

Conversations At The Core

Discussion Guides for Men

William Paul Young

The Shack

(Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007)

This six part series of discussion guides were created especially for church and community men's groups to assist in growing together as Christian men by the Rev. Dr. Paul Koch, Washington, Missouri.

Content

- 1st session Assign reading assignments ahead of time. The introductory session includes the Forward to Chapter 3
- Extend invitation to keep a “Spiritual Awareness Journal.” Many existing views on God and religion will be challenged in Young’s book. Keeping a journal to jot down thoughts while reading will provide structure to the readers. If you choose to hand out the discussion guides in advance they may serve as a journal template but reassure the group that the guides are not a test or homework assignment. They are to be considered thought-provokers for pondering in the mind.
- 2nd Session Chapters 4-5
- To introduce the subject matter and to bring the group together, read to the group *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood, watercolors by Cheng-Khee Chee (Scholastic Press, New York, 1992) Discuss the juxtapositions of God’s attributes from the creation. Which resonate among members in the group?
- 3rd Session Chapters 6-7
- Begin the group with a “God Beliefs” exercise. Solicit from the group their belief statements or images of God that first come to mind. Discuss from where or how these beliefs developed.
- 4rd Session Chapters 8-10
- Begin the gathering by sharing aloud *In God’s Name* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Illustrations by Phoebe Stone (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994)
- Continue with a “Names of God” exercise. Solicit from group members their personal names for God that they use in prayer or other references. Many lists of names for God used in scripture are available online or in study bibles. Discuss why these names were selected and what meaning they hold.
- 5th Session Chapters 11-14

Begin the session with a “Names of Jesus” exercise. Solicit from group members their personal names for Jesus that they use in prayer or perhaps remember from the Bible. Discuss what meaning these names may hold for people.

6th Session

Chapter 15 to After Words

Begin the session by reading aloud *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth* by Douglas Wood, Watercolors by Jon J. Muth (New York: Scholastic Press, 2003)

Invite the group ahead of time to bring items that remind them of God or God’s love to place on a worship or study table. Reflect on the images and go around the room sharing stories about these sacred objects.

Invite people if they are willing to share from their “Spiritual Awareness Journals”

Encourage the group to keep up with sessions’ readings and attend all sessions. They certainly are excused when participation is not possible. Emphasize that even if one is absent a given night or cannot keep up with the readings, please come when s/he can as the group will value them being there.

Forward

Being a child of the church, I have seen and been in my fair share of church gatherings, committees, councils, classes, studies, assemblies, boards, breakfasts and groups. Each comes and goes with time, as do the people who stock them. One consistency is that churchmen predominantly choose the administrative boards, especially building and grounds, and leave the faith formation opportunities to be filled primarily by women. A consistent exception was the monthly “men’s breakfast” which often resembled a civic club with guest speaker and at an hour way too early for dads who help get the children off to school or Saturday activities. Sadly, few or no other men-specific offerings were present and certainly none that helped men grow in spiritual ways as informed by their masculine ways of understanding God and their call for Christian brotherhood among men.

Upon entering seminary my “personal theological project” was to understand men and the church and men and faith. This investigation culminated in my DMin project which I previously adapted for Chalice Pages, *When a Man’s Church Is Not ‘The Church.’* The published observations articulate that men indeed gather and discuss spiritual matters important to them and that they long to share in endeavors with other men for their personal fulfillment and community connections. Whereas the church has failed to acknowledge or provide this or has had difficulty knowing where to begin with men, many have found alternative places for community and support. My book, listed above, highlights a YMCA as essentially being the church for the men who go there regularly, or shall I say, religiously.

I have followed my own recommendations and continue to lead what is now an active men’s ministry in my community. The approach was not to forge our gatherings like any other Bible or book study at church but to form a core of men throughout the community who could commit to short-term purposes. Many personal invitations among friends were extended to the initial gatherings. Indeed, half of the men who came were not of the church that I pastor. We met not at any church but at a local deli on Main Street. Though closed after lunch, the owner gladly gave me a key and said the place is ours, help yourself to free coffee and leave contributions for the pastries in the cabinets on the counter.

We meet weekly in concentrated spurts – namely Wednesday evenings during Lent and in the fall between Labor Day and Thanksgiving. Coffee is ready at 6:00 for fellowship with hour-long discussions running precisely between 6:30 and 7:30. Afterward, all who wish gladly head down to a beverage establishment to continue conversation and to deepen friendships. The weekly meeting has peaked at 24 present with an average core number of about 12-14 each week. We take winter and summer off, but schedule additional recreational activities to nurture our “other sides” of connection such as trail bike rides, bonfires and canoe float trips. Every spring and some falls, we participate in a statewide men’s retreat at our church’s mission camp. All of these are much anticipated and well-attended.

