth fades into obscurity for as Francis Schaffer (1912-1984) said, nature will inevitably eat up grace.

At either the macro or micro levels, naturalism possesses zero tolerance for supernaturalism, the theistic evolution and deistic intelligent design movements being examples. So what's the bottom line of this transcendence-immanence business? What's the big deal? In a story he says is as old as history, and it is, Peter Jones frames the issue for us: "Will we worship Nature or the God who created Nature?" [118]

So to understand the current state of affairs in contemporary evangelicalism one must be aware of naturalism's influence upon the culture in general and Christianity in particular. To this end a general understanding of evangelical Christianity in America and how naturalism affects the church might prove helpful (Galatians 2:4).

### **The Condition of Chaos**

Historically the theological lapse of Christianity from supernaturalism and order into naturalism and disorder might be summarized as follows. After the Pilgrim-Puritan Fathers settled in this land (1620-1691) and after the First (1730s through 1740s) and Second (Late 1790s to Mid 1800s) Great awakenings, there occurred in six sequential yet interconnected movements: **1.** The Rise of Liberalism (Mid to Late 1800s); **2.** The Reaction of Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Early to Mid 1900s); **3.** The Rejection of Fundamentalism by Neo-Evangelicals (Mid to Late 1900s); **4.** The Romancing of Evangelicalism by early Pentecostalism and then the Charismatic movement (Early 1900s to Present); **5.** The Repackaging of Evangelicalism by the Church Growth Movement (Late 1970s to Present); and **6.** The Restructuring of Evangelicalism by the Emergent Church Movement (Early 2000s to Present). The interacting historical phases were and are . . .

#### *Rationalizing the Message—Liberalism*

In their attempt to remain relevant to a changing culture during the mid to late 1800s, major Protestant seminaries, denominations and pastors began adjusting their message to suit a determinative naturalistic-scientific worldview influenced by the acceptance, whether in part or the whole, of evolutionary theory and the application of the theory to other academic disciplines. Trying to keep in step with a growing scientific elite and materialistic culture, liberals jettisoned belief in the "embarrassing" creation account of Genesis in favor of viewing the opening chapters of the Bible to be myth. As a result and given the interconnectedness of the rest of the Bible with Genesis, other biblical and supernatural beliefs began to fall like dominoes. Denominational hierarchies grew out of touch with some of their membership who remained Bible believers. Where could these believers go to find fellowship with others of like precious faith?

#### *Reacting to Liberalism—Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*

So across denominational lines these believers sought encouragement from and fellowship with others of like-minded faith. Their fellowship centered upon five essential and supernatural fundamentals of the faith to which they agreed—the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of the Bible, Jesus' virgin-birth and incarnation, His substitutionary atonement on the Cross for sin, His physical resurrection from the dead, and His promised personal return to earth. This rejection of naturalism by Bible believers was initially called "fundamentalism." That the movement attracted a significant number of followers became evidenced by the Bible conferences that were held and the Bible believing seminaries (Westminster, Dallas, Fuller,

etc.), colleges, churches, independent faith missions and publishing houses that were founded. Because of its emphasis upon the Gospel (the evangel, good news), this network of independent fundamental Christians and institutions also became known as “*evangelicalism*.” Bible believers found a home in which naturalism did not oppress or suppress their faith. They separated from unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). For about fifty years all seemed to go well.

#### *Reservations about Fundamentalism—the Neo-Evangelicals*

After World War II during the late 1940s through the 1960s, a spirit of discontent settled over some evangelicals. (Traditional fundamentalists were not similarly disaffected.) Tired with some of the movement’s censorious attitude toward liberal Christians and Roman Catholics along with its disregard for advancements in science (evolutionary theory, quantum physics, etc.), in biblical scholarship (historical and higher criticism regarding the origin and authorship of the biblical books), the need for social relevancy (the social gospel, i.e., “WWJD”), and the desire for respect by the academic community, evangelical leaders and scholars began to distance themselves from separatistic and “narrow minded” fundamentalists, their churches and institutions. This protest movement became known as the New or Neo-Evangelicalism.

Generally, new-evangelicalism de-emphasized the local church and founded parachurch ministries to compensate for what they thought were fundamentalism’s deficiencies, ministries such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, *Christianity Today* magazine, Youth for Christ International, Campus Crusade for Christ, Christian publishing houses, etc. With varying emphases, some biblical and others not, most of these ministries remain a part of the evangel movement today. But from within and without, philosophical naturalism with its separation of nature from grace continues to influence the collective mind and soul of the evangelical movement. The world, always the enemy of God, continues to exert pressure upon Christians to conform (1 John 2:15-17). So evangelicalism continued to be a host for naturalism causing many within the movement to loose the zeal in their hearts for a message they no longer believed in their minds.

