

God and *The Shack*: Interviews With William Paul Young

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Introduction

This is a transcript of four interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 100 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

Please understand that when people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in the first three interviews is William Paul Young, author of the best-selling book *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2007).

Our guest in the fourth interview is C. Baxter Kruger, president of Perichoresis, a non-profit ministry. Dr. Kruger is the author of the following books:

Across All Worlds: Jesus Inside Our Darkness

God Is For Us

The Great Dance: The Christian Vision Revisited

Jesus and the Undoing of Adam

The Shack Revisited: There Is More Going On Here Than You Ever Dared to Dream

Sharing in God's Life: Interviews With C. Baxter Kruger (available as an e-book in the same place you obtained this one)

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, then Vice President of Grace Communion International.

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## How *The Shack* Was Written

**J. Michael Fezell:** A new novel has skyrocketed to the top of the charts, capturing the imagination of Christians everywhere.

What's so surprising about *The Shack* by William P. Young is its portrayal of God: not the solitary God of popular imagination, such as the one portrayed by George Burns in the film, *Oh, God* or by Morgan Freeman in *Evan Almighty*, but the God of Christian orthodoxy – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three in one and one in three, the Holy Trinity. The result has been hailed as life-changing. Let's talk to the author, William P. Young.

**JMF:** What is it about *The Shack* that is capturing Christians' imagination?

**WPY:** I have no idea. (laughter)

No, I have some ideas. I think that for a lot of us who grew up inside religious kinds of environments, *The Shack* allows God to become accessible and understandable in a way that hasn't been out there in the same kind of form. There's something about a story, there's something about art in general, that has a way of getting past our preconceptions and our paradigms and everything else. Music does that. It has a way of going right past our intellectuality and penetrating us in the heart.

I think that's why parables that Jesus would use were so effective, because they had a way of penetrating past people's preconceptions and their stereotypes and everything else. As a story it has a way of doing it, when you come to the character and nature of God.

I grew up as a missionary kid and a preacher's kid and I went to Bible school and seminary and we always try to find analogies or some way to comprehend the Trinity. I didn't intend to write a great book on the Trinity, that was an accident. What I did was want to communicate to my children, the fact that the very nature of relationship has to be embedded in the character and nature of God.

**JMF:** So you wrote this for your children to begin with – publication wasn't something you had in mind.

**WPY:** No. I'm the most accidental author you'll ever meet. I've never published anything, I've always written as gifts, whether it was poems or songs or whatever, gifts for my children, for my friends, for events, and this was no different. This was in obedience to my wife. She wanted me to write something for the children. She said, "I'd like you to write something that would help your kids understand the breadth of how you think, cause you're a little bit outside

the box.”

**JMF:** There must be a reason she asked you to do that, there must have been something shaping. This is a pretty enormous undertaking...

**WPY:** It’s probably because I’ve done a lot of speaking, a lot of teaching, those kinds of things, and the transformation in my life came about through the process of the renewing of the mind, the healing process in my life, and she’d watched all that and then she also liked how I wrote. So the combination of the two things. My goal in 2005 was to get it done by Christmas, and get it to Kinko’s, put it in a spiral bound, whatever, and have it for them for Christmas. No thought whatsoever, it wasn’t even on the radar that somebody would want to publish it.

**JMF:** So what happened?

**WPY:** It got out of hand, is what happened. Even the electronic version, the first manuscript I sent to a couple of my cousins. It had this huge impact that I wasn’t anticipating. And it would spill over. People would send it to other people, and we started getting this feedback about the book, and I didn’t know what to do about it.

So after Christmas, I sent it to the only “for real” author that I know – that was Wayne Jacobson and he intentionally writes books. I just attached it to an email because one of his books had just come out that I really loved and I said, by the way, I’ve been working on this. Then he said, of course, he gets buried with these kinds of things. I understood that and said, no expectations, really.

I just had the nudge (and sometimes the Holy Spirit gives us a nudge just so we learn how to hear his voice, not for any outcome). But in this case he actually started reading and he promised me he would read at least 20 pages. He called me back up and kind of freaked me out, because (I’ve come to know that Wayne is like this, but I didn’t know it at that time) he started off – “What were you thinking sending me this manuscript?” I thought, “I have pushed all his hot buttons.” I’m backing up in the basement. “Oh man, what do I do?” I said, “My relationship with you is way more important than some sort of manuscript...just put it on the shelf.”

He said, “No, you don’t understand. I can’t print the pages fast enough. I don’t remember the last time I read anything where my immediate response was “I have six or seven people that I need to send this to right now.”

So I said, “I trust the Holy Spirit in you. Send it to whoever you want.” He said, “I already did.” This is from Friday to Monday. That sort of got the ball rolling.

I went down and met with him and his buddy Brad Cummings – they do the “God Journey” podcast, and Bobby Downs from Christian Cinema came around, and we began to just talk about and work on how to bring this about, which started a 16-month process, because we all have jobs and busy-ness and everything else.

We very collaboratively worked on the book – then nobody would publish it. We sent it to everybody. Nobody wanted it. Either they didn’t respond, or if they did, they said, “It doesn’t fit our niche.” It’s either too edgy or too much Jesus, depending what side of the farm they’re on. So the guys said, “Well, we’ve always wanted to be a publishing company,” so they created their own – with one title – *The Shack* – and attached it to a website.

Wayne’s and people from the podcast were the initial ones who purchased the copies, and then they’d come back and they’d buy four, and they’d come back and buy six, and then a dozen, and then a case, and we just watched this thing begin to blossom. Even to date, we’ve only spent a couple or three hundred dollars in marketing and promotion, total. It’s all been through relationship, which is the earmark of the book itself. It’s all about: this has got to be a relationship with God or else we’re just not going to be good enough to achieve that whatever it is that we’re supposed to be doing.

**JMF:** There’s a perception of God that most people have, kind of a “God’s out there, we’re down here.”

**WPY:** He’s watching from a distance, like that silly song.

**JMF:** Yeah. What do you see as the problems of that kind of perspective – that’s how most people think of God?

**WPY:** Any theology of separation creates a gap that is up to *us* to traverse.

**JMF:** Now, theology of separation, you mean ...

**WPY:** A lot of us grew up with an idea that everything was based on our performance. Instead of a new covenant understanding of union with Christ, we still function as if we lived in the old covenant ...

**JMF:** Separated from God.

**WPY:** Separated from God. When we have any perceived separation, that separation’s our problem, it’s our fault and it’s our sin, it’s our whatever – and so it’s now up to us through behavior to get across that separation to wherever God is – to enter his holiness.

Even modern believers use language that is a language of separation. “We are now going to

come into his presence” – as if we’ve been out of it. All of that language is old covenant language, and the whole performance-based paradigm is definitely old covenant, but we’ve just modified it – changed some of the words – and now we can eat shellfish. But we also have another thousand extra little rules that we’ve added as well.

**JMF:** When you talk about relationship, as opposed to this theology of separation, this is what you get into as you unfold the God-character in the book. The Trinity plays a very important role in that – but the Trinity is not something the average Christian thinks much about. It’s a doctrine, and the church holds it as a doctrine as important and key, but...

**WPY:** But it’s a more of an intellectual kind of affirmation than anything else, and people don’t see how crucial the reality of the relationships amongst or within God are to us. Again, I didn’t intend to write a book on the Trinity, but by describing them relate to each other, all of a sudden it makes sense.

**JMF:** That is, Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

**WPY:** Exactly. You begin to see God within – God’s very character is relational and cannot be un-relational. For example, God has never done anything by himself. There’s always been three involved. In the creation, he says, “This is a great creation, it’s all good. But there’s one thing that’s not good. We have a creation here, a human being who doesn’t have anybody to collaborate with. And that’s not good.” In God’s very being, you have collaboration and relationship, that’s why there’s verses about the Father being the creator and the Spirit being the creator, and Word, Jesus, being the creator.

We think in our independent theology, individualistic theology, that somehow we can do this by ourselves – that we’re going to be alone. It’s relational for us because we are made in his image, and his very nature is relational. It begins to change everything – the dynamics of how this all works.

So when Jesus comes to us, when God the Father comes to us, the Spirit comes to us, it’s all about relationship. That’s why to me the central passage of the new covenant in Scriptures is John 14, 15, 16, 17, when he’s talking about, “this is what we’ve been going after. We are coming to live inside of you – we’re going to make this a habitation and not just a visitation. We’ve been dealing with visitation, but it’s all going to change now and we’re going to come live inside of you.”

**JMF:** Typically people think of that in terms of rules! God has a list of rules,

commandments and we obey those, and that's how we have a good relationship with God and with each other.

**WPY:** Good luck with that! If you think that it's on the basis of behavior – especially those of us who've been damaged, which would probably include most of us. But the more damaged that we've been, behavior is not going to work for us. We have to have some form of transformation, or there's no hope for us. We're not people that are necessarily self-disciplined. Our flesh got hurt somewhere in the process and we don't have the bent for that or the ability for it. So if we make everything behavioral in terms of relationship with God, we're toast. This is not going to happen.

**JMF:** Does it take a degree of honesty for Christians to see themselves in that light?

**WPY:** Absolutely, and it takes time, it takes process, and for us, to become honest is a process by itself. You have Jacob, right? Jacob is in the later part of his life and he's still not been honest. It has taken this whole time. God has been consistently working at him and present with him, and he's now going to face his brother who he thinks is going to kill him. He sends everything out until he's got nothing left to work with, and then he takes on God.

In the wrestling match, God finally says, "I'm done. We're not doing this anymore. This is your whole life. I'm not going to play this game anymore."

Jacob says, "I'm not going to let you go until you bless me."

God says, "Ok, tell me your name."

When I first ran into that during my process of healing, I immediately went back to Jacob as a young man and he goes in looking for the father's blessing. I'm not going to leave until you give me the blessing. His dad says, "What's your name?" And he says, "Esau."

We're right back there, in that sense, but all these years later – and now he's wrestling and saying "I'm not going to let you go until I have the father's blessing."

And God says, "What's your name?"

He finally says, "Jacob. I'm a liar, I'm a heel-grabber, I'm a cheat, I'm a usurper, I'm all these things."

Then God says, "Ok, I'm not only going to bless you by putting your hip out, so that you have something that will remind you everyday of who you are and where you've come from, but I'll change your name, too. You'll be a conquered one, you'll be conquered by God."

That level of honesty is what *The Shack* is part of. It's about being honest. *The Shack* is a

metaphor. It's the place where we got hurt. It's the place where we got damaged, it's the place that we messed up so royally – or that we've been piling all the stuff. And we don't want to go back there. We want God to come in and just yank us from where we are, to somewhere where we think we ought to be. And he says, "No, we're gonna actually begin to heal the emotions, and heal the thinking, and heal the heart, and do all these things. But to do that, we've got to go back there."

For me, it took 38 years to get to the shack, it took 11 years to get through the shack, and I condense that 11 years to a weekend for Mackenzie Allen Phillips, the main character. And in that "shack," it's time for all secrets to come out, because we are as sick as the secrets we keep. A lot of times, the religiosity side – this performance-based paradigm – either forces us to hide our stuff, or just flat out lie about it.

**JMF:** To ourselves.

**WPY:** To ourselves and to everyone out there, and to God. It's just like somebody said to me: "Oh. I couldn't really tell God this." It's like he doesn't know. All because he is separated again – he's over there somewhere and this is just between you and me, I can tell you, but I couldn't really tell God these things.

We again have that idea of God as not being inside this process with us. He is outside, seeing how good at the process we are, and judging us at every point for our inability to be perfect in it. We only feel as good about ourselves as our last moment of perfection, inside that paradigm. It's a devastating paradigm, and I think it's false.

One of the reasons I wrote the book for my children was to save them maybe 40 years of legalistic-performance-oriented baggage. I don't want them to run with 750 million pounds of weight, and they're so far ahead of where I was when I was their age, and I'm grateful for that.

