

Review: JAR2373

**THE LIFE BETWEEN  
THE LIFE BEFORE AND THE LIFE AFTER**

a book review of  
*Cross Roads*  
by Wm. Paul Young

(FaithWords, 2012)

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**The Life between the Life Before and the Life After**

The plot of *Cross Roads* by Wm. Paul Young, best-selling author of *The Shack*, centers around Tony Spencer, a middle-aged, selfish, and soulless businessman whose deceptive and manipulative character is matched only by his cold and cruel heart. Young's story opens with Tony living unrepentantly, hating and being hated, until a brain tumor sends him into a coma. Suddenly, his consciousness travels to an expansive landscape that is his own despicable being/heart/soul (pp. 61–62, 153). It's a dreary place, dotted with dilapidated structures and overrun by weeds (53–55). Here's where Tony meets God.

Jesus—a bronze-skinned man wearing “jeans and a woodsy shirt” (51)—is the first member of the Trinity to appear. He's a no-nonsense, casual guy—hardly different than a buddy one might hang out with at Starbucks. In fact, He comes to Tony “holding a tray of coffee and pastries” (51), but soon afterward shows His edgy humor by slapping an incredulous Tony across the face, explaining, “Just helping you perceive how active your imagination really is” (57). Jesus subsequently serves as a tour guide of sorts, elaborating on the meaning of everything Tony sees throughout the world “between” his ever- weakening life on earth and his impending afterlife (152). Christ eventually introduces Tony to the Holy Spirit—a rotund, elderly Native American woman called Grandmother (74). It's only a temporary form, the Holy Spirit jokes: “If you want oozy or ghostly, I can do that, too” (88). As for “Papa God,” He appears as a smiling, six-year-old girl with “raven hair” adorned by a “wreath of tiny white flowers.” But she keeps her identity secret, telling Tony, “My name is Hope” (200).

**A Theatrical Trinity.** Although many Christians will feel uncomfortable with such depictions, a justification for them *could* be argued from the standpoint of creative/artistic imagery. Even some Bible verses depict God in different forms: a man (Dan. 3:25), a burning bush (Exod. 3:4–6), flame/smoke (Exod. 13:21), and tongues of fire (Acts 2:1–13). Whether God could (or would) materialize in Young’s forms is a long debate, which, if set aside, leaves a more crucial, relevant question: what is *clearly* stated by Young about the Trinity?

Young begins with a firm declaration by the “Jesus-man,” who proclaims, “I am God” (69). Christ goes on to say He was “always God” and became “fully human,” while never ceasing to be “fully God” (70). Jesus is described also as “fully the creator” in whom, and by whom, the cosmos exists (70). Young goes on to condemn polytheism, saying, “There is only one God” (71). So far, so good.

Unfortunately, Young then replaces his crystal-clear wording with highly ambiguous language that can be taken as either doctrinally sound or theologically problematic. For example, he has Jesus referencing Irenaeus (d. 202) and Athanasius (d. 373), who allegedly “saw that God’s very being is relational, three distinct persons who are so wonderfully close we are oneness” (72). This comment certainly *might* be implying the orthodox definition of the Trinity (i.e., the Persons “are” one in essence). However, it *might* also be implying that the Trinity’s “oneness” is nonliteral (i.e., “oneness” is just a euphemism for an extraordinary *relational* closeness). Is Young hinting at a non-ontological “oneness” that has nothing to do with a shared divine essence? If so, then that is something neither Irenaeus nor Athanasius taught. The Godhead, according to these church fathers, is “one” because each member of the Trinity possesses, in totality, the same coeternal/coequal divine essence (nature). Their relationships are a result of that shared essence/nature.

Another ambiguous assertion is that the Trinity can only work in one’s heart “at the speed and in the direction” they *allow* and, “out of respect,” God *must* “choose to submit” to a person’s notion of what’s “real,” even if it’s a false notion (60). This might simply be reflecting the old Calvinist vs. Arminian debate involving free will. But what’s odd is Young’s assertion that God must “submit” to us. How far does that go? He even mentions God needing to submit to unreal notions. Does that include false beliefs about healing, prayer, or faith itself? At best, Young’s verbiage is confusing. At worst, it undermines several biblical verses amplifying the sovereignty of God, who is subject to no one (Ps. 15:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:35). Young comes perilously close to negating God’s ability to act as He wills with believers/unbelievers, either softening (Jer. 24:7; Acts 16:14) or hardening (Exod. 4:21; Deut. 2:30; Rom. 11:8; 2 Thess. 2:11) their hearts (Rom. 9:18).

**Universalism?** Also troubling is Young’s use of Romans 8:38–39, which at the very least, leaves room for universalism. The passage explains that nothing can separate *Christians* from God’s love, but Young applies it to *everyone*: “God tells you that separation is not true, that nothing can ‘really’ separate you from the love of God...but you believe separation is real, and so you create your own reality based on a lie” (47). Is

Young saying true “separation” (hell) is an illusion because *true* “separation” is unreal (“Whatever you believe about death and hell, it is truly not separation,” 48)? Or is he simply saying that people needlessly spend eternity in a hell of their own making because they’ve chosen to believe a lie about God or Jesus? If it’s the latter, then the statement, though poorly worded, is not heretical. If, however, it’s the former, then Young is advocating a false view of hell.