The crux of our weekly conversations has evolved. Upon beginning, we discussed how and when to proceed. We agreed to select books to ground and focus our conversations but wanted to stay away from packaged curricular studies. We have often found men's curriculum in particular to be theologically "where none of us are" and the provided discussion questions either a restatement of the reading material or light-weight. In other words, instead of softballs the men were willing and ready to receive fastball pitches right in the strike zone. As none of the chosen books included conversation guides, I wrote them myself and intentionally tried to make the questions personal yet safe to discuss. I found myself starting with hypothetical questions such as "have you *known of a man*" but eventually found the men wanting to answer "*when have you*" questions.

The single-sheet guides are prepared and handed out one week in advance with referenced page numbers to the selected book. Men are encouraged to read the passages but liberty and grace are extended to all who wish to follow along without reading. We might have a general introduction question at the beginning for all to welcome newcomers but then we will divide into groups of three or four. An invitation to share a related story is always welcomed. The smaller groups allow fuller participation for all. They may choose to use the guides or come up with their own discussion points – with encouragement to stick to the subject rather than veering off to sports, news headlines, etc. When there is about 10 minutes remaining in the hour, all groups come together for a report to everyone about a highlight or observations that was shared. Men are encouraged to form new groups the following week to get to know others.

Books are carefully chosen after much discussion. They have ranged from important new releases to tried and true classics. Some are memoirs, chronicles, nonfiction, novels and challenging religious books. Some films were shown, stopping halfway for discussion up to a point. For one series, the group chose to have free-form discussion around a designated topic each week. This demonstrated how the group was claiming its own purpose and identity, with a different man accepting leadership for each topic's introduction. Upon this milestone, the group named itself the Wild Wise Men, based on the title of a wonderful book by Richard Rohr that was studied previously.

There is no hard and fast way to ensure success – or failure. I offer you my encouragement for keeping on the journey. It takes time to arrive where you want to be but keeping on to keep on is what it's about. My Wild Wise Men, in our starts and stutters give me something that I personally look forward to experiencing each week. I thank all the men who have become my brothers from the bottom of my heart. I thank my wife, Marcia, and my children Aaron, Joel and Grace who graciously allow me a night out each week.

Grace to you, and peace,

Paul Koch

Introduction

As soon as William Paul Young's *The Shack* hit the Christian bookstores, let alone Wal-Mart, in 2007, many men in our group suggested we choose this book for our next conversation starter. Not being familiar with the book as I try to avoid both of the above retail outlets, I was characteristically dubious when the premise was explained to me. I had read similarly inclined "Christian" mass distribution books and was woefully unimpressed. Using "the other side's" hell language, I was burnt before – aside from them exerting horrible theology, I found the writing to be horrible literature.

Nonetheless I agreed to go to the library and check the book out. Miraculously, not all the numerous reserved copies were gone; one had perhaps mistakenly been returned to the shelf. But, while heading to the stacks, I feared the book's library catalog call letters were an ominous sign. I was searching for a book shelved under F YOU.

To my prideful chagrin but reader's delight, I was engrossed in *The Shack's* crime story and found Young's subsequent theological curiosity refreshing. He gently re-imagines the Trinitarian perspective on the three persons of God – in fact, perhaps 3 ½ with a refreshing nod to Sophia, who many scholarly authors simply overlook with regard to her legacy in relating to God. I was humbly reminded that just because something is popular, the church needn't wait for a decade long stamp of approval before considering it.

Conversations on each session's reading were intriguing and fulfilling. None of the men quit midstream, or voiced narrow rejection of Young's portrayals of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We can tip our collective hat to the emergence of religion in popular media from time to time. One man commented that he had no trouble at all imagining God as an African American woman having watched Della Reese's loving yet stern portrayal of the angel Tess in the television series, *Touched by an Angel* for several years. This God who loves to cook comfort food for her guests, and lots of it, was a big hit.

I hope you enjoy your time together in *The Shack* as much as I enjoyed preparing these discussion guides. My imagination was running wild as I was thinking of all sorts of other material I would like to introduce to the small group. Some of these are included in the outline as possible ways to begin the conversations before heading straight to the material. God bless.