**JMF:** Why, even though we know this about God, do we tend to be so addicted to rules?

**WPY:** Part of it is bad theology. Maybe intended or unintended – but we got the idea somewhere along the road that we're still in the old covenant, the language changed a little bit. The other part of it is that – think of where we've come from, where before Jesus Christ came to live inside of us and make us spiritually alive, all we had was the flesh, all we had was this mortality, and everything was dependent on how we looked, who we knew, how good we thought, if we could sing or not, everything was performance and competition. That's how we think about everything.

So when Jesus now comes to dwell inside of us, he doesn't automatically transform the flesh. It's in a process of being saved. I reject the Buddhist kind of mentality that says (and it's in Christianity to a degree) that somehow we need to disappear so that Jesus can be revealed.

He's already come – the Father is well pleased with the Jesus that is part of the Trinity. He doesn't need a billion Jesuses – what he desires is to come and live inside of *you* – the epitome and apex of his creation. As great and incredible as the macro universe is, as incredible as the micro with quantum mechanics and everything else, it's nothing compared with one human being. The intricacy and the incredible wonder of that person, he comes to make alive and then begins from the inside to transform out.

We're not used to that – we're so performance-oriented that we want to take the rules and think that they are going to affect my behavior from the outside. That's the intention of rules, is that they will modify my behavior and they'll tell me what to do. That's why we love self-discipline without understanding that it's a work of the flesh – as opposed to self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit that comes from the inside and works its way out.

We have this natural affinity with rules, because all of our sense of worth, our value, our security, all of our understanding of reality is attached to performance. I can judge you, I can compare myself with you – or I can find somebody else, if you're better than I am. It's all based on performance, and it's what we're used to.

How do I understand significance? Behaviorally. I've got to do something in order to be significant. God says, "That's not the truth. You're made in my image. I love you. There is nothing you can do to change that. You can't add to your significance, you can't take it away." And yet the issue of significance inside the Christian community is as rampantly a driving force in the lives of people – especially men – as outside.

The whole paradigm is a very coercive, imprisoning paradigm – because it all comes back to "how good at this I can be?" You know what? It doesn't change us. All it does is modify our behavior. But give us enough time – it will all explode again, anyway, because all we're doing is repressing the shame and the guilt and the condemnation – the things that God nailed to the cross, because he knew it couldn't achieve one ounce of righteousness. None of those things can produce righteousness.

The law can't. All the law could ever do is say, "You're guilty, I'm here to tell you." In the book I used the illustration of – it's like a mirror. You've been working under the car all day,

you've been wiping your face and you don't know how dirty you are until you look in the mirror. And the mirror says, "You need soap."

And you say, "Oh if I can just take the mirror and scrape myself clean" – which is what the legalistic paradigm says. Somehow, I can embrace these rules in such a way that I can accomplish them.

Then Jesus comes along and says, "You can't even have the *desire* to break one of those [laws] inside of you, because if you do, the whole thing's lost."

Somehow we think, "No, God gave us this whole new set of rules – the Ten Commandments plus whatever our religious environment and sub-culture has added to it – to do certain things, to not do certain things, whatever. If we can just embrace that. And God gave us the Holy Spirit to help us do the rules now."

I'm sorry, it's not going to work. If you think you can do this, I've got a book for you: "One thousand and three hundred and forty two steps to holiness." I guarantee you at step number two, you'll be dead.

**JMF:** Now, surely, you get objections from some sectors of Christianity that say, "By saying this kind of thing, you're just encouraging people to sin and you're taking away any kind of ..."

**WPY:** I've got good company there. Is this not the question that Paul raises in Romans? "So, are you saying that we should just go out and sin so grace would abound?" [Romans 6:1]

What's his response? "You don't have any idea of who you are, do you?" Because when it comes to God, the central issue is his character – who is this God? When it comes to human beings, the central issue is identity – *who* are you?

We have a theology that has told us that we are still stuck in a paradigm that identifies us as an old nature. But we have a new nature now – and these two are duking it out, and it's kind of, "what nature are you going to feed today?"

But they don't tell us if the feeder [the one who is doing the feeding] is part of the old nature, or part of the new nature. If it's part of the new nature, it's only going to feed the new nature. If it's part of the old, maybe it gets confused. In that paradigm, which comes down to performance, you're always going to consider yourself fundamentally as the old nature.

The issue is "identity." Did anything really happen when Jesus Christ came to live inside of you? Or is it just all positional and intellectual? Because if it's just positional and intellectual,

I'm back working at this as hard as I can – just like I was before.

But maybe, maybe he came to dwell inside of this flesh, not to eradicate it, but to heal it. If that begins to happen, here are some things that I won't be... There's a possibility that I wouldn't be. My emotions begin to be healed. I begin to feel things differently. My thinking obviously gets transformed. It's renewed – all this transformation takes place because of the renewal of the mind. I begin to look at people differently. I begin to touch people differently. I begin to relate to my circumstances differently. Those changes, for a lot of us, we couldn't go and say, "This caused this change, or that caused it." God is the only one inside of us who can unwrap this healing in such a way that it doesn't destroy us.

**JMF:** Isn't it like a sheer force of will, that rules and laws are about *you* deciding you're going to do something right? Whereas we're not talking about that. We're talking about actual relationship.

**WPY:** Yeah. You cannot use the flesh to defeat the flesh. You cannot use self-discipline to become self-controlled. That's the whole Galatians 3 thing. Paul says, JB Phillips translation: "Dear idiots of Galatia, who has bewitched you? Having began in the Spirit, do you think you're gonna be perfected by the flesh? Don't you understand who you are?"

To use an easier illustration that might help – there are a lot of folks that pray for patience. Do you find anybody in the New Testament who prays for patience? Can you think of one prayer in the New Testament where somebody prays for patience?

**JMF:** Nothing springs to mind.

**WPY:** Exactly! Cause it isn't there. There is an understanding that patience is a fruit of the Spirit, that when Jesus comes to live inside of me, patience comes to live inside of me. Patience has wed his life with mine in such a way that my nature is now patient.

But if I think I'm still the old nature, and I'm still impatient, I will continue to function because that's what I think the truth about myself really is. Instead of beginning to understand that for me to act impatiently is to go contrary to my nature – that who I am in Christ – that's the core of this new covenant that I'm a part of. That's the central element of identity, is that union – relationship. Jesus says, "I'm coming inside. In fact, not only I'm coming, the Father is coming. We're going to make a habitation in you." It's not a visitation, where you're once in a while empowered so that you can create holiness in your life, or righteousness.

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Is God a Christianized Zeus?

JMF: Thanks for being with us again, Paul. And, by the way, you do like to be called Paul, even though your name is William P. ...

WPY: It's a family thing, my dad is William Henry, I'm William Paul, my firstborn is William Chad, and my first grandbaby is William Gavin.

JMF: And the thing you have in common is no one goes by William.

WPY: No. You know what's funny is, I've had people recommend the book to *me* who are my friends, because they did not connect that I'm the Paul.

JMF: Hey, there's a guy by the name of Young who's written a book...

WPY: Yeah, you related to him?

JMF: What kind of people are reading *The Shack*?

WPY: It's across the board. It's people who are from a conservative Christian framework, there are people who are totally outside. There are people in prisons, and people from every kind of walk of life you can imagine. I get 30 to 50 e-mails a day, from all over world. It is really across the board – theologians, to people who have never ever read the Bible, and so we're getting people who are attracted to the story and it's impacting their lives – from every walk that you can imagine.

JMF: What are some of the common themes of positive response that you're getting?

WPY: Believe it or not, there have been a lot of people who've been hurt by religious institutions.

JMF: That's shocking!

WPY: Totally shocking. I don't mean that facetiously – there's a lot of hurt out there because of – systems have a way of manipulating people of accomplishing their goals in a very non-relational or un-relational framework. So there are a lot of folks who are coming with a whole lot of hurt that way. There are people who are in the middle of great sadnesses themselves – who have issues with their family or health, and they bring that.

One of my favorite quotes – not because I love it, but it was so penetrating to me. There's a gal in Atlanta who is struggling with cancer who said that the book really yanked her out of the depression that she was in, and it's serious. She is facing life and death. When she wrote, she said, "I wasn't afraid to die. I was terrified at the look of disappointment on his face when we meet." That encapsulates, for a lot of us, our experience within religious systems.

People are coming with their own stuff. I got a note from a gentleman who's in prison. And another one from the guy who is the chaplain of, I believe, Leeds Prison in London – the largest prison in London – he was saved under Nicky Cruz – he was a Hell's Angel and doesn't like Christian fiction, but really loves this book. It's penetrating into those areas.

We're finding that it's being a bridge for reconciliation even between the African-American community and the arch-conservative White community – just because, for a lot of people, they've never been able to use any imagery of God other than Zeus. We've Christianized Zeus – or Gandalf with an attitude. But now for the first time it's like – let's get God out of the box that we've placed him in, because he's frankly left anyway.

JMF: The old gentleman, kind of like Gandalf with a flowing beard, out there ... judging..

WPY: And with the lightning bolts, and it's all our behaviors, so as soon as we step aside...

I had some young men, and I know about a discussion that they had about the character of God. One particular young man who's a friend of our family was struggling last year with his relationship with God because they had concluded that God was Zeus, and that doesn't create a lot of relationship. My wife, Kim, handed him the book last summer at a wedding and said, "Just read this." He called me up about three weeks later and said, "Paul, when Papa came through the door, my whole world changed."

It's not about me coming up with all the effort necessary to bridge the gap – but that God actually crosses it himself in pursuit of us. The only time you see God running anywhere in Scripture is when the object of his affection is coming toward him – that's the prodigal father – he runs. Other than that, it's all walking, it's all relationship. I wanted God to just come across that divide – because that's how I believe he is, and everything that I understand about Scripture says that's the God that we are in love with and who loves us, and pursues us.

JMF: You've had objections from religious circles.

WPY: Yeah, I had a few.

JMF: The question comes up, "This is just your idea of God that really isn't biblical."

WPY: I wrote God as good as I knew how, and he is better than I wrote him. It's fiction. This was not an attempt for a systematic theology, so there are things that are not in there. This was a story for my six kids. It's a fictional account. There's a lot of truth behind it, in terms of – the pain's real, the process of coming to wholeness is real, the conversations are very real conversations and the character of God is as good and as real as I could write him.

We are getting some push back, but it's very minor, and very small. Just some people who are vocal minorities. It just tends to be that way. I have a couple thousand emails from people whose lives and relationship have changed – and stories all the time. That stack is what I really care about.

I am not opposed to answering any of the [doctrinal] questions, but a lot of times [this type of] conversation doesn't push us across into loving people. It's just kind of a theological place. Unfortunately, there are some folks who, when they ask you a question, they're asking for a piece of wood they can burn. They're not asking for a conversation. Those are not the conversations I get involved in. They're just not valuable.

But I got an email the other day and this gal writes, "Your book's the most juvenile piece of trash I've ever read. It's pedantic, it's slow..." it's whatever. She really gave it to me. She's the kind of conversation that I love...

To just step back a second. I had a fellow say to me this weekend: "When somebody asks me about *The Shack*, this is what I say to them: 'Your response to this book will tell me more about *you* than about the book.'" That is so accurate. I don't have a sense of ownership. This was a gift, all of what's happening with the book is so outside the box. My favorite quote is from Tyson, who goes to Oregon State. He says to my 19-year-old daughter, "Amy, this book is so far beyond your dad." That's my favorite quote. With all that in mind, when people are telling me, I have nothing that I need to protect. I don't have a territory here. This is not my identity. I'm not a writer in terms of... I wasn't doing this in order to be significant or because my security was involved here, my sense of worth.

So when this gal writes me this note, I wrote her back. I was very careful because I wanted my response to be affirming and positive. People who are word smiths, we know how to put a knife just under the surface of a word – you know what I'm talking about? So, I wrote her back: "I'm so impressed that somebody would have the self-confidence to write an author and trash their stuff like this." I said, "I am so impressed." And I said, "I'm attaching about two week's worth of emails that I get, about 20 pages, and email snippets, and you maybe absolutely right. This could be the most juvenile piece of trash you've ever read. But look at how it's changing peoples' hearts and lives, look at how it's bringing people into a relationship with Jesus Christ? The beauty of that is that God could take such a juvenile piece of trash and impact peoples' lives this way. I am so pleased to be a part of this."