#### *Reviving the Heart—here come the Charismatics!*

Parallel with the rise of Neo-Evangelicalism, earlier the Pentecostal (Early 1900s to the Present) and then contemporary the Charismatic (Middle 1900s to Present) movements influenced the soul of evangelicalism in America. By the rousing up emotion for Jesus, the Charismatic movement with its emphasis upon supernatural “signs and wonders” revived feelings of faith which since the days of the manipulative evangelist Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), laid dormant because of naturalism affect upon the collective evangelical worldview. These movements remain viable and influential among persons considering themselves to be evangelicals. But despite the influence of these movements, the 60s generation, “the baby boomers,” continued to feel disconnected from traditional religion and worship, the church their parents had nominally and passively embraced.

#### *Repackaging Church—the Church Growth Movement*

So new strategies and methods of doing church were conceived during the 1970s and 80s in institutions like Fuller Seminary and its connection with Leadership Network, and by leaders such as C. Peter Wagner (1930-2016) and management consultant Peter Drucker (1909-2005). Methods were designed within a naturalistic framework to produce predictable results, namely

church growth. So evangelicalism was repackaged to attract the bored-with-traditional-church crowd of “baby boomers.”

The church growth movement revised church “worship” to accommodate the contemporary tastes of those born during the late 1940s through the 1960s, accommodations which included *entertaining* worship teams performing upbeat rock music accompanied by special electronic effects, *cultivating* a casual ambiance by encouraging people to dress informally and drink their lattes, *communicating* psychologized messages designed to meet people’s “felt needs” and make them feel good about themselves, and *providing* full service ministries for the whole family. In the church growth movement the consumer became king and influential pastors, taking their cues from Bob Schuller (1926-2015), conceived of doing church the “Purpose Driven” (Rick Warren) and “Willow Creek” (Bill Hybels) ways, both of which employed “tricks of the trade” learned from the master maestro of The Crystal Cathedral. (By the way, The Crystal Cathedral is no more. It went bankrupt.) Churches became “welcome centers” employing user-friendly management techniques and schmoozing-seeker-sensitive messages to reach the disconnected generation of “baby boomers” who felt the church to be irrelevant to the materialistic and well-adjusted life they desired to have, and on the surface at least, the new management, method and message appears to have worked, especially in affluent suburbia America. Manipulate . . . manipulate . . .

### *Evangelicalism in Chaos*

This confusing, incoherent, chaotic and disparate mix (i.e., Traditional Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, Neo-evangelicals, Dispensationalists, Reformed, Calvinists, Neo-Calvinists, Open Theists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, the Jesus Movement, the Latter Rain Movement, the New Apostolic Reformation, Trinity Broadcasting Network followers, Evangelical Radio and Television Preachers, Evangelical Publishers, Fuller Theological Seminary, Leadership Network, Purpose Driven and Willow Creek, Contemplative Spirituality—Richard Foster and company, the Emergent Church movement, and much more) I years ago referred to as “pan-evangelicalism.” By the way, though confusing on the surface, not everything in this mix is bad. Nevertheless, in one of his books Francis Schaeffer warned of *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. [119] We are now living in the disaster.

That many evangelicals have become disaffected by being part of the evangelical chaos and seek structure, stability and authority for their faith may be indicated by their defection into Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism, the recent conversion of the *Bible Answer Man’s* Hank Hanegraaff to Orthodoxy being a case in point (many others like Thomas Howard, Elisabeth Elliot’s brother, and Frank Schaeffer, Francis Schaeffer’s son, preceded him). [120] James Stamoolis, who has written on the defection of evangelicals to “this older iteration of Christianity,” ascribes it to “the whole idea of authority,” and with the movement’s defection from believing in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, evangelicalism now espouses spiritual anarchy. So Stamoolis adds, “I know a lot of people who have converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and Orthodoxy because it’s fixed. It’s settled.” [121]

### *Rescuing the Gospel—the Emergent Church*

But as the entertainment phase of doing church wanes (it doesn’t take long for the bored to get bored again with the entertainment business called church), influential leaders and authors, who

are really liberals, have arisen within the ranks of the evangelical movement. These individuals think and propose that change is again needed, that the aging, wrinkled and self-centered evangelical movement has grown out of touch with the needs of the world and had better get its act and message together or die and like an empty ship be lost adrift in the sea of cultural irrelevancy and obscurity. So to become relevant to our secularized culture, these voices view that evangelicalism doesn't need another "face lift" (the mega-church has already tried doing that that), but a "mind lift." Strong sentiment therefore exists in the emerging church that after decades of "lifts," adjustments and readjustments, the church still hasn't got the Gospel right.

