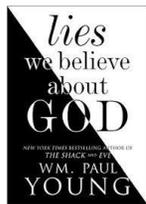


Do We Really Believe Lies About God?

William Paul Young, the author of *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (2007), became the most celebrated Christian fiction writer in the early twenty-first century. By 2017, *The Shack* had sold 22-million copies and had been adapted to a movie that had rave reviews. It divided Christians of all persuasions. They either loved its emotional storyline or they despised its bad theology. The theological debate was renewed when Paul Young released his latest book, *Lies We Believe About God* (Atria Books, 2017) in conjunction with the movie. The book sharply criticizes the Christian Church and claims that “we believe” 28 lies about God.



Challenging the Bible

Lies We Believe About God (hereafter, *Lies*) begins with a foreword by a Universal Reconciliation theologian, Dr. C. Baxter Kruger. He has rekindled past New England Universalism and merged it neo-orthodoxy and evangelical theology. Universalism flourished in New England the mid-1700s and was hotly debated as heresy that divided Christianity. Universalism is called such because eternal salvation in heaven is universally applied to all humanity through Christ's atonement. The Universalist churches that sprang from this history aligned theologically with the Unitarians in 1961, becoming the Unitarian Universalist Association. Kruger and Young differ by retaining Trinitarian language, but they renew debate on liberalism and Universalist theology.

In *Lies*, Kruger attacks the Bible's trustworthiness. He wrote, “The gospels and letters that make up the New Testament are attempts to explore and express the meaning of Jesus's presence and death” (10). Kruger undermines the credibility of the eyewitnesses and the inspiration of Scripture (Luke 1:1-3; John 15:27; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:16) by renaming the New Testament history as “attempts” at His “meaning.” Luke and Peter clearly used “eyewitnesses” in rejection of Kruger and Young's false revision of what occurred. The New Testament's history is eyewitness based and not a mere attempt at some subjective meaning.

Kruger questions how we read the Bible, “Very often the deepest question, and the most ignored, is *how* to read the Bible. What does it mean to read the Bible correctly?” (1-2). The question sounds innocuous, but his answer is deceitful. When a friend suggested the “plain” sense, Kruger rejected it as biased. His task was to prepare readers for Young's new liberal interpretative methods. Young approves Kruger's foreword as the “foundation” of his own “Truth” (20).

What they fail to tell readers is that the Historical-Grammatical hermeneutic is a discipline with centuries of tested and true input from the most gifted of Spirit-filled Christians. Evangelical doctrine did not simply pop up from nowhere. If you alter man's sinful nature, Christ's atonement, salvation, and God's judgment, then you have called Jesus a liar and you have poisoned the gospel.

Lies is divided into 28 subjects, each devoted to a chapter where Young attempts to unravel the things that bother him most about Christianity. Some *lies* are so disproportionately exaggerated that mature Christians will find them weak, inane, or ludicrous. A few weightier ones need an analysis, but let us first examine Young's interpretation method.

New Interpretation Methods

Paul Young rejects the Historical-Grammatical method in favor of three liberal methods: 1. Allegorical interpretation, which claims to bring forth hidden meanings behind various people or events. 2. *Sensus Plenior*—Spiritualized interpretation, which denies literalness of specific passages by spiritualizing their meaning. 3. Esoteric interpretation, which is a mystical, special internal knowledge, or gnostic genre. He uses all three of these to make the Bible fit his preconceived notions.

No Hell

The heart of his message is that all creation is in “relationship” with God. Everything is therefore interpreted through the lens of his relationship motif.

For him, God's relationship with all humanity is salvific (Universalism). All humans are universally children of God.

Evangelical Christians also see a relationship with God, but it is quite different. Humans are not automatically God's children. The human race is “alienated” from God from an imputed sinful nature (Col. 1:21; Rom. 5:12). God brought salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-3). If we “receive” Jesus and “believe in His name,” then we “become” God's children (John 1:12-13). Our sins are “washed” by Jesus' blood, we are no longer condemned, but justified, and we are “adopted” as His children (Rev. 1:5; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:5). Salvation is not universal, but is restricted to those whose names are in the “Lamb's Book of Life,” (Rev. 20:12). Those whose names are not found are “cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 21:15).