Four days later she wrote me back and said, “I need to ask for your forgiveness.” Which is beautiful, because if I’ve been all defensive and said this or that or “you can’t even spell all your words right” or whatever, there’s no relationship in that. All I’ve done is protected my little kingdom, my little territory, my little sense of identity or worth.

So yeah, we’re getting some push back. I’ve been labeled a Hindu, and I’ve been labeled a Universalist and I’ve been labeled somebody who hates the local church. But there are folks out there, and they’re bringing everything they’ve got to the table, and part of what they feel they’ve got is that there are people behind them, and they want to protect them from people like me. It’s what they’ve got, this is what they’re bringing to the table. I think they’re wrong, that the people behind them don’t need protection – that the Holy Spirit can speak to them – all of that. But it is what it is.

We can deal with individual questions, like being Hindu, because I’m not, being a Universalist, because I’m not. All of these kinds of things are part of the ongoing conversation. But it is a small group compared with how this book is simply, in the best way, ruining people’s lives – in the best way. It’s just transforming, and all of a sudden God in Three is becoming accessible, and is on their side to help them deal with their stuff and there’s no shame in that process.

JMF: The common perception of God is being a Judge, and you are separated from him until you say the sinners’ prayer. You deal with that in pretty clear terms as the characters are unfolded in the book.

WPY: Absolutely. If you look even at Jesus, and I always go back to “how does this play out in the life of Jesus?” He called them “disciples” a long time before they were alive. He even said to them, “I no longer call you servants – reflecting the old covenant kind of mentality – but I call you friends.” They’re not even alive yet.

In the same passage he’s saying, “I’m going to go to the cross, I’m going to come back, receive you to myself, on that day you’ll be alive.” Then he says, “The work that I do, you will do also.” Which means, not the work that I *did*. “I didn’t come to model this. I came to *continue* to do my work. But now, I’ll be in you together, we’ll be able to collaborate, participate together in what I’m doing.”

Even in relationship to the disciples, you don’t have this sense of separation. The whole point of the Incarnation is his identification with us – it’s not a sense of separation. This is where

we've done a huge injustice to the Trinity. It's like God the Father is the Holy One. Jesus is the one who's allowed to get his hands dirty. God has to be at a distance, you know, like you're saying earlier – watching us from a distance, because holiness means he can't look upon sin or he can't be around it. And we're going, "how does that fit with the omniscience of God? How does that fit with the Incarnation? Isn't Jesus fully God, and fully man? If he's fully God, then God must be in the middle of it.

One of the dominant metaphors or images that I used, is that there are nail scars on Papa's wrists – God the Father. I've been given some push back about that. But that's scriptural, and everything that is embedded in the story – and I didn't do this just by myself – I had help from some very smart theologically trained people to make sure that the realities that are inside this parable, this story, are validated by Scripture.

This one's 2 Corinthians 5:19 For Papa – God, "for God the Father was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself not counting their sins against them." Is that separation? Where did reconciliation take place? It was on the cross! Where was God the Father? He was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. This was a collaborative event where God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in Christ was involved in getting inside all of our loss and all of our pain with the express purpose of healing us. Not "I'm sorry, you've got to deal with all the bad stuff, I'll be back in three days." That, again, would be separation, and that's what I was trying to go against.

JMF: "I and my Father are one."

WPY: Yeah, "you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

JMF: Yet at the same time, in the book, you maintained the distinctions, Father, Son and Spirit while also bringing together the unity.

WPY: Which turned out to be so beautiful. I'll tell you, a lot of people have asked me, "Who did you read in order to portray God this way?" I hardly read anybody about the Trinity. I've started to read a lot more, because it's out there from the Catholic experience, from the Protestant experience – there are some beautiful things, Eastern Orthodox has beautiful portrayals of the Trinity. My guiding phrase was Ravi Zacharias' little phrase: "Unity and diversity in the community of the Trinity." That little phrase was what framed everything that I did when I was talking about how they related to each other – how they loved each other.

I wanted my kids to stand back and say, "That's the kind of life – that's the kind of dynamic relationship that I want, not only between me and God, or involved with me and God, but I want

it in terms of my experience with the people that I love. And with my enemies even,” because it continues to extend.

God’s nature is agape. I want my children to bask in the love of Father – and that’s the central thing that I was trying to communicate, as well as his character and the consistency of his character. Then, let’s take a look at some of the worst situations that we could ever imagine, and let those situations ask the questions that all of us feel in our hearts.

JMF: In light of the response, the overwhelming response that you didn’t even expect as the book has been distributed – word of mouth, not even by ...

WPY: It’s through relationships. It’s people who care about somebody, who gives it to them, and it’s like these conversations just emerge. How you respond to the book will tell you more about you, as you respond, it tells me more about you than about the book, a lot of times that’s very true. But it raises conversations that have never happened before among people that thought they knew each other.

There’s a lot of people who respond, “This is exactly the way I always thought God must be like.” And there are people who are responding and going, “I’m so afraid to believe this because I’ve been disappointed so many times... Is God really like this? Is this a possibility?”

And there are folks who are saying, “There’s just not enough wrath in this book,” because there’s wrath in Scripture. Yes, of course, there is. A friend of mine who is an Old Testament professor and theologian, when asked that, he says, “Can you name me one thing that God lets Mack off the hook on and says, ‘Oh, that doesn’t really matter?’” There’s nothing. God goes after every single thing.

JMF: Mack, being the central character.

WPY: God goes after everything in Mack’s life that is wrong, everything that’s not truthful, that’s not honest, everything that’s a lie, everything that’s false, and to me the wrath of God is God’s very character against everything that is wrong. The fact that a doctor comes to someone and wants to perform surgery to cut a piece of your body out because it’s got cancer, doesn’t mean that he hates you. In fact, he’s after that which is destroying you.

When you look in [God’s] face and you see anger, you might misunderstand that he is making a value statement about you. But he’s not. He is coming after everything that keeps us from being free and being whole. The full set of his fury is against that. Even what he did in the Old Testament in terms of what *we* call the plagues, many times is referred to as the miracles, or

the great workings, or the wonders, the nine wonders – because he went after every point of idolatry that was locking the Egyptians into their losses, as much as it was locking the children of Israel into that bondage. That’s a beautiful thing, you know.

If we want to understand the Old Testament, we’ve got to first look at Jesus, because he is the most obvious expression and manifestation of the character of God – “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father; I and the Father are one.” All those things are true. Some people think that God got saved somewhere between Malachi and Matthew and during the 400 silent years. This is the same God who’s been there. Just because our conceptions are so wound by performance – and by these kinds of frameworks that we don’t see clearly – doesn’t mean that he is what we thought he was. Like one gal wrote and said, “My daughter just came in, she’s 21, she wants to know if she can divorce the old God and marry this new one.”

JMF: Already been done. The concept of wrath itself – the definition of wrath, when we talk about the wrath of God, we like to put the definition of our own wrath, when we are angry about something that’s offended us – and we project that onto God, and so that’s the way God must be.

WPY: Absolutely. For a lot of us, our theology has been maybe our own father, or authority figures in our lives, projected to the ultimate level. And we don’t...

JMF: Angry...

WPY: And out of control, and I’m constantly disappointing him and I’m constantly failing. It’s a, “You got an A minus – that’s ok, but I know you can do better.” “Yes, you played great defense, but your offense was awful.” Whatever it is, we are constantly put onto a scale of performance and say, “You failed.”

What’s the main question in legalism? It’s “How much is enough?” And the answer is always, “More.” How much is enough prayer? How much is enough reading Scripture? How much is enough giving? How much is enough? And legalism says, “More.” We can’t do that.

JMF: And even if it’s more, it’s got to be better.

WPY: Yeah. More as in perfect. Yeah, you figure it out.

JMF: And then how do you define perfect?

WPY: Exactly.

JMF: Your life has changed as a result of an enormous amount of... You have everything from interviews, everything’s turned up-side-down, I imagine, in you life as a result of the spread

of this book.

WPY: Yeah, it's had a little impact.

JMF: So, what do you do for relaxation to get away, hobbies, or...

WPY: I have two grandbabies. Part of my relaxation is to spend time with them. Any grandparent knows. That's as close to being in heaven as you can imagine. I have six children, I still have three at home. So I'm involved with some sports activities and drama and being involved in their lives as well. And I'm married to the woman who saved my life, and I think all men, for the most part, marry up. I have a community of friendships and relationships that are all a part of that, that are wonderful.

Life is lived at one day at a time. This is a funny, different kind of season for us, and we're tracking it one day at a time. We don't have any guarantees we'll be here tomorrow. So I want to spend this day in the present, in the presence of the one who loves me best. I don't want to project it into what's going to happen into the future and be freaked out. This is where he lives with me.

It goes back to the prayer I prayed at the beginning of 2005, when I came out of the shack: "I will never ask you again, Papa, I'll never ask you again to bless anything that I do, but if you have something that you're blessing that I could hang around, I would love that. Because I want to know at the end of the day, you did this." My whole life is religious. At the end of the day, I couldn't tell you whether I did it or I performed it because of insecurity or a need to be significant and I coerced people into getting things done and I shamed them into doing stuff. I'm done with that.

JMF: Isn't there a certain confidence ... like Mack finally saw in the book that, regardless of what you wind up being involved with, you can rest assured that God is there with you in it – whether it might have been the best choice or not-so-best, he's there.

WPY: Absolutely. There's a huge rest in that. Jesus says, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light." Where does he live? He lives inside of us. If my yoke is not easy and my burden is not light, what part of God have I picked up? I picked up something that doesn't belong to me.

Rest is the environment in which we do everything. We live our lives and that happens today. Today is the day of salvation. Today, enter my rest, today. This is where eternity intersects my life – today.

I love the bride of Christ. I bash any institutional systems generally. I don't care whether

they are political or religious or whatever, because frankly, they are part of the world's system – a way to coerce and manage human beings. But I love “the bride.” I don't care whether “the bride” meets in a used building or has a steeple.

The church is “people.” It's people, always has been. You either are the church or you're not. To gather together is a gift – always has been. We were intended to be in community. How you do it, it's going to be different from culture to culture and situation to situation. If you are under persecution, it's going to look a whole lot different than when you're not.

All of that is to say, “God decided to do something with this story.” When I asked him if it would be okay for me to hang around something he was blessing, I never thought it would be something that I did – actually wrote. That wasn't on the radar. I was just saying, “I'm available.” I said, “I don't care if I shine shoes or open the door, or clean the toilets. It doesn't matter to me, if I can just be hanging around you.” Because that's where I am in my life, that's all that matters to me.

All the gifting of family and friendships and community of faith – all of that – is just the gift he brings to encompass his presence. That's where I want to stay, that's where I want to live. Between you and me (and I guess everybody out there), if this all went away tomorrow, I'd be fine. My identity is not in this book. My significance is not connected to this. My security is not. He's everything. If it goes away, great! I want to be around whatever he's blessing. This doesn't have to be it.

When somebody attacks it, and attacks me or whatever, it's just part of being part of this process. They don't know me, so they can't be attacking me. If they knew my history, they'd go, “Why in the world would God have loved a man like that?” I'd say, “It's just the way love is. Grace is wasteful, and he wasted it on me – like he wants to waste it on all of us. He has already.” Don't we love being in the middle of his embrace? Absolutely. Do we want to leave it for some temptation, for something else? Not anymore.

JMF: Any more ideas for writing on the horizon?

WPY: I write little things, so far, and I post them on WindRumors, which is the website that I write stuff on. I've got ideas, but you know what? The beauty of this is that I want to walk it out a day at a time. If I do it, I'll do it as a gift. I don't even know if I'll do it under my own name. I don't know. I don't know any of these things today. But I'm always thinking about stuff and working on different ideas and things, I love that.