As the mega-church movement centers upon methods, management strategies, music styles and psychologized preaching, the emergent church now attempts to adjust and adapt its message by creating a new "missional" narrative to fit an evolutionary "kingdom now" theology (which in its postmillennialism, denies the futuristic prophecies of Jesus, the prophets and the apostles). Thus, emergent church leaders focus upon such "now" issues such as developing a sense community in the church (something lost in the mega-church), discovering a real, more authentic and more relevant historical Jesus, advocating a "green" worldview including an ecological message, attending to social and political justice issues, communicating a more inclusive gospel message, and so forth. To get its message across, the emergent church attempts to create a new story to attract new believers from the crowd of secular skeptics and doubters like millennial youth who have grown to see "entertainment church" as being too self-centered to have any real impact on the modern world. (About this they are so right.)

Now that we have seen what has gone on in "the church of what's happening now" we could ask, where might evangelicalism be going? My answer would be evangelicalism is going to go where it's been going, and that's deeper and deeper into naturalism and this philosophy's inherent demand for pantheism, mysticism and universalism—that everything is God, that everything is spiritual, and that everyone is saved. These ingredients of naturalism are evident in Wm. Paul Young writings. He has become the popular communicator of the new framing story coming out of the emergent church. He is on the cutting edge. Mark this also: When Young's star begins to fade, and it will, someone else will assume the mantle of a false prophet. Someone else will arise to promote universalism. Nevertheless, into this evangelical chaos enter Wm. Paul Young and others . . .

*Conclusion: Part 2 to follow . . .*

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### **Endnotes**

[111] Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Theology," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, Everett F. Harrison, Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960): 518.

[112] Wayne Jacobsen, "Is THE SHACK Heresy," *Life Stream*, March 4, 2008 (<https://www.lifestream.org/is-the-shack-heresy/>).

[113] *Ibid.*

[114] *Ibid.*

[115] Wm. Paul Young, "Restoring the Shack," *TBN*, Episodes 1-20, March 5-July 9, 2017 (<https://www.tbn.org/people/wm-paul-young-0>). See also interview by Oprah Winfrey of William Paul Young, "If Love Is Forced, That's No Love at All," *SuperSoulSunday*, Season 8, Episode 801, July 9, 2017 (<http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/william-paul-youngif-love-is->

forced-thats-no-love-at-all-video).

**[116]** There is also a glut of other popular entertainer-communicators who also played a role in the historical transition between historic evangelicalism and modernity, names like Peale, Schuller, Warren, Hybels, Osteen and more. See Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "Bewitched: Evil Eye Over Evangelicalism," *Discernment Newsletter*, March/April 2010, Volume 21, Number 2 (<http://www.discernment-ministries.com/Newsletters/NL2010MarApr.pdf>). See also Paul Smith, *New Evangelicalism: The New World Order* (Costa Mesa, CA: Calvary Publishing, 2011). Paul has particularly insightful observations about Charles Fuller, the founding of the seminary bearing his name, and that seminary's fall into modernism. See also Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976): "The Strange Case of Fuller Theological Seminary," 106-121, and "Other Denominations and Parachurch Groups," 122-140.

**[117]** D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Authority* (Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1958); 60.

**[118]** Peter Jones, "Preface," *On Global Wizardry: Techniques of Pagan Spirituality and A Christian Response*, Peter Jones, Editor (Escondido, CA: Main Entry Editions, 2010): 15.

**[119]** Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984). "Have Christians compromised their stand on truth and morality until there is almost nothing they will speak out against? Has the evangelical church sold out to the world?" This is the question the book asks.

**[120]** Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "'Bible Answer Man' Converts to Orthodoxy: CRI's Hank Hanegraaff joined the Greek Orthodox Church on Palm Sunday," *Christianity Today*, April 12, 2017 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/april/bible-answer-man-hank-hanegraaff-orthodoxy-cri-watchman-nee.html>).

**[121]** "Why Orthodoxy Appeals to Hank Hanegraaff and Other Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, April 20, 2017 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/april-web-only/why-orthodoxy-appeals-to-hank-hanegraaff-and-other-evangeli.html>).