Young does not like the “lake of fire” part, so he employs esoteric interpretations to eliminate hell. He changes hell's fire into God's “fiery Love” and he puts God in hell also. He wrote, “. . . perhaps hell is hell not because of the absence of God, but because of the presence of God, the continuous and confrontational presence of fiery Love and Goodness and Freedom . . . This is a fire of Love that now and forever is ‘for’ us, not against us” (136). Young is the only Christian author to make hell “for us” and “not against us.” Young's liberal interpretation makes hell is a good thing, it is good for you! With this understanding, telling someone to “Go to hell” would not be hostile, but a blessing of God's presence with His fiery Love!

Lies is all about making the Bible conform to what Young believes. However, the biblical message “not of private interpretation” (2 Pet. 1:20) and we must “rightly divide the Word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). When the Bible is falsely interpreted and wrongly divided, as with Kruger and Young's methods, then it becomes a contradictory mess. Young is not worried because he candidly confessed that he is not concerned about being right, “my life has been more about being open to a ‘thousand answers’ than it has been about being right” (16). Contrast that with the Bible telling us that right thinking is the highest priority, “My thoughts are not your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8). God wants us to think rightly—His way.

Little-Christ

Young has mastered the art of stretching, changing, and equivocating word-definitions without telling his reader that he has altered them. He does with the word Christian, where he twisted its definition as “mini-Messiahs” and “little-Christ” (53-54). As a “little-Christ,” he adds, “I would wholeheartedly accept and embrace such a categorization” (57). To his embarrassment, the Greek term for Christian, *Christianos*, in Acts 11:26, cannot be and never has been translated as “little-Christ.” Its literal translation is “Christ-follower” or one who “belongs to Christ.” It is utterly false to teach that *Christianos* means “little Christ.”¹

Where did the “little Christ” definition originate? It was nonexistent until the 1890s when Madam Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophy cult introduced it. Theosophists popularized it in their literature and it slowly crept into Christian books without warrant. It surged after 1980, but it has no historical Church usage and has no basis in New Testament Greek.

Jesus answered the question for us about other Christs, saying, “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:23-24, cf. Matt. 24:5; Mark 13:21). Jesus stated that any “Christ,” whether little or any other size, is false and you are NOT to believe it! Jesus alone hold title to “Christ,” upon good biblical authority (Matt. 16:16).

God's Bloodthirst, Abuse, and Sacrifice

Young horrendously describes God. He turns God into a “bloodthirsty” (115), “Cosmic abuser, . . . [and] a very cruel and monstrous god” (149) if He originated the crucifixion of Jesus. He also refers to the crucifixion as “child



sacrifice" (169). This blasphemes and distorts what God accomplished in Jesus' crucifixion. The book neglected to explain that Old Testament sacrifices are a shadow of the substance found in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:17). The New Testament, especially the book of Hebrews, explains why the Old Testament sacrificial rituals took place. It was foreshadowing Christ's "once for all" sacrifice on the cross (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10).

Young regrettably repeats the very same terms used by modern atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, Harris) as a replacement for God's Word to describe the crucifixion. Christians view the Old Testament blood atonement rituals as types of Christ until the law was fulfilled in Christ's death (Hebrews 7-10). The "piercing" of Jesus' hands and feet were predicted in prophecy in 1,200 BC (Psalm 22:16) and 520 BC (Zechariah 12:10) and then were fulfilled in John 19:37 and Revelation 1:7. Jesus being pierced and crucified as "the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" is inescapably God's plan because no humans were present before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). How can he ignore these great explanatory passages, much less dozens of other references?

God Submits to Man

Submission is another word that Mr. Young equivocates. He boldly states that the almighty God submits to man, citing the cross as an example (147-153). The cross then becomes the launching pad for his further claim that God regularly submits to man. This is a tricky word exchange and it is not the way we describe the passion of Christ. He rephrases the terminology so that it is entirely different from the biblical message.

The apostle Paul stated it correctly in Philippians 2:6-8. Jesus, who, "in the form of God, humbled Himself to become "in the likeness of men. It is a slight-of-hand trick to switch from God incarnate, who as man submitted to the cross, to then say that the almighty God submits to man. By comparison, Young said "God submitted to man," but Paul wrote that Jesus submitted to death by the cross, He "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." These are not two ways of saying the same thing, but two different things altogether. It is a fallacy of equivocation of terms and the fallacy of false analogy.