I love the freedom that says, “Just stay in my presence, everything will be fine,” and if I get the chance to do some other things and creative stuff, if I live past today, he’ll be there, we’ll figure it out – we’ll work it out. It’s a journey and it’s a process. As much as we’d like the blue or the red pill, it’s a process, and it’s a great one.

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Did an Angry God Force His Son to Die?

JMF: The view of God that you present in *The Shack* is a sound biblical perspective that strangely is foreign to the way many people have traditionally thought about God.

WPY: We have lost, or a lot of us have never had, the conversation about the nature of God. We've been so focused on our ability to keep the rule, or the law, or whatever and it's all been behavioral. We haven't had a conversation about what is this character. We live in such world of uncertainty. Everything about our lives is uncertain. We could get a call from the boss today and what we thought we were heading toward is no longer there. A sale could go sideways, a truck comes across the middle line, and changes our lives. So we're filled with uncertainty.

JMF: And especially about what God thinks about us, we don't know... we're afraid of him.

WPY: We try to create something that will get his behavior to be certain. "If I can just do the right things, in the right order, to the right degree, then God is rather obligated to do it" – to do whatever it is that we think we want him to do. That can be having enough faith, for example... Whatever our formula is, to get the result... so that we can get God's behavior to be certain. There's a word for that, and it's called *magic*. God doesn't like magic. Magic is, if I have the right formula, the right incantation, the right something, I can get the right result. We try to use magic to get certainty.

If there's no certainty in our circumstances, and there's no certainty in God's behavior, where is there any certainty? It has to be in his character. If we get his character wrong, or if we think that he is not good, that he is not loving – and we get that wrong, then we are by ourselves, and we're back to issues of fear and control, because we try to get control over uncertainty in many ways. Anger, or dulling the pain of it through addictions of one sort or another, depression... there's a million ways that we try to gain some control. Instead, if we begin to understand the character of God – that he comes into this relationship with us, for us, to heal us – that is a place we can put our feet down and begin to stand and move forward. Otherwise, we're just on our own.

So the characterization of God in the book is an attempt, in fiction, to try to describe that solidity of character that I think a lot of us have not trusted. We don't trust... That's Mack's big issue – that he doesn't believe God is good. But he doesn't know to get from where he is to believing it either, and God is very gracious about that process and says, "You can't do it by

yourself, but together we can do it.”

JMF: In the midst of tragedy or great pain, that’s when it’s very difficult to believe that God is good...

WPY: Yeah, because everything has become uncertain.

JMF: There’s a place in the book where you talk about the Father versus the Son, the Father being so holy and so great that he can’t be touched by our evil and our wickedness. But Jesus on the other hand is the good guy. Kind of the good cop, bad cop... Let me just read that section briefly.

Mack [the central character] says, “But I always liked Jesus better than you, he seems so gracious and you seem so mean.” “Sad, isn’t it? He came to show people who I am and most folks only believe it about him. They still play us off like good cop, bad cop most of the time, especially the religious folk. When they want people to do what they think is right, they need a stern God, when they need forgiveness, they run to Jesus.”

And yet as you portray the characters here, we’re not talking about two different Gods of different character, we’re talking about one God who is for us...

WPY: Unfortunately, we have some theology that has come alongside and said, where God the Father is, his issue is our sinfulness. He can’t hang around us. That is sort of like Jesus has made friends with us and God the Father is a little perturbed about it. He wants to say, “Can you find a better quality of friend? I mean, they come to my house, they mess it up, they leave things dirty, they don’t do the dishes. If you just find a better quality of friend. I know I’ll be ok because you love them.” We have the mentality that Jesus is trying to convince the Father that we’re worth enough to love.

JMF: We use the word “advocate” because he’s an advocate with the Father for us, but ... he needs a lot of convincing.

WPY: And to make even matters worse, we have this idea that God comes to us and says, “You and I have a problem. Your behavior doesn’t meet up to the standards required, but I have a solution: For you and I to be ok, I’m going to take my innocent Son, whom I love more than anything else in the world, out to the woodshed, and kill him – and then you and I will be ok. Oh, by the way, trust me.”

We’re going, “Is there a disconnect here somewhere? Is that what had to happen for God the Father and me to be ok?” We’re going, “That’s not it at all... that God was in Christ reconciling

the world to himself, it was God the Father that crawls inside of this very thing.”

People say, “What about, ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’” That is Christ on the cross, for the first time as a human being, experiences a sense of separation. He doesn’t believe that it’s real – because the next thing he says is “into your hands I commit my spirit.” There is no real separation, but he feels the sense of it, but God is in him in that whole process. There is no abandonment like that. That cry is a cry of those who have experienced abandonment. For some of us that is such a hope for us.

JMF: There is this sense that you get from preaching sometimes that the Father is so angry, he’s furious; the wrath of God is cited, because the word *wrath* appears in Scriptures. The sense is that he is so angry that somebody has to pay, and so Jesus steps in and says, “Well, kill me if you have to kill somebody.” So we have the resolution that, “Christ died for my sins, therefore I’m absolved” – but there’s still that angry God. He has calmed down, but when he is going to break loose again?”

WPY: Exactly – we’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and we fall back on performance, we fall back on our behavior being the basis for his mood. We have to maintain at least an adequate amount of behavior so that he feels good about himself and doesn’t take it out on us. So we have this schizophrenic God, we have the “good cop, bad cop” type of God. We don’t know whether we’re waking up on the side of his love, or the side of his justice – or his holiness. We think holiness is a manifestation of his reaction against sin. The truth is, he was holy before there was sin. What makes God “other” [i.e., holy] is his very nature of love – that’s what makes him “other” than us. Holiness then becomes a manifestation of his love, not of his justice, not of his dealing with sin.

Wrath is the right response to things that are wrong. Anger is the right response when there is pain and hurt, when children are abused, when people lie to each other, when divorce happens, people taking advantage... to greed, to all of these things, it is the right response. And for God to have that right response against everything that is in his creation that prevents the freedom of the human creation, which is the object of his love, for him to come after that with everything that he’s got, [wrath] is appropriate, is right.

My friend Wayne Jacobson has a book called *He Loves Me*. In it he uses the illustration of being a child running into a hornets’ nest and screaming running in the direction of his mother, and seeing her coming at him with this look of rage. She wasn’t after him. She was after these

hornets, how dare they touch her precious little child. But if you look at her face, you'd think he had done something wrong. We have that mentality when we deal with God.

He's angry against everything that hurts us. Jesus showing up at Lazarus' funeral – that intense anger, compassion that comes out even though he is in the midst of raising him from the dead. Death is wrong, you know. The impact of sin is wrong. The wrath of God is an element of his love. You can't divide his wrath from his love, as if he's two separate characters. Everything God does is motivated by love, and everything has a loving purpose.

JMF: Scripture speaks of “the enemies of God,” and “the wrath of God against his enemies.” How does the love of God come into his relationship with his enemies in terms of his wrath?

WPY: He is constantly saying that we are to love our enemies as well. There is an understanding that we wed ourselves to our own lost-ness, to our own independence. It's like the surgery. There is a process that is very painful for us. God, even, in dealing with the Egyptians, or the wonders of the plagues – that was a very painful process.

There are people who set themselves up in an independence stance and I tell you, you can wed yourself – the people in the New Testament that were most doing that, were the religious people. They were the most lost when Jesus says, “Woe, woe, woe,” and he tells them that they are dead men, the inside of them is dead. The “woe” idea is a warning woe. It's saying “whoa!”... almost like a horse. “Stop what you're doing. Don't you understand that this process that you're on, this path that you're choosing – of independence, is going to drive you deeper into the darkness, not into the light that you think?”

One of the other questions that has come up about book is, “Why isn't Lucifer in the book – as one of God's enemies?” I believe in the fallen angels, I believe in the demonic, and I grew up out in the mission field. I know the reality of these things – the spiritual dimension. We don't live in a benign universe as far as the spiritual dimension. I don't believe God has any rivals, I don't believe Lucifer is a rival. I think his power was totally destroyed and now all he has is the ability to lie.

All those things being true, the book was not intended to be another book about Satan. It was intended to say, “This is who God is, and this is the process that we're in – that he comes inside of us to bring us to healing. We don't need the juxtaposition in this book, and like I said, there are plenty of books that deal with that. This was not an attempt for a systematic theology.

JMF: When we talk about enemies, Christ died for us while we were yet enemies ourselves.

WPY: Who among us has not been an enemy?

JMF: Right. Then, like you said, we're told to love our enemies. Then we proceed with the idea that God doesn't love his enemies, but he expects us to love our enemies.

WPY: Suddenly we have this requirement that even God cannot live up to. The reality is, that he does. The reality is, that the creation that he has created, he loves, and human beings as the epitome and apex of what he pursues. We have all been in the position of being his enemy, and in some respects, we still fight him in this process, but there's no shame to it.

JMF: That's the beauty... In your book, the most poignant scene, to me, is the judgment scene where everyone stands guilty. It's very beautifully done, and thoroughly scriptural. That's what makes it so beautiful.

WPY: Part of that was to try to get the reality of this out of the abstract intellectual framework – just like using the loss of a child as the core part of the story. The term *agape* is used, that God is *agape*, he's this kind of love that's so different. The only verse that I can think of (and there maybe other ones) where somebody who is apart from God experiences *agape*... (Normally you cannot be apart from God to express it. But the closest that a human being apart from God can) is reflected in the verse, "If you being evil..." It's talking about your core independence. "If you being evil know how to *agape* your children..." That's the word that's used.

The closest point that we can come to understanding the way God loves is the way that a parent loves their child, and I tell you there's nothing like that – not if there's any kind of health in your life, there is nothing that comes close to that. That is the kind of way God is, in his very character and nature. That's why I wanted to use the thing that is deepest in us, to raise the deepest kinds of questions, and (for my children) I wanted this to be the conversation around which to develop the conversation, the processing, the ideas, and the relationship with God.

JMF: I tend to be that kind of person who when he sees a bandwagon, I say, "The last thing I'm going do is get on it." So, as people kept saying, "You ought to read this book, you ought to read this book," I thought, "I don't read books that 'you gotta read.'" But finally I did read it. I read the first few chapters, and this is where we get into the story of the tragedy and so on, and the very real anger and so on that Mack has.

He enters the shack, and I lost interest after God entered the shack. I thought, "I don't see

how he's going get out of this, because I'm on Mack's side here. There won't be a good resolution to this, I don't see how, in fictional form, we're going be able to – [WPY: Find our way out.] – get from here to there, and resolve this anger without it just being facile, just some easy solution – what do we call that, a platitude, sort of thing. [WPY: a cliché.] I eventually got back to it and well, I had to do an interview with the author.

WPY: That'll get to you every time.

JMF: So I better finish the book anyway... That judgment scene, to me, that itself could be a full treatment of the subject, it was just beautifully done.

WPY: Thank you. That scene has become where the whole book leads to. From there, everything becomes resolution after that. It was to say, "This is the reality of the heart of God in terms of how he relates to us. Let's take it out of intellectual, spiritual, religious kind of terminology and make it real to us.

For Mack to have to struggle with this big question about his own children – that becomes something very real to him, and all of a sudden it puts us into a spot thinking, "Are you telling me that God loves us like that?" We're saying, "He loves you more than that." That is as close as we can get to understanding the intensity of that love – he loves us more than that, and more pure and better than that. I agree, I love that chapter.

JMF: Another section that is striking in the book is where Jesus is talking to Mack:

"Remember, the people who know me are the ones who are free to live and love without any agenda." And Mack says, "Is that what it means to be a Christian?" "Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian," Jesus said. The idea struck Mack as odd and unexpected. "No, I suppose you aren't." Then Jesus says, "Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhist or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who are murderers and many who are self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I've no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into brothers and sisters, into my beloved." "Does that mean," asks Mack, "that all roads will lead to you?" "Not at all," smiled Jesus. "Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."