Pastor Paul

The Shack by William Paul Young

Conversation questions compiled by Paul Koch

Session 1: Forward to Chapter 3

1. The first line reads: “Who wouldn’t be skeptical when a man claims to have spent an entire weekend with God...” 9 Is there cause for skepticism on what can be gained by one sharing his story of *spiritual daring*? 1
2. Young dedicates his book to his children; each is given a special name. 8 Is there significance or power to naming? Describe an encounter you had with names.
3. Mack’s father was *externally religious* but a mean closeted drinker and abuser. 9-10 What affect do you think this home environment generally has on a child’s faith?
4. Mack’s faith and religion is described in complicated ways. 12 How would you begin to explain why his thoughts are as they are at this point in the book? Are his thoughts and perspectives typical in men you know?
5. “Most of our hurts come through relationships, so will our healing, and I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside.” 13 Do you agree?
6. “Mack’s relationship with God is wide; Nan’s is deep.” 13 How do these two approaches compare? Are men’s faith more of a spectrum survey while women’s are focused and rooted? What might this perspective of faith say about men’s relationships in general - with friends and significant others?
7. Have you ever gotten a strange note like Mack’s? 18 What was your first instinct?
8. Compare and contrast Mack and Missy’s discussion on legend and truth with regard to the story of the Indian princess and Christ. 33
9. The legend had a powerful effect for both Mack and Missy, but in different ways. From what point of view do you take?
10. Mack’s melancholy was named, *The Great Sadness*. Is there a point in naming this?
11. In referring to Mack’s impression of the Madisons: “As much as he felt unusually at ease with these two, he really didn’t know them and the conversation had gotten deeper than he was comfortable with.” 39 Were you ever unusually open to sharing but then had a nagging feeling to pull back sharply? What explains this tightrope?

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Session 2: Chapters 4-5

1. What about the abduction scene is particularly disturbing to you as a reader? Would a Christian man feel or react differently from a man of challenged faith?
2. Mack prayed, “Dear, God, please, please, please take care of my Missy. I just can’t right now.” 62 Is there an expectation that caring for others and our children is our responsibility with God as the backup? Is caring God’s primary responsibility?
3. Upon finding the hubcap, Mack didn’t want to hope that Missy might still be alive when everything he knew told him otherwise. 63 Is better strategy to brace for the worst or to ‘fear the worst and hope for the best?’ Was Missy’s funeral, happening soon after her dress was found and with an empty casket, forcing closure ‘too soon?’
4. Mack’s emotions and reasons were melting toward the end. Would God leave such a note in a mailbox? Would God call a grieving father back to a crime scene?
5. Mack was “sick of God and God’s religion, sick of little religious social clubs that didn’t make any real difference or affect real change.” Pull apart Mack’s concerns.
6. What does Marilynne Robinson’s quote from *The Death of Adam* speak to you? While you’re at it, unpack the authors opening paragraph to Chapter 5. 69
7. Mack kept his intention to go to the shack a secret *for Nan’s sake*. 70 Was it really for himself? Honesty can be messy. When do we disclose?
8. Why would Mack decline Willie’s offer to face God (or the killer) with him?
9. Mack told Willie, “I love you too,” though Willie never said, “I love you” to Mack; he expressed concern, hope and a prayer. 75 Is that saying, “I love you?” Who has told you “*I love you*” without saying the words. Do you say *love* to your friends?
10. Were Mack’s anger and confusion to God upon entering the shack appropriate? 80
11. “The nose is the best link to the past, the olfactory sense the strongest for tapping into forgotten history.” 83 When was this true for you? Are scents words from God?
12. Mack found three persons in the shack: they appeared to resemble a large Black woman, a Middle Eastern man, a small Asian woman. Each had particular features and qualities. Share how each person’s physical and ethereal qualities spoke to you.
13. Mack surprised himself by noticing that a white man was not among the three. 89 Were you surprised? How are men comfortable today with varying images of God?

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Session 3: Chapters 6-7

1. Jesus told Mack, “Don’t go [to God] because you feel obligated. That won’t get you any points around here. Go because it’s what you want to do.” 91 How much of men’s religion and religious practices are motivated by obligation rather than desire?
2. Why was Mack surprised that God listens to funk? (92) What types of music provide you a spiritual pulse of life?
3. After meeting all three, Mack went first to the God person to resolve his questions – why not to Jesus or the Spirit? Who do you pray to “first?”
4. God said God appeared as a woman to Mack so he would not fall into his religious stereotypes. 95 What stereotypes do you reinforce about God? Are men’s propensity to primarily relate to God as man liberating, limited or just not thought through?
5. Mack was surprised that God too had scars on her wrists like Jesus. 98 Do you think God has all of our scars too? Tell your brothers, if you choose, stories of your scars.
6. The Spirit explained that they have limited their *omniscience* out of respect for us so when we pray it would as if hearing the joys and concerns as if for the first time. 108 Mack likes this reasoning, do you? Share your thoughts about whether you believe God is “all-knowing.” Where might there be inconsistencies regarding God’s place in life events?
7. Mack said he felt more comfortable with Jesus than the other two, possibly because of his humanity. 112 Do you? Do you think of Jesus as being a fellow man – a buddy? How would such a personal friendship with Jesus change your religious relationship?
8. Sarayu is *creativity, action, breathing of life, wind, My spirit...* 112 Is this your understanding of the Holy Spirit?
9. Elousia’s name is *Creator God, being, that which is truly real, the ground of all being...* 113 Is this your understanding of God?
10. Is Jesus good-looking? 113 Does appearance matter to you when you think of him?
11. Mack felt lost but Jesus reassured him that he was with him and since he is not lost, neither are we. 115 Why do so many people feel lost?