Universalist Salvation for Everyone

Young is sold out to Universalism after ten years of denying it in numerous Christian media interviews.* In *Lies*, he wrote, "Are you suggesting that everyone is saved? That you believe in universal salvation? That is exactly what I am saying!" (118).

If salvation is altered, then the gospel is altered. Young's all-inclusive universalism denies the need for evangelism because everyone already has it! We need only to celebrate that they have it: "We don't offer anyone what has already been given; we simply celebrate the Good News with each one: *We have all been included*" (120). This gives a false hope of a false salvation to an unbeliever. Rebellious people love a message of no repentance—go ahead and live an ungodly "life and salvation is yours anyway because you have "already been given" the "Good News."²

In response, the New Testament Greek noun for the Good News or gospel is *euangelion*. If the gospel has "already been given," then it renders the verb meaningless for spreading the gospel, *euangelizo*, "to proclaim the gospel." The Church office for an "evangelist" is also gutted (Eph. 4:11).

Young's theory destroys everything touching the gospel. The four gospels should not have been written because there is nothing to say if everyone already has it. Acts through Revelation should not have been written, because if it has "already been given" to them, so why tell them anything? Young is absolutely wrong because the early Church knew the Greek word for evangelism and they exemplified it to the point of martyrdom.

Second-Chance Salvation

Universalists often teach second-chance salvation for those who either refused to follow it or did not have the opportunity on earth. Young's book is no exception. He wrote, "I mean that I don't think God would ever say that once you die, your fate is sealed and there is nothing that God can do for you" (182). Young asked, ". . . why would we think that the event of death would have the power to take away our ability to say yes?" (186). Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."

Man is Good

Young does not believe that "Sin separates us from God," (225) or that "You have sinned, and you are separated from God" (231). Instead, he teaches that man is good; the same message as Humanism and the New Age. "Sin," according to Young, "is anything that negates or diminishes or misrepresents the truth of who you are . . ." (229). He teaches that you are a good being and your sin is not realizing your own goodness. In fact, he spoke of an atheist who, without any repentance or conversion, is "already is a child of God" (205). Young has made being a "child of God" an innate human attribute.

Numerous Bible verses outright deny this, like the Psalmist, who said, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). Also, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3). Still further, "There is none who does good" (Ps. 14:1) and "there is none who does good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:12). Man sins because he is a sinful being and his only hope is through Jesus' atonement.

Atonement Not Substitutionary

On Christ's atonement, he admitted in an interview, "I'm not a penal substitutionary guy . . . I don't see the Father pouring out his wrath on the Son." The clear biblical doctrine that Jesus Christ bore the punishment (penalty) for our sins by substitution on the cross was prophesied. He was "smitten by God" for our sins. Isaiah wrote, "Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:4-5).

Peter, who witnessed the crucifixion, paraphrased Isaiah, "[Christ] Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). That Christ was substituted as "the just" in trade for us, "the unjust," is clearly explained by Peter, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18).

There was no question in Paul's epistles that Jesus bore God's wrath by becoming "our curse" (that is the wrath) on the cross, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')" (Gal. 3:13). He took our sin, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (1 Cor. 5:21). See also Romans 3:25, 8:3; and Hebrews 9:26. By altering the atonement of Christ, its purpose, and accomplishment, we are in the most hopeless condition under Young's new theology. If Jesus did not take God's wrath for sin, then Young's own sins have not been expiated and the wrath of God still stands against him and his personal sins.³

The Greatest Problem

A greater problem is that Young's book makes Jesus a liar on these subjects. Jesus did not preach a broad, everybody's in, Universalism. Instead, He said "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matt. 7:13-14; Luke 13:24). Jesus preached about torment in hades and hell (Luke 16:23-25; Matt. 5:22; 9:43-48—where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched). Jesus preached the trustworthiness of the Bible, "Your word is truth," (John 17:17). Jesus taught about His atonement, "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28). He restricted this to those who enter by the narrow gate and not by the broad way. Young's Universalism teaches the broad way, but he errs greatly, because Jesus and the Bible holds the truth on these subjects.

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1. A. T. Robertson's *Word Pictures of the Greek New Testament* at Acts 11:26 and "Christian" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.
2. Those who knew Young claim that he lied about not being a Universalist. He wrote papers on Universal Reconciliation in 1996 and 2004 and presented them to pastors. Copies survived and are quoted in James De Young's book, *Burning Down the Shack* (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2010).
3. A good resource is *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, by Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, (Crossway, 2007).