Some people have taken from that or responded that, "You're saying that being a Christian doesn't matter," they accuse you of universalism, whatever they mean by universalism.

WPY: Yeah, when somebody asks me if I'm a Christian, I ask them back: "Would you please tell me what one is, and I'll tell you if I'm one of those." If we're on the same page, I don't have any problem identifying myself as a Christian. Unfortunately, in the world today that has become kind of a Ziploc bag, and as soon as you say the "C" word, there's no more communication, no more conversation. What people think in their minds what a Christian is, is not what Scripture reveals as someone who is indwelt by the very character nature of ...

JMF: It has become a caricature, a pre-conceived idea depending on a person's experience of a Christian or Christianity.

WPY: Exactly. For example, we think of anybody in the Middle East, as Westerners, we tend to think of them as Muslim. As if they believe all the tenets of Islam, etc.

JMF: And they're all the same, and they all fit this particular category that we have them on.

WPY: Most believers from the Middle East will still tell you they're Muslim, but they're Christian. For us that's a little incongruous. These little boxes, I wanted to get outside. Jesus died, rose again, ascended to the right hand of the Father before the term [Christian] had even been created or coined. It happened probably in Antioch, where it was a derogatory term; they were going, "We like this term." And so for Jesus to identify himself as a Christian is moot. The term didn't exist. That was one piece of it.

Then I wanted to push it even further and say, "It's not the label that you're identified with that is the relationship. A label is a label, and I don't care what label you have, let's talk about what you *mean* by it. And then we'll see."

I have no problem identifying myself as a Christian, or the validity of being a Christian, or any of those things. But I want some agreement about what we are talking about. What a lot of people think of a Christian, I don't want to be identified with, because there's a bunch of it that is not true, and not right. I want a bridge to be built in a relationship with anybody. I don't want the word "Christian" to become the impediment that stops that relationship from being built. I don't want it to be an impediment between them and the love of Jesus Christ, either.

JMF: That has nothing to do with faith in Jesus Christ, or belief in the name of Christ, as some would want to say it.

WPY: No. If I can say it as clearly as I can, I am convinced that Jesus Christ is THE only way into the embrace of the Father. There is no other name given among men through whom we

are saved – he is the sole and only road into the Father’s heart – he is the Father’s heart who has bridged that gap to us.

That was the last edit we put into the book, because somebody who read a pre-version said, “I love this book, I love everything about it, but I’ve got a couple of friends who are going to think you’re a universalist.” So that little section where he says, “Do all roads lead to Papa?” Jesus smiles and says, “No, most don’t lead anywhere, but I will travel down any road to find you.” That was the last edit we made before it went to the printers in the first edition.

I’m grateful for the brother who sent that and said, “What do you think?” Because I wanted it to be clear that we are not talking about... I want the centrality of atonement to be central. This is what God has done to reconcile the world to himself. Now, as ambassadors of Christ, as if you are the very pleading of God, beg, “Be reconciled back to him, because he’s reconciled himself to you.” That, to me, is the centrality and the significance... the exclusivity – if I can use that term – of the person of God who has come in Christ in the power of the Spirit to make a way for us. I’m not a universalist.

JMF: The subject of the Bible comes up in the course of the discussion between the Holy Spirit and Mackenzie, and in one place here, they’re out together in a canoe. Just reading from the book:

Mack allowed his oar to turn in his hands as he let it play into the water’s movements. “It feels like living out of relationship, you know, trusting and talking to you, is a bit more complicated than just following rules.” “What rules are those, Mackenzie?” “You know, all the things the Scriptures tell us we should do.” “Ok,” she said with some hesitation. “And what might those be?” “You know,” he answered sarcastically, “about doing good things and avoiding evil, being kind to the poor, reading your Bible, praying, going to church, things like that.” “I see, and how is that working for you?” He laughed, “Well, I’ve never done it very well. I have moments that aren’t too bad, but there’s always something I’m struggling with or feeling guilty about, I just figured I needed to try harder. But I find it difficult to sustain that motivation, [I think virtually everyone, with any honesty would have to identify with that.] “Mackenzie,” she chided, her words flowing with affection, “The Bible doesn’t teach you to follow rules, it is a picture of Jesus. While words may tell you what God is like and even what he may want from you, you cannot do any of it on your own. Life and living is in him and in no other. My goodness, you didn’t think you could live the righteousness of God on your own, did you?” “Well, I thought so, sorta,” he said sheepishly.”

You’re presenting here the Bible not as the way it’s popularly taught – as God’s instruction

book for mankind. So it is used to rule on behaviors and to judge and to tell everyone what they're doing wrong, and then goes back on the shelf. But the whole idea of Jesus in the Scriptures is often missed.

WPY: If we are only flesh, if that's what we come to this writing with, then we'll drop back to see it as a behavioral kind of thing without the illumination of the Spirit and the work of the Spirit. Even those words are dead to us. They don't produce life. We are absolutely dependent, even in the words of Scripture, for the presence and life and illumination of the power of the Holy Spirit. All of us are. We know folks who know the words very well but have no life in them.

There's that part of it. Jesus on the Emmaus Road with the disciples: Starting with Moses he showed them himself throughout all of Scripture. It's a story, it's a story of his love, it's a story of his attraction to us.

I love Scripture. We are very blessed in the sense that we have this so available and just at our fingertips. Most of our brothers and sisters throughout history did not. They began with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I think maybe they have a little bit of an advantage, because we so easily fall back into our intellectuality and don't even know how to hear the voice of the Spirit for ourselves.

Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." And there's a lot of us who are going, "Well, but don't we just have to hear it through whatever the leadership is, or whatever the structure is that I'm a part of?", and he is saying, "No." He's saying, "You individually, you hear my voice." I think that's part of what the work of the Spirit is. It's to tune us, to allow us, so that through the purification process, we sense his presence, and we hear him speak to our hearts. That becomes central.

Then Scripture comes, he can illuminate it – but I'm not at all convinced that Scripture is the sole and only place through which God speaks. In my life, it's been through movies even, but also music, creation, relationships, conversation, art, architecture, incredibly beautiful cultural diversity and uniquenesses that happen there. The Spirit is very able to speak through whatever the Spirit has available or what we've given the Spirit to be available.

JMF: And the Scripture provides a rudder, a foundation, a primary means by which God reveals Christ to us. But isn't that something that is often misused in order to maintain some kind of control or to subjugate or to rule over ... That isn't the Holy Spirit speaking to us through

Scripture, that's us manipulating Scripture for our own ends, our own selfishness.

WPY: Yeah, it goes back, in part, to not believing that people can grow up to hear the voice of the Spirit for themselves – that we need to interpret that for them so we can maintain control. A lot of people are afraid that if people move into freedom, and freedom is why Christ came – it was for our freedom – that if that happens, people will go do crazy things. There is good evidence that suggests that the amount of coercion and control that's placed on people is the reason why, when the control comes off, they go out and do crazy things. They've just never matured inside of that framework. The work of the Holy Spirit is to move us toward freedom. That is his life in us.

Freedom within the context of our understanding of reality is all based in dependence, not in independence. We are a culture that's full of independence, which makes sense, and the Holy Spirit is constantly driving us toward dependence. That is the only place where we find freedom, because we were designed to live our life in freedom – in dependence – in that union relationship with God.

Scripture is wonderful. It is definitely something through which the frame of our lives are understood. But if I was thrown in a prison, without it, I know the Holy Spirit would be present with me. You have a teacher, you have an anointing on you, and in that sense you don't need a teacher, because the teacher lives inside of you, and in all things will teach you how to abide in him, 1 John.

JMF: Sure. And yet there's a submission that we all have to one another, to listen, to test our ideas, and so on, and make sure that we are reflecting the self-sacrificial love of God rather than our own agenda. All that works in community...

WPY: Exactly, it takes us back to this relational element that exists in the very character, nature of God, that our relationships are just a reflection of that unity and diversity in the community of the Trinity. The beautiful thing is that he invites us into that level of relationship.

I was thinking about Christmas this year, and you have God who is working together for our redemption and they [Father, Son and Spirit] have this circle of relationship and they crack it open and invite a 15-year old little girl into it and they say, "Would it be ok if we did this?" They wait until Mary says, "Be it done unto me." That's the God of the universe who is in relationship with us and submitting the process to us so that we would join in that process with him.

Same in our own hearts, same in the process of our own healing and nowhere does he use

shame to try to produce this. He doesn't use law to try to produce it. The beauty of it is, as we become whole, pure in heart, we begin to see God everywhere. We see his activity, he's in the details of our lives, he's in the present with us. Incredible. Is this good news or what?

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## **The Theology of Paul Young's Book *The Shack***

### **An Interview With Dr. C. Baxter Kruger**

**JMF:** Welcome to *You're Included*. We're talking with C. Baxter Kruger, founder and director of Perichoresis.org. Dr. Kruger is the author of *The Great Dance – the Christian Vision Revisited*, and *Across All Worlds – Jesus Inside Our Darkness*. His books and audio lectures are available at *TheGreatDance.org*. More than a year after this interview, *The Shack Revisited: There Is More Going on Here Than You Ever Dared to Dream* was published in October 2012.

Baxter, thanks for being with us.

**CBK:** Good to see you again, Mike.

**JMF:** Since you've been here last, you've been doing some traveling (among many other things) with Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, and giving some seminars with him. Could you tell us what's going on?

**CBK:** The first time we met was with the Worldwide Church of God meeting in Virginia two and a half years ago, and we became friends and we started talking. The way we met was through Tim Brassell emailing Paul, and telling Paul that I had written the theology that goes with *The Shack*.

**JMF:** Tim, being one of our pastors.

**CBK:** One of your pastors in Portsmouth, Virginia. Then Paul picked up that phone and calls me. I'm like, "I can't believe you're calling me, I mean everybody in the world wants to talk to you." But we talked and we became soulmates quickly as we realized we were on the same page. Then we started doing some seminars and things like that together, and we did a tour of Australia through our network – Perichoresis network down there, and we've done several seminars together. Recently, I've been asked to do more lectures on the "Theology of *The Shack*" or things like that. It just sort of evolved and happened, and it's been beautiful. He's a fantastic man. I love to spend time with him.

**JMF:** We've had Paul on our program and talked about *The Shack* and some of the concepts of God that are so earth-shaking for many people who read it. People either love it, or they hate it. How do you account for that?

**CBK:** I think the scene where Papa comes out and embraces Mackenzie Allen Phillips and the way it's set up, I think that right across the Western world, we all have two different Gods. One is the God of our constructs in our mind, and the other is the God that we know in the depths

of our soul. This God here [in the heart] is the Father, Son, and Spirit, and love and grace and goodness. And this God here [in the heart] that we know loves us more than we love our own kids.

But that does not fit the theological constructs that we've been hearing – the doctrine of Atonement fights against this view, this knowing of God. When that scene happens in *The Shack*... Actually, Mackenzie Allen Phillips goes to the shack three times. The first time was to find the remains of his daughter. The second time he goes to meet Papa, but the Western God is what he is thinking was going to happen, and that God never shows up. He ends up shaking his fist in that scene and says, "I hate you and that's it, done, not doing that." That's the whole Western legalistic ogre God who watches us from a distance, more interested in whether we keep rules and relationship, and then he leaves and he rejects that God. "I don't want anything else to do with that."

He walks back to the Jeep and the whole world changes. He goes back and again he raises his fist. It's to knock on the door and he doesn't even get to knock – the door flies open and there's Papa and lifts him off the ground. That scene speaks right here [the heart] to everybody on the planet. They know somewhere in here, that's the truth about God.

But it just goes "bzzzzt!!" to all of our constructs. It creates a crisis. Right there in the opening scene, everybody wants to be there, but people who have a lot invested in this God [in the head] are seriously threatened by the awareness that people have here that this is good, this is beautiful. Who doesn't want to be embraced? The news is – that's the truth, we're all embraced like that. That's the gospel.