Young’s inexactness about hell/salvation leaves us with many questions, especially in light of his reference to Aldous Huxley (d. 1963), who rejected Christianity and taught that all religions ultimately express the same thing and lead to the same destination. In *Cross Roads*, Huxley shows up at the Pearly Gates (42). The possibility of nonbelievers being united with God is further pushed by Grandmother, who reveals that she and Jesus began dwelling in Tony’s soul/spirit even though he had *never* invited them into his heart: “If it had only been left up to you,” says Grandmother, “we probably would never have had the opportunity to dwell here” (79).

But such views grind against many biblical verses, wherein we see the presence of an indwelling God inextricably linked to one’s conscious decision to accept Christ as Lord and Savior (Rom. 10:9; 1 John 5:11–12), which results in a changed life (James 2:17–24). Our *very real* separation from God due to sin (Isa. 59:2; Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:13) can be bridged only by a relationship with Jesus (John 3:3, 14:6), who suffered in our place (Rom. 5:8) to satisfy God’s wrath (Rom. 2:5–8; Eph. 2:3; 1 Thess. 5:9). Salvation comes by grace through *faith in Christ* (John 3:16; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8–10), who died for us (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:25, 5:6–9; 1 Peter 3:18) and rose from the dead (Rom. 4:25; 1 Thess. 4:14)—not just a readjustment of perspective (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:3). For those who deny Christ, a *true and eternal* separation awaits them (Matt. 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:8–9).

**Literary License?** Equally disturbing is where Young’s C. S. Lewis character reveals that in the “life after” he has become “fully dwelt within by everything God is” (155–56). Here, although *dwelt within* seems to suggest an ongoing, essential distinction between Lewis and God, to be *fully* indwelt by *everything God is* would seem to include God’s divine nature/attributes. But how is it possible to remain distinct from God, while simultaneously embodying “everything God is”? Young doesn’t explain, at best leaving his words subject to grievous misinterpretation. The worst-case scenario is that Young sees a blurring of the line between God’s nature and man’s nature in the afterlife (i.e., we become either a part of God or separate little gods). Both views seriously contradict Scripture (Isa. 43:10). Yet again, Young’s ambiguity is a problem.

The oddest aspect of *Cross Roads* is how Tony’s psyche takes possession (for lack of a better term) of other people (120), slipping in and out of their bodies via kisses (103, 253). He unites with a Down syndrome teen (105–111, 118–27), an attractive woman (130–31), a cop (253), and an Alzheimer’s patient (253). This is clearly a literary device. And Scripture says nothing about it *per se*. But it must be noted that the only biblical references to shared bodies involves demon possession. Young uses this tactic to express his view of man’s internal structure as “one” being comprised of “spirit, soul, and body,” akin to the unity/diversity of the Trinity (113). We are “a spirit

interpenetrating a soul interpenetrating a body” (113). Young specifically says it is the soul that “remembers...imagines...creates...dreams...emotes... wills...loves...thinks” (114).

Why Young needed to outline his trichotomous view of man explicitly (as opposed to the dichotomous view)<sup>1</sup> is never stated. Did he feel his view would justify the journey of Tony’s consciousness (120)? Did he want to use his view to comfort readers with loved ones who are cognitively challenged? It may be no coincidence that dividing spirit from soul allowed for Young’s observations about a Down syndrome character, Cabby: “Cabby’s body is broken, and his soul is crushed and bent, but his spirit is alive and well” (113).

My deepest concern relates to Tony’s communication with the dead; namely C. S. Lewis, and Tony’s son, Gabriel. Lewis claims he’s “visiting” Tony (153). And Gabriel explains, “I asked Papa God...to be given the gift of coming here to help you” (234). But no such “gift” is granted in Jesus’ parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31). Moreover, communication with the dead, an occult practice associated with mediums, is strongly condemned by God (Deut. 18:10–11, Lev. 19:31, 20:6, 27; 2 Kings 21:6, 23:24; Isa. 8:19–20).

Young’s novel is obviously not completely grounded in Scripture. At the same time, however, it does repudiate evolution, relativism (i.e., “no single right thing, no absolute truth”), and existential nihilism (i.e., life is without meaning/value). It additionally affirms the eternity of the soul (64), Jesus’ resurrection (68), the eternity of the Son (70), our need to forgive (77), the foolishness of unprotected/casual sex (98–99), the value of disabled persons (108–9), and the beginning of life at conception (156).

*Cross Roads* also advances a theme built on God’s love as revealed in Jesus. It announces that no matter where we might be in life, God is there—calling us and revealing Himself to us as the only source of hope, strength, and healing. Young’s apparent desire is to comfort hurting people in need of God. Ironically, *Cross Roads* ends with a C. S. Lewis quote that is very applicable to the book itself: “If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.”<sup>2</sup>—*Richard Abanes*

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## NOTES

- 1 See Hank Hanegraaff, “Body, Soul, and Spirit: Monism, Dichotomy, or Trichotomy?” <http://www.equip.org/perspectives/body-soul-and-spirit-monism-dichotomy-or-trichotomy/>.
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1952), 39.