

The Gospel in “The Shack” and the “Gospel in the Stable”

Colleagues

When Phil Kuehnert’s item on THE SHACK came your way a couple of weeks ago (ThTh564), not everyone of you was satisfied. One very unhappy camper told me “Having read and been troubled by The Shack, I was eager to read a theologically astute critique of the book. Instead what I got was pabulum of an enervating sort. This falls far below the Crossings standard.” I tried to comfort this vexed co-crosser by telling him that Phil had indeed met my “standard” (which I claim is a cut or two above pabulum), and that’s why it was posted as a ThTh offering.

In addition I mentioned that when Phil and I were discussing his assignment, we agreed that he wouldn’t do a standard review of The Shack, but use it as a way to show us his own convictions about Pastoral Care (capital P and capital C which means “necessitating Christ” in Phil’s lingo)—and how he practices it. The Shack is a classic(?) example of pastoral care with no caps. It’s happening everywhere, Phil tells us. In his conclusion he says it flatout (if you missed it before) that in the no-caps kind of pastoral care—which dominates Pastoral Care Education programs these days, and thus the practice out in the field—“the message of Christ’s death on the cross is robbed of its power. But The Shack is religious fiction . . . and it does provide pastoral care, but not Pastoral Care.”

In our e-mail exchanges before Phil finished the essay, he conned me into doing something akin to what the unhappy camper asked for. Here’s how it happened. After I’d finished reading the book, I scribbled out “some thoughts,” and sent them to Phil’s tundra-turf up there in Fairbanks, Alaska as we continued

our conversation. Here they are.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Phil,

I read *The Shack* last weekend whilst you were minus 44 there in Fbknks, and have some thoughts for your consideration as you “press on” doing your own piece for our ThTh crowd.

1. The gospel in *THE SHACK* and the gospel in the *STABLE* at Bethlehem are not the same gospel. What the four gospels say about Jesus and what *The Shack* says about him are two different gospels.
2. The crunch point is not author Young’s surprising and innovative Trinity, but the Good News offered by the Trninty that Young creates.
3. Though Young is down on “institutional religion,” his gospel is itself at the center of today’s non-institutional evangelicalism. And it is an “other” one. Almost “institutionalized” these days in that group’s “anti-institutionalism.”
4. To wit: Young is clearly anti-nomian with reference to the “lex semper accusat” [=God’s law our constant accuser] of the Lutheran confessions. God is never the sinner’s critic in his theology. At least, not a serious critic. Thus there is no wrath in God. Or as Bertram so winsomely puts it in his book, there is nothing about sinners that “infuriates God.”
5. God –the whole troika of his imaginative THREE person deity–is 100% “s lippy Agape.”
6. Anti-institutional. Not only is “institutional church” a “no-no” for his jovial troika, but all of society’s

institutions. His God says "I don't create institutions." Augsburg Conf. Art. 16—au contraire—says God DOES create institutions. Only one of those statements can be true. This from the review below:

Young is no longer a member of a church, nor are his publishing partners, both former pastors. They are a part of a movement that rejects the institutional church, but Young says he doesn't feel "any need to try to yank people out of systems or be negative about them." His hostility, though, shows up in THE SHACK when Jesus says, "I don't create institutions; that's an occupation for those who want to play God. So no, I'm not too big on religion . . . and not very fond of politics or economics either. . . . And why should I be? They are the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I care about."

7. That's anti-nomian stuff again. First anti-nomian about God's law accusing sinners, and now with reference to the usus politicus of God's law operating in the institutions of human society. Are institutions God-created or man-created? Because he thinks they are all coming from "man's side," they are no good for Young. Nothing God-sided about them. Luther, of course, reading the Bible with law/promsie lenses, heard God to be the creator of the institutions—for sinners' benefit, good stuff as God's ongoing action of preservation in a sinner-populated world. These institutions are always managed by sinners, sure, but even with sinners running them, God's work of preservation and retribution (also of the magistrates) does indeed happen. Not always perfectly, but nevertheless And it'd be a helluva (literally) lot worse if sinners set up non-institutional societies, as Young wishes for. Such societies really would be MAN-created,

i.e., contra God the creator.