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Session 4: Chapters 8-10

1. Have you ever had a flying dream? What was it like?
2. Mack seemed taken back that the God he met was not a vindictive *God Almighty*. 121 Would you be disappointed?
3. Is Sin its own punishment? 122
4. Is God the 'boss' of Jesus and the Spirit? 123
5. Can you have authority and unity? 124
6. Sarayu said, "When you chose independence over relationship, you become a danger to one another." 125 How have you seen this lived out? Why do so many men "go it alone?"
7. Mack seemed to have the most difficult time following Sarayu, the Spirit, among the three. Do we have the most difficult time following the Spirit too?
8. Explain how color, variety and messy fractals are part of the Spirit's garden.
9. "When something happens to you, how do you determine whether it is good or evil?" 136
10. Dwell on the metaphor that the garden is your soul. 140
11. We call Jesus, 'Lord and King' but has he acted in that hierarchical capacity with us? 147 Many theologians encourage us to consider non-hierarchical ways of relating and especially for men to move away from patriarchal privilege. Has your position in hierarchy limited your faith development with God and with others?
12. Domination was spelled out as a curse after the Fall in Genesis 3. How are we still living in that curse? 149
13. We have spent three sessions with Young's personified characters of God, Jesus and Spirit. How would you 'cast' them were *The Shack* is made into a movie?

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Session 5: Chapters 11-14

1. Have you ever thought of Judgment Day as being when you would get to judge? 160
2. If the seat of judgment was reversed and you were responsible for eternal judgment, could you even do it? What must God go through?
3. Could you send someone you love to ‘hell?’ 164 How could God? Why is the notion of a hell taught prevailing in many religious denominations?
4. Do you find Young’s allegory of the trial effective in understanding Jesus’ willing sacrifice for us? 165
5. Is the image of Missy playing with the children behind the waterfall how you might imagine it?
6. “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” – Blaise Pascal 172 In what ways have you seen this to be true?
7. Compare and contrast Jesus’ and Mack’s descriptions of heaven and the church. 179
8. Comment on Young’s universalist, seemingly antiestablishment perspectives with regard to church, religion, government, economics etc. at the close of Chapter 12.
9. As Chapter 13 opens, we are reminded how food contributes greatly to Mack’s comfort. Why has Young emphasized this theme? Is there comfort food for you?
10. Papa affirms that God uses tragedies for our growth yet does not will tragedy. 187 Why then is so much blame cast on God when things go wrong?
11. Do you think many Christians play the good cop / bad cop game with respect to God and Jesus as Papa described? 188
12. Does our desire to ‘protect’ others actually take us out of relationship with them? 190 Why do many men cast themselves as the protector in the family?
13. The Spirit said, “It is true that relationships are a whole lot messier than rules, but rules will never give you answers to the deep questions of the heart, and they will never love you.” 200 Why do people stress that religion is all about following rules?

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Session 6: Chapter 15 – After Words

1. Were you surprised that Mack encountered his earthly father in the heavenly realm? Why or how were Mack's first words to his father apologies and love? 217
2. Why did Papa change his appearance before their hike?
3. Were you anticipating that Mack would eventually have to confront Missy's killer in the spirit of God's reconciliation? Is confrontation necessary?
4. What is your understanding of forgiveness? Do you believe it does not require forgetting, excusing, or establishing relationship? 228
5. Papa said you may have to "forgive a hundred times the first day, and then the second and succeeding days but eventually the needed number of times will decrease until you don't have to say it anymore to forgive." 229 Would you find this way useful?
6. Many people who have faced tragedies similar to Mack's have expressed that finding the body of a deceased loved one can help in healing and bringing closure. Why is the completion that touches the physical necessary for what is spiritual?
7. Why would the ladybug pin be etched in the coffin too?
8. Missy was buried in Sarayu's garden, which she said was Mack's soul. Are final resting places indeed within us?
9. How would you choose among the options presented to Mack – to stay with God and be reunited with Missy or return to the present life? 237
10. Their final meal together was bread and wine, yet there was no mention that it was communion. 238 Papa said earlier that meals should not be ritualized but always a free expression of love. What might we say about our practices of Holy Communion?
11. Does the hint that Mack's journey with God might have occurred during his unconsciousness following the accident make *The Shack* more plausible or is 'figuring out what actually happened' unnecessary or believably true?
12. How do you think Mack will testify at the sentencing phase of the trial? What do you think Mack will say or discuss with the killer when he eventually meets him?
13. What human characters in the novel showed God/Christ/Spirit-like attributes to you?
14. Having completed the sessions, what have changed in your theology and beliefs?