**JMF:** This concept of God being the far-away judge, we're uncertain of how he feels about us, where does that come from?

**CBK:** It's the construct of the fallen mind. It's Adam and Eve in the bushes, guilty, ashamed, afraid... and they project that fear and that guilt and that shame onto the Lord's face. They tar the Father's face with the brush of their own anxiety, and they create a mythological deity.

**JMF:** Isn't that pretty much the way all of the ... if you go back all through ancient history, that's the idea of religion and the gods, and the gods who are in the elements and the gods in the sky – there's always this sense of... you don't know what they are going to do next. They're like us, they're unpredictable, you've got to urge them or get ...

**CBK:** You've got to twist their arms somehow because they're not *for* you. That's the projection of the fallen mind onto God creating the image... Someone in Australia (I can't remember who it was) said, "God created us in his image and we've been returning the favor ever since." That's the tarring of the Father's face with the brush of our own pain and struggle and anxiety and guilt. The perfect philosophical expression of that is in Greek philosophy, and as it emerges in neoplatonic philosophy, where you have God as the one that's removed – infinitely removed – from the earth, because this is matter, and matter is broken and sinful. This God is removed and isolated, so pure and self-contained and non-relational that this God is beyond being known and can't even feel anything that happens here.

That's the origin of the Western mindset on God. Then you throw into that: legalism, so this distant, removed God is, in his innermost essence, holy in a legally defined way – moral rectitude, purity in that way as opposed to "holy" as a Trinitarian concept, which is about the singularity, beauty and goodness of the relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit. You've got two Gods.

**JMF:** That gives us this idea, this huge gulf between God and us. Then in the evangelism training you are taught, you have to explain to people there's a huge gulf between them and God. (**CBK:** Yeah, because Jesus hasn't come.) Now you can get him to become this bridge for you "if you say the sinner's prayer with me right now." He will be the bridge and you can get across to God.

**CBK:** To me that's just like pure neoplatonic philosophy coming in, because it denies, in the first instance, it's as if the Incarnation hasn't even happened. One of the ways around that for me is I like to put it this way: The gospel is not the news that you can receive Jesus into your life. The gospel is the news that the Father's Son himself, who's face to face with the Father, who's anointed in the Holy Spirit, became a human being and *he* has received us into *his* life.

One is the Greek philosophical construct of separation and somehow, Jesus has done something and there's a bridge and we can get back across because this God is too pure to even look at us.

Whereas the Trinitarian model is the Father, Son, and Spirit share life, and they're passionate about our inclusion and Jesus has come, as the early church teaches – Irenaeus is a great example: "Our beloved Lord Jesus Christ became what we are in order to bring us to be what he is." Athanasius: "The Son of God became the Son of Man to make us sons of God..."

because the point is to share that Trinitarian life with us.

In the Greek model, this is bad, Incarnation may be real but not really. In this model of the gospel, the Trinitarian gospel: Jesus becomes not only human, which is unthinkable on that other model – he becomes flesh, he becomes what we are and enters into our brokenness and darkness in order that the life that he shares with his Father and the Holy Spirit, could become as much as ours by way of experience as it is his own.

**JMF:** Isn't that exactly what he says in John when he talks about, "I and the Father are one" and he says, "we are one with each other in him, we're one with him, he's one with the Father, therefore we're one with the Father in him." It's been there all along.

**CBK:** But it doesn't fit the great construct because there's separation, there's distance and un-approachability, and this god is so pure that in no way could he get entangled with humanity and matter – because that's all so broken and so fallen. So even though we hear Incarnation, it just kind of moves out, we don't pay much attention to it. We don't underline those passages. What in the universe could be more shocking and stunning and beautiful than the fact that the Father's Son himself – the one who is face-to-face with the Father, who dwells in his bosom, the one who is anointed with the Holy Spirit himself, becomes a human being to be with us? Is there any news more fantastic than that in the universe?

Why have we not seen it to be the point of emphasis? It's because of the influence of the Greek model. That's beginning to die down, it's beginning to come in conflict... and books like *The Shack*, without doing any theology, without making any theological statement – that scene, you got two Gods, and that creates a crisis in us, because we know both Gods. Once you see the scene, you think, this has got to be resolved. That's going to be difficult, and that's where the crisis is in the book.

People love it here, but it, "Oh, no, that means... what about all this that I've been taught? What about all this that I thought was 'gospel' – it doesn't fit." I'm not talking about some sort of intuition here, I'm talking about a revelation of the Holy Spirit to us that this is the truth, this is who God is. It's who *you* are. That's the crisis in the book that it creates in the very beginning. It's a beautiful crisis, liberating crisis.

**JMF:** It also raises the issue of justice and fairness and all this sort of thing, in the sense that this God of the academics that we have – the God on paper that we... with the gulf and all that, and who we have to become atoned for by behaving better after we make our decision and all

that. There's a sense that the bad guys need to be punished and cut off from God. But in *The Shack*, we are talking about a God who is presented in the Gospels who has already forgiven everyone in Christ. It raises this issue of: "How can it be that all the bad people, like in the book, the murderer of Mackenzie's daughter, how can that person be loved by God and be embraced...?"

**CBK:** He and Mackenzie, too, because we don't know exactly what he did to his dad, but it was not good.

**JMF:** Yeah, and so there's a chapter on judgment where there's a seat, and the Holy Spirit comes to talk about that topic with Mackenzie. That gets into this issue and resolves it, and many find that tremendously liberating because it speaks right to the gospel. But there are those... you can go to websites that take great exception, and find that horribly wrong and contrary to anything godly and righteous, because the bad guys seem to be getting away with something.

**CBK:** The first thing I would want to say there, my professor of theology J.B. Torrance, used to say all the time: "Forgiveness is logically prior to repentance and faith." In the modern West, we've packaged it like: forgiveness is possible *if* these things line up, if you receive, if you pray... To me, forgiveness was instantaneous – Father, Son, and Spirit forgave Adam and Eve and forgave us. It's not a question of their forgiveness, it's a question of how are they going to reach us so that we *know* we are forgiven and we can begin to have real relationship with them?

The Bible is about how God does the impossible – how the Father, Son, and Spirit reaches us in our blindness, our projections and our darkness. And how far are they willing to go in order to meet us ALL – not just the broken folks. In Jesus, they've come (the Father, Son, and Spirit have come) to meet us. This is what I've been working on a good bit in the last couple of years since we've last talked – in seeing the reconciling work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is the deliberate, willful, submission of Jesus Christ to our bone-headed, wrong-headed religious judgmental darkness. He could obliterate us, he could call the angels, but he doesn't. What he does is he bows to suffer – not from God's wrath, not from his Father's wrath, and not from the Holy Spirit's abandonment. He bows to suffer from *our* curse, our wrath, our rage and our venting. We made him a scapegoat and we damned him and we did it to him publicly in the most humiliating way possible. And he said, "Okay."

In accepting us as we really are – in our brokenness and in that wrath, he has established a relationship with the human race – all of us, at our very worst. And he brought Papa and the

Holy Spirit with him. So it's not a question to me, "Is this person forgiven? Is that person forgiven? What about bad people...?"

What has happened is the entire human race, in its blind rage, has been met by Jesus and Papa and the Holy Spirit, and it's inside and it's seeking to come out. That's forgiveness – he's found a way to reach us. Now, the question is: where are we in our journey – because we're still blind, all of us. We're still broken.

That's part of what Paul is getting at, is helping people, in that moment realizing, "If you put yourself in the seat of judgment, then you got to make decision about who's going to be forgiven, who's going to be included, who's going to hell, who's going to heaven." When he puts you in that seat, you think we're not... he confronts you in the book with the fact that we love our children better than our theology allows us to let God love us.

A sweeping panoramic from the other side sees the Father, Son, and Spirit coming to build a relationship with us in the midst of our darkness and sin and pain, and they set up shop right there and then seek to help us come to know that. That's what is one of the things that's underneath all the way through the book. People are unprepared for that because they've got a construct – separation, Greek philosophical deity, with Bible verses to "prove" that it's right, separation – Jesus is the bridge, only those people who've walked across that bridge are included and loved and forgiven. If you've got that kind of construct, then what we're talking about here makes no sense. It's like, how can that be, how can God be this good? You can't just say, "God forgives us." No, but you can say to your daughter, "I forgive you, without payment." Do you love your daughter better than the Father loves us?

Are you participating in love in the Father, Son, and Spirit? J.B. used to say that all the time, "God commands us to forgive sin seven times seven times. Are we supposed to be better than the Lord? Or is he not telling us the way he is?"

**JMF:** Colossians points out that "once you were alienated in your minds." Not alienated *from God's side*, but alienated in *your* minds. He just got finished in that passage talking about what he's done... reconciling everybody, all things whether things on heaven or things on earth and all that. And then once you're alienated... not alienated, but alienated *in your minds*.

**CBK:** That's right. And some translations use the word "separation" there, like in Ephesians 4:17 it says: "Don't be like the pagans, don't walk around in the dark, now you know who God is and who you are, walk in that." Jesus is saying, "I'll meet you in your pain, I'll meet you in your

brokenness, I'll meet you in your sin. Walk with me. Just walk with me, trust me a little bit and let's walk together. Let me share my life with you." And you can begin to let go of some things.

I thought Paul [Young] did a great job in that conversation by backing Mackenzie up and said, "Wait a minute, if we cut off this guy, the murderer, then we have to go back – probably cut off his dad, go back, cut off... and then you start cutting people off and squashing them before they are... and there are millions of people here that are never even born.

It puts you in that quandary where you think, wait a minute, God deals with us in our darkness. That's the only group he has got to deal with. He meets us in our pain and he's saying, "Walk with me." He's saying that to the Christian community, too. "Come on, walk with me." The one who walks with me, he says, "I am the light of the entire cosmos. It's who I am, it's who you are in me. Walk with me, and the one who walks with me, this one will never, ever walk in the darkness but shall have the light of life."

These ones don't come to know what this whole thing is about. That's the distinction between the Christian community and the world – or the believing and unbelieving. The Christian community say, "I want to walk with Jesus, I don't know how to do it. I don't know *how* to continue in your Word. You've got to disciple me. But I know that you've got something here that I want to participate in."

The other part of the world is saying, "No, it's not there." That's where they are in their experience, and the Holy Spirit keeps walking with us. "I'm going to find a way to reveal" – and this I love – the Holy Spirit is determined to find a way to reveal Jesus, not simply to the world, not simply to a person, but to reveal Jesus *in* them. So they'd encounter Jesus in their own pain and darkness and struggle. And from there, healing and life begins to work its way out.

**JMF:** How do you find the reaction, response... People who come to the seminars that you've held are coming because they're excited about the book, but how do they respond personally when you talk to them?

**CBK:** One of the most beautiful things to watch is when Paul Young tells the story behind the story – which is, to me, way more fascinating and beautiful than the book. People weep and people cry and people feel loved, they feel accepted, they feel moved. There may be a handful of people somewhere in the room who are angry. But by and large, they're being saved from their darkness and confusion and it's like an evangelistic meeting as he shares his life and story.

There's conflict, but what I've experienced is overwhelming love and excitement. People

saying, “Yes, yes, yes. This is what I know. Tell me more. Don’t stop, don’t leave, let’s keep talking.” Their tears are flowing because they’ve heard him express the fact that they’ve been through this horrible sadness, they too have, and they haven’t been allowed to talk about this. But this guy is talking about it. He’s talking about a God who knows about it.

One of my favorite scenes in the book that I think speaks directly to what you’re saying, both in terms of Christ, is saying in terms of response, is the scene where Mackenzie is in the garden with Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, and they’re digging stuff up. The garden is Mackenzie’s soul and his brokenness. So without theological argument, Paul has set up a scene where the Holy Spirit is now inside Mackenzie’s brokenness and darkness because he came with Jesus and Papa. The Holy Spirit is not bothered, not put off, not “I can’t look at this,” but is able to embrace in freedom Mackenzie at his very worst. And then Papa comes walking the down the path with the sack lunch. It just screams acceptance, and that is something that people feel, and it opens their soul. So much stuff gets to come out and they love it.