8. But now back to the Gospel according to THE SHACK.

- God's love has only one thing to remedy in the human race: the stupidity, cupidity, of free-will humans. Free-willers who chronically use their free-will "just plain wrong."
- Mack's needed salvation is informational. Fancy word is "noetic" He needs information so he can understand. He does not need forgiveness. He just doesn't see how it all computes—and now radically so after Missy's horrendous death.
- so Mack needs (another technical term) "gnosis," knowledge. He needs insight. His deity supplies it. And what he gets is a gnostic gospel from the troika.
- the redeemed life of humans is primarily a life of love. Just like the troika's own consortium of three. When replicated in humans it's all about sharing, about loving relationships—with a minimal role (if at all) now played by "faith." For where is there any need to "trust" at all, after you've gotten the insight on how God works this all out and how it all comes out OK in the end?
- There is no "Anfechtung" [challenge to faith, an attack] for Mack any more after the Troika has brought him into clarity. [I ought to re-read it to see how in each chapter this and that "topic" of theology gets explained to Mack—like J.T. Mueller's dogmatics for us LCMS seminarians in the 1950s.] Is there no Anfechtung for believers? Not so according to Biblical faith, beginning already with Abraham at Mt. Moriah. Faith is always beset by Anfechtung to and through to the final encounter with the last enemy. Christian faith continues to trust the

Mangled Messiah CONTRA the continuing life-experiences that negate His promise. My Doktorvater wrote a whole book on "Der Angefochtene Glaube" = "Faith is always beset by Anfechtung."

9. All the reviews I've read (only a couple) signal the autobiographical and that Young says so. Mack IS the author Young. So this is the gospel according to Wm. Paul Young. It's a fifth option to the canonical four gospels.
10. The gnostic gospel in summary offered to Mack by his tripartite guru: Here's how it all computes.
 - a. The fundamental theological ellipse is free-will humans and a monist deity in three-flavors but all the same ice cream. There is no conflict within God to get sinners saved. Nor any conflict with other principalities and powers who claim Mack for their own..
 - b. Humans have free will. There is no initial "bondage of the will" where my volition/choices are already under the management of God's own opponent. [I don't remember any mention of God's adversary anywhere in the story. Maybe I missed it.] Luther's Bondage of the Will, his epic arm-wrestling on that topic with Erasmus, is probably unknown to the author. Whether he knows it or not, he sides with Erasmus. So do most of America's citizens—also those in the church (especially "evangelicals")—and also sadly most folks, I bet, in Lutheran churches.
 - c. The horrendous death of Missy is the theodicy [how can God be just when such awful things happen?] question for Mack. He's given a gnostic solution.
 - d. The monist deity is in a sense a part of a larger Manichaeian blueprint. It's not two supernatural powers (two conflicting deities), Power of Evil and Power of Good (Love) as in classical Manichaeism.

It's sinful humans who are the anti-god to True God. But if that is the sum total of the "enemy" that God has to confront to save these very same antagonists, then their salvation will be no big deal. For who is patently the bigger God in this tussle? Piece of cake.

- e. I'd have to re-read it to get Young's specs on what really happened on Good Friday/Easter Sunday. I'd be expecting a gnostic version here too. "I want to understand" and "We want to help you understand" is a cantus firmus throughout the book. Mack's redemption is to "get his head screwed on right" about linking the living God to his own mangled childhood and Missy's murder. Maybe the reason I don't remember any/much Good Friday/Easter stuff is that it isn't there. Or if so, it is used to illustrate just how sloppy God's agape really is. You, Phil, could check that out. And you can do what I am unable to do—link all this to the mayhem and madness and Anfechtung you know—for yourself and for those many many of God's kids whom you've shepherded when their encounters with horrendous evil made it "perfectly clear" that trusting Christ's promise is sheer insanity.

Enough already before breakfast.

Cheers!

Ed