When I had the chance to be with him, to see him speak and see him unfold his life’s story, it’s like an evangelistic meeting. People are being liberated from their darkness and being able to accept themselves and accept others ... “This is fantastic, this is the truth, this is the way God really is.” Paul Young tells a story which you know the story, your listeners know it from other interviews with him. That sense of acceptance is like whoo, man, tears... Most of the time that I’ve been able to teach and do seminars and things alongside with that or with that, people are so excited they can hardly sit still. “Just tell me more, tell me more.” They’ve never heard this thing about the Trinity. “Nobody’s ever told me about that doctrine. Where did this come from, where is that in the Bible? I believe you, but where is it? Let’s look.” It’s like, you’ve got to be kidding, that is so unbelievable. You could speak for three days and never move.

**JMF:** Once people get their minds around that, then that’s all you see in the Scriptures anymore. Verses and passages that you’ve read your whole life, all of a sudden you see them in a new light. You see what they’re actually saying to you, and it changes everything.

**CBK:** Funny how the Bible changes like that, isn’t it? You underline all the wrong verses. You think, “Why did I underline that? I missed this whole section here.”

**JMF:** Yeah, that [verse] tells me what that one was saying.

**CBK:** In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was face-to-face with God. And the Word became flesh, meeting us in our crap and darkness, and we saw

it and we got to experience its fullness in our darkness. That's the gospel. Right there in the first part of John. Once you see that, it's everywhere in the New Testament.

**JMF:** You're working on a book on the topic of theology of *The Shack* in which you go into a lot of these things, is that something that we can look forward to fairly soon?

**CBK:** Probably not in a matter of weeks or months, because I'm working on another book, and three-quarters of the way through – this is a novel and it's pretty interesting, pretty racy. I've done lectures on the theology of *The Shack*. I'm getting the recordings from two different places and I'm going to get someone to transcribe that. Then I'll sit down and take the time and work through and add and develop and edit that. But the basic research and ideas of the theology of *The Shack* that I've been wanting to do are all in place, and I've already sort of done a test drive on it. It's been lecture format and interaction.

I will get all that put together and then hole up somewhere and write it, and of course (just because of my friendship with Paul) I would never want to produce anything that he was not pleased with on one level. Although there are places in the book where he and I disagree about things, they're not major issues. I'm still a theologian, after all. There are some places I want to quibble with him a little bit. But by and large I absolutely love every single thing in the book. I don't like the first four chapters. I mean it's kind of brutal, because you'd smell what's coming and nobody wants to read that scene. But from Papa on, it's just off the charts.

So I want to help people see what's going on, and I also want to help them understand that what's being said here about God – may be new to us, but it's actually the early church's. It's what launched the early church. If it's new to us, we've been lost over here in Augustinian captivity. I read *The Shack* as Athanasius in the early church shouting across the centuries saying, "Come on back home, boys and girls. This is the way God really is, and you know it!" But be willing to repent, have your mind reconstructed to allow the truth of what's being said here, and the truth of what was said in the early church, come together.

**- many thanks to our volunteer transcriber -**

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The Shack Revisited

On this episode of *You're Included*: Dr. C. Baxter Kruger, theologian and author; with [William] Paul Young, author of *The Shack*. They talk with us about Dr. Kruger's book, *The Shack Revisited*, and the theology embedded in Young's original narrative.

JMF: Baxter and Paul, thanks for being with us again. It's good to see you guys.

CBK: It's good to be back.

JMF: We want to talk about your book this time: *The Shack Revisited*. This is an endeavor that you guys have been working on in tandem. Paul's got the foreword here, and Baxter's been doing theology that supports *The Shack*. Can you tell us how you got into this, what happened, how it came to be, and where you are with it?

CBK: The short version is that Paul and I had become great friends over the last several years and went to several conferences and things like that together, and then I started getting ready to do things like "Theology of *The Shack*" at conferences. We bumped into each other in Toronto at a conference and ended up having an afternoon to spend together, so I showed him some scribbled notes that I had, and he said, "Maybe you would write that into a book, and we'll see." So I went basically off the grid for eight months.

I wanted to show how the core vision of *The Shack*, which is done in drama in a very right-brained way, is the early church and is the main line coming all the way through. There's a number of reasons for that. One is that when I read *The Shack*, I'm thinking I'm reading Athanasius, I'm reading J.B. Torrance, I'm reading George McDonald. This is so beautiful, and it's in a form that people can understand.

But I felt that there were many people who said, "Okay, somebody grab me by the hand and help me go to the next step. Help me see this. Is this biblical, is this work historically accurate? What is going on here?" So I'm trying to unpack all the nuances that are embedded into the narrative of *The Shack*.

WPY: For some people, their heart just leaped, and they were touched deeply by *The Shack*. Baxter comes along and says, "I want to encourage and affirm that this is not new theology. This is something that is actually traditional." And then for those whose paradigms were tampered by *The Shack*, who were a little upset, this is to come along and say, "You need to think about these questions, because this is why you're bothered." Those are some of the implications of doing a book like this. I'm very excited. Baxter writes in a very accessible way. It's not a high-brow

theological treatise, but it's very supported, for those who like that sort of thing, and yet it's very much a story itself, very accessible.

JMF: Let's talk about some of the things you said in here, and let's get into it a little bit. Let me read this...and then a section from *The Shack*, and then if I could get both of you to comment:

"This is one of the many reasons that the Trinity is so critical. For if God were alone and solitary from eternity, then there is nothing for God to love until he creates. So the solitary God can only *become* a lover, for he is not one by nature. And this love can only be a love that grows out of his aloneness and self-interest. And it's more than possible that whatever it was that caused the single-person God to create and become a lover could change, and the solitary God could then go back to his essential non-loving nature. The love of this God is caused by something outside of his being, and is this not what we all fear? That something outside of the being of God causes him to love us? That his love is conditioned by something other than his nature, and thus that we're the ones who must get it right, trip the love wire, make God's love happen, and keep it happening? No wonder we're so exhausted and unhappy."

And then the quotation from *The Shack*. Mackenzie is talking to Jesus:

"'Why do you love us humans? I suppose I... ' As he spoke he realized he hadn't formed his question very well. 'I guess what I want to ask is why do you love me when I have nothing to offer you?' 'If you think about it, Mac,' Jesus answered, 'it should be very freeing to know that you can offer us nothing. At least not anything that can add or take away from who we are. That should alleviate any pressure to perform.'" (From page 202).

Let's talk about that. It's very common to think of God (I still do it...) as a solitary figure sitting up in heaven somewhere on a throne. He's probably got a white beard, and he's very wise and kind and loving most of the time... I hope he is, and I hope he listens when I'm begging him to help me get a home run or something like that.

WPY: Like Gandolf with an attitude.

JMF: Yeah, there we are.

WPY: That's why I went such a different direction in the story. That's why Papa is about as far away from Gandolf with an attitude as...

JMF: Or Santa Claus.

WPY: Or Santa Claus who's got a list and is checking it twice...and look out, because he's coming to town.

JMF: Right. A very unfortunate song that does great disservice to Santa Claus...

WPY: Part of this, as you were reading it, struck me again that if perfect love casts out fear and if God is perfect love, what kind of image of God do we have... [**JMF:** Why are we afraid?] where we have fear and love co-mingled in the relationship? If perfect love casts out fear, and I look to the God that I fear (in that negative phobia kind of sense where I'm afraid in the worst kind of way, judgment and even worse than that, disappointment. I'm afraid that I'm a disappointment. The things that I would fear most in my relationship with my own father, for example.)

If that's supposed to be the source of my freedom and the source of where I have to go to get away from that fear, and yet it is the source of that fear, I'm stuck. I have a major problem here, and I don't know where to go. Where do I turn to in terms of trying to deal with that?

JMF: Fear God and keep his commandments. That's what we hear preached.

CBK: Well, revere and...

WPY: Reverence.

CBK: Reverence and awe. You can be awed by God's beauty and goodness and glory.

JMF: So "fear" is an unfortunate translation.

CBK: It is a translation. This paragraph that you read puts its finger on what I would reckon (I think Paul would agree) is the number one human and pastoral issue we have. It's that Does God really love me? If God is not eternally Father, Son, and Spirit...if there is a G-O-D, a single person behind that, that when one day he decided we were going to have community, then the God behind the Father, Son, and Spirit is the will of God. A single-person God is not other-centered, not approachable, not interested in fellowship, it does not love out of its nature.

JMF: And it doesn't need.

CBK: It does not create out of other-centeredness. This is one of the reasons the Trinity is so critical, because the Father, Son, and Spirit, as Athanasius said, "The Holy Trinity is no created thing. God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit." The only way they know to be is as Father, Son, and Spirit. That's who they are, that's who God is in that communion of love. That's the way they relate to everything in their creation.

The reason God loves us is not because his blood sugar happened to be up one day and he decided to create the universe. The reason he loves us is because that's what the Father, Son, and Spirit do. I can count on that. That doesn't mean I can go do anything I want, and there are

consequences for that. But one thing I know is that no matter what happens in life, I am loved forever. Loved forever means that he, the Father, Son, and Spirit, are loving me constantly to set me free to live in that love.

That's something you can hold onto, because what I hear being preached all the time is this model where God is essentially your Judge, and can become your Father *if* you repent and believe. It's the windshield wiper thing to me.

I remember the first time I was consciously aware of repenting and believing. Two years later, I had another experience. Three years later, I had another experience. So how much did I really repent and believe, and who in the equation of the Christian church can really raise their hand and say, "I have never graduated from 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief.'" That means that God's being is sitting there flipping back and forth between being our judge and being our father.

What the early church understood was that fatherhood is first and eternal, and out of that relationship we are created and we love. That's what we believe, that's what we count on, that's what we struggle to understand. And that's his nature. God's love for me is not depending upon me getting something right. I can't change it! I'm not so powerful as to tamper with the being of the Father, Son, and Spirit. They love. That's good news. Now let's walk together in that.

WPY: That's great news. Another piece of this is that to the degree that fear exists in my life (because if perfect love casts out fear, and the one who fears is not perfected in love – that's not a value statement, it's just an observation) ...if that's true, then the degree that there's fear in my life, to that degree I don't understand the love of God for me. Because you either have one or the other. That helps me, because then I can recognize I've got something wrong in my paradigm about the character and nature of God.

We live in an uncertain world, as everybody knows. There's a lot of things that we just can't count on. Where are we going to plant our feet? It's got to be in the certainty of the character of God. But if we're caught in betwixt two temperaments (where love is a temperament and justice is a temperament or judging is a temperament and it's based on my performance), I'm sorry, I'm too broken and my history is too shattered to compete in the environment of performance. It's not going to happen.

CBK: Even if you weren't broken, even if you were good, you still couldn't trust it, because you've got this whole dimension of judgment that's not integrated... Of course the Father's going to judge us. Because he loves us, he will judge us to the roots of our souls, and separate all

darkness from us so we get to live in the place where there's only light. Of course he will judge. He's not going to let any of us off the hook with anything, because he loves us, because it's his character to love us. That's just the most liberating and freeing thing to me. I'm glad you pointed that out. That's the very center of the book...

JMF: Aren't we afraid not to be afraid? We don't want to be afraid... You can read *The Shack*, you can read a book like this that gets into the theology that is behind and under and through *The Shack* about who God is for us, but you're afraid to not be afraid.

WPY: We think intimacy is devalued if we're not afraid, which is crazy. In our relationships, in a healthy relationship between a mother and a daughter and a mother and a son or a father and a daughter, intimacy creates a great degree of respect. And we have a paradigm that says intimacy is an eradication of respect.

CBK: Familiarity breeds contempt.

WPY: Right. My point, and I think Baxter would agree, is that intimacy creates a higher degree of respect, because you get to know the person deeper and deeper, and you have an expanded view of what that is, and love surrounds that.

JMF: You're not taking sin seriously, or you're just kidding yourself.

CBK: What you're actually taking seriously is the beauty of the love of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The question is: is there anything in this universe better, more beautiful, more life-giving, more blessed, than the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit? Is there anything? From where we're sitting, this seems like a lot of options. But from where the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are sitting, that's the best thing ever.

How long is it going to take us to work through all the things that we think we've got to do before we come to see that [the love of the Father, Son and Spirit] is what I want, I want to be in the middle of that? The Christian community is trying to find a way to keep these people on these paths by using fear, and they're not able to move. They're just living in fear, they're not getting to know that they're loved.

The Father, Son, and Spirit are prepared and have run a huge risk in creating human beings and giving us freedom. But they know something. They know that they're not going to find anything in the cosmos that is anywhere close to the love and the life that they share together that we're included in. How long is it going to take us [to realize that]?

Is the point here that the Christian church is to have everybody so afraid we just do right all

the time? That's like having a child that you're raising and you want them to be free, but at ten years old they get frozen into doing right so they never get to grow up and they never get to experience love in the house. Is that what the Father, Son, and Spirit... is that what this creation is about?

They want us to come to the place where we look at them and say, "I'm in, my whole heart. I want to be a part of this. This is the best thing." That's what Jesus said to Peter, and Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, what are we going to do? We've got the best thing there is." [cf. John 6:68]

WPY: What is it about us that is so twisted up that we need an angry, vengeful, vindictive God?

JMF: We want people we don't like...

WPY: To suffer the consequences.

CBK: Somebody's going to have to pay.

WPY: In *The Shack*, Papa doesn't let Mackenzie off on anything. But Papa doesn't walk around with a big stick with a nail on it to prove a point. It's love that pushes Mackenzie into dealing with these things. The kindness of God leads us to repentance, right? And we think it's the anger, the fury, or whatever.

It's not that God is not angry or furious against everything that is damaging his creation, including the things that are damaging me, his child. We're for that. The more we see of the goodness of God, the more we're for him burning out of my life everything that keeps me from being free and causes me to damage relationships and my family and on and on. That just goes. We want to be judged in that sense, because we trust his goodness in that judgment, not in some behind-the-scenes vindictiveness where behind the love of God there is really another agenda, or the Father has a different agenda.

People say silly things, like the intimacy that exists between Papa and Mackenzie, as if that's an affront to the character of God. That's what they got mad at Jesus for – his intimacy with the Father. What we don't understand is, we got included into that intimacy. That's the whole point – everything is by, for, through, and in Jesus, and we exist in that relationship with the Father because we're carried in him. We're created in him.

Then Jesus is talking about God as *Abba* when the entire Old Testament never even conceived of the idea of intimacy, and yet here's Jesus talking in the most familial, deepest kind of senses that we understand as human beings in relationship to our kids, but we couldn't

understand that in relationship to God. Jesus models that right smack in front of us, and it is such an affront that he ends up getting killed for it.

JMF: If you go on Youtube and look for “God loves everyone,” there are a number of voices that absolutely are furious about the idea of anyone saying such a thing. [They say] What a damnable lie that is.

CBK: That God loves everyone.

JMF: They go to the passage that says, “Esau I hated, Jacob I loved.” If God hates Esau, then he hates someone, then he doesn’t love everyone, and so therefore you better straighten up and live right because God does not love everybody, it’s a damnable lie that he loves everyone.

CBK: Are they afraid that someone is going to show up at the gates of heaven and be accepted in who’s not supposed to be there?

JMF: Certainly not Esau.

WPY: People who bring up that story obviously don’t understand their scripture very well, because you go back to the Old Testament story, and there was a blessing on both those boys from the beginning. Yes, Esau and Jacob, there was a distinction in terms of the redemptive plan, and that’s what that term [hate] is. It’s not a psychological hate that’s here – it’s a separation saying the plan includes this boy, but not this boy. Read this story: there is total reconciliation between Jacob and Esau inside the love of the father in that story. There’s a lot more going on with that story than we see at first glance.

That’s part of the question. Mackenzie faces it in the judgment scene, where he is sitting in the seat of judgment, where he is to judge God and the entire human race. He realizes that is exactly what he’s done. He’s billed the character and nature of God that is not love, and therefore not trustworthy and not good, and then everything else flows from that. If we believe in a God who is that over-distant Omni-being, then we will read the Jacob-Esau section of Romans (or wherever) through that lens. It’s a paradigm. You’re going to hear the kind of God that you believe in. The sad thing is that people...

JMF: And you’re going to pull that verse right out of its context in order to prove your point.

WPY: And people become “there you go”...people become like the God they believe in.

CBK: [after putting on odd eyeglasses] You look very different to me right now, Mike.

JMF: So do you.

CBK: Yeah? Now [he takes them off]...

JMF: Now you look like Baxter.

WPY: We see through the lens of our own paradigms and we become like the God that we worship.

CBK: Athanasius says that “the God of all is good and supremely noble by nature, therefore he is the love of the human race.” That’s what the early church came to see. I don’t think we can overestimate the goodness of God and the love of God.

Some people hear me say that and say I’m just saying everybody can do whatever they want to do. I’m saying that he is so good and he loves us so much he is going to bring us to the place to where we want to participate in this life with all our hearts, and that we’re not going to need barbed wire in heaven, because we will hate everything that is dark and is hurtful to us and to others. We only want to be sharing in that life. That’s a very different thing than “we’re going to go to heaven because we don’t want to go to hell,” and we’re actually hoping that we can be in heaven, but not ever have to run into the God that we fear.

JMF: And also the people that we don’t like.

WPY: A lot of times when people bring up the issue of “you’re being soft on sin,” they often have an attraction to sin that they’re trying to avoid. We don’t want that attraction in our lives at all. We’re not being soft on sin at all. We’re not saying, “I’m just going to do anything because it doesn’t matter.” It all matters. We’re saying, “It matters because these things are devastating in our lives.”

CBK: Here’s the dynamic. We are included in this circle of other-centered life and love. That’s who we are, that’s our nature. We’re free to do whatever we want, but when we violate that way of being, it hurts like hell. There’s no escape from it. You’re free to go live in any darkness you want, but it hurts like hell, because this is who we are. There’s an education process so we can come to see that.

JMF: It’s a journey, isn’t it?

CBK: It is a journey.

JMF: You’re on a journey toward Christ...

CBK: An incremental process.

JMF:...and that journey can have some pretty bad places in it if you want to make some bad choices. There are consequences.

WPY: And sometimes not choices you make for yourself.

JMF: Often you cause things on other people that they didn't make for themselves.

WPY: That's part of why we're so opposed to the darkness and we're opposed to the sin, because we've seen what it's done to the people we cared for and we loved. The darkness that I hold onto, I don't just keep to myself.

CBK: That's a great point. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, we share it with others.

JMF: One other portion of the book I wanted to get to before we finished is "The Wonderful Exchange." It's a quote from the apostle Paul at the beginning, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet though he was rich, but for your sake he became poor that you, through his poverty, might become rich." You go on to expound on this concept of the wonderful exchange that Mackenzie learns about.

CBK: In that chapter, what I'm trying to show is that one of the themes in *The Shack* is that what Mackenzie is getting in this relationship is not simply forgiveness. He's getting to share in all that the Father, Son, and Spirit have together. That's the ancient gospel. I quoted Paul first, and Irenaeus there: "Our Lord who became what we are to bring us to be what he is."

We're so locked in the West to the guilt-and-sin thing that we don't see much more than forgiveness going on in Jesus and the cross. Irenaeus, the ancient father, said, "Our Lord Jesus became what we are in order to bring us to be what he is" in his relation with the Father... Calvin, the same way, I quote Calvin on that, he's beautiful. And then J.B. Torrance, he says, "The incarnation, the prime purpose of the coming of Jesus in the love of God is to bring us to be included in this communion that we may participate in the Trinitarian life of God."

What is given to us in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is not simply forgiveness. Jesus reaches in and takes our darkness and our hell and takes it into himself so that he can pitch his tent, as it were, in the midst of our darkness and pain, so everything that he is in his experience with the Father and the Holy Spirit and as Lord of Creation then becomes ours. That's the point: we're going to be brought to participate in Jesus' relation with his Father, and in his anointing in the Holy Spirit, and in his relationship with everything in the entire cosmos.

WPY: Because he remains the creator.

CBK: That's because of who he is, and he's bringing us to do that.

JMF: And he remains one of us.

WPY: Yeah. Part of this exchange is that not only have we been included into this life

(Whether we know it or not, or even want it or not at this point, we've been included. That was the plan and purpose of adoption from before the foundation of the world.) ...not only has that happened, but in exchange, also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 14, 15, 16, 17) come and climb inside of our shacks, the places of our darkness, and meet us, regardless of whether we've yet repented or not. There is a process in which God is working in the heart of every human being to restore them to the desire that he has for them, which is everything that they were intended to be.

CBK: There's a whole atonement theory of theology wound up in *The Shack*, and this is part of what I'm talking about with "The Wonderful Exchange" is the way that Papa and Jesus and Sarayu get inside of Mackenzie's shack, which is his soul, which in particular is the brokenness. They're there before he even knows them or who they are. The Father, Son, and Spirit have pitched their tent inside human darkness, and sin, and treachery, and betrayal. And they got there by Jesus submitting himself to suffer from us.

Jesus says, "I'm going to let you make me the scapegoat, and you're going to pour your wrath out on me." It's not the Father's wrath being poured out on Jesus – it's our wrath. It's our rage, it's our curse. We damned him, we beat him, we crucified him, and we mocked him. And he said, "I'm going to take this, because as you do this to me and as I accept this, I am entering into a relationship with you in the very pit of our darkness and confusion and brokenness. I'm bringing my Father, and I'm bringing the Holy Spirit with me. We're not going away, because you can't kill me again."

WPY: This idea of this distant God, it's not a new thing. Isaiah writes about the atonement: "We (human beings) esteemed him (Jesus) stricken by God." That's how we looked at it. We think of God in such a light that we esteemed Jesus stricken by God.

CBK: "Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself." [Heb. 12:3] Focus on what he endured in order to meet us. So he who is rich becomes poor, that he may meet us in our poverty with his wealth. The redeeming genius of the Father, Son, and Spirit is they're going to establish the new covenant with Israel and with the human race, and here's how. They're going to establish it by taking our worst treachery, by allowing us to betray them and murder them. They're going to pitch the tent of the new covenant relationship in the tent of our betrayal. If that's not genius... That's the secret, that's the mystery, that's been done, that's real, we're all included, we're already in the journey of understanding, and we've got a long way to

go yet.

JMF: In *The Shack*, Jesus says to Mackenzie, “We want you to join us in our circle of fellowship. I don’t want slaves to do my will, I want brothers and sisters who want to share life with me.”

CBK: Yeah. They don’t want Christian robots who are doing everything right but have no heart. Jesus wants Mackenzie on the dock, but Mackenzie’s crying to him, “Jesus, I feel lost.” That’s what he really feels. “I feel lost.” Jesus holds his hand and says, “I know how you feel, Mackenzie, but I’m with you, and I’m not lost. I’m sorry you feel that way, but hear me, you’re not lost, because I have a hold of you.”

When Mackenzie begins to hear that in his pain, he’s beginning to discover who had met him in his hell. That’s a relationship of acceptance and love that can rekindle a man’s dignity and life and give him some hope that he’s a part of something way bigger than just him or just his religious obedience.

WPY: It’s a beautiful thing.

JMF: Thanks for coming.

CBK: What a great day.

JMF: And great conversations.

WPY: I’m again honored. Thank you.

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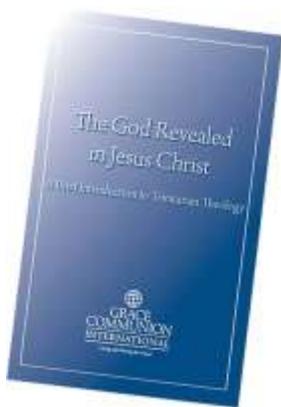
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