

So What About that Book...

“The Shack”

By Dr. Calvin Habig

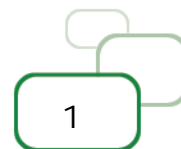


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Literature and movies can be a great asset both in understanding our faith and understanding the culture into which we bring the message of Jesus. Almost every movie or book contains some theme or subtheme that is addressed by the Word of God. The intended message of the book or movie may be the *opposite* of the Word of God, but it can be evaluated by that same Word.

Occasionally, however different books & movies are released that purport to carry “the true message of Jesus.” Sometimes those can be a helpful perspective on what the Bible teaches. More usually, they can confuse people by blurring what actually is true with elements of untruth.

In 2007 a book was released that has created a stir among believers and non-believers alike. It has crawled its way onto most of the best-seller lists in the U.S. Over two million copies are currently in print and the book carries recommendations from Christian leaders and public figures that many people respect like Eugene Peterson, Michael W. Smith and Wynonna Judd.

On the other hand, the book has very strong critics. “Heresy!” cries one critic. “The worst book to ever be published” decried another. What it is that has created such emotion among these writers; and is “The Shack” a book that we can learn from or something that we should avoid? How do we speak to those who have read it and either have raving praise for it, or who call what it says heretical to the Christian faith?

In this little paper, I intend to give my personal perspective on the book. The book had been recommended to me by several members of my church family. When I saw an article in *Christianity Today* magazine entitled, “How to Read ‘The Shack’,” I knew it was something I wanted to read.

That sense was heightened when I couldn't find a copy. Every place was sold out. I went from store to store and was told the same thing: it was a very popular book that the store had trouble keeping in stock. Knowing that over a million copies had been printed, that surprised me. Finally, I was able to buy the last copy on hand at our local Borders bookstore. I also downloaded the audio-book so I could listen to it on my iPod. I read some sections and listened to others.

So, what about "The Shack"?

Let me say, bottom line, that I wanted to like this book, and I did. As I told my wife, it parallels some of the struggles I have had in my life and I found it personally helpful.

Second, it is insufficient to say, "It's just a novel...don't worry about what it says about God." Or in the words of an article in *Christianity Today*, "*The Shack* is a novel, after all, not a systematic theology."¹ But every novel tells us something about reality, about the human condition and about God.

In an article posted on *Christianity Today Online*, Derek R. Keefe "Young could have written a theological treatise, a spiritual memoir, or even a long poem. Instead, he wrote what he calls a 'parable' (not an allegory). That should give readers pause about confidently reading off a systematic theology from the book."²

It is fair to ask, "What is this book trying to tell us?"

Cindy Crosby, in an article on *CTOnline* gives this summary of the plot of *The Shack*:

For all the hubbub, it's a simple story. Mackenzie Allen Philips is on a camping trip in Oregon with his three young children, when his youngest daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and brutally murdered. Evidence of her death is found in an abandoned shack. The vicious murder rips the young family apart, and when the story resumes four years later, Mack is drifting and grief-stricken. He receives a typewritten letter from someone called "Papa," his wife's nickname for God, inviting him to meet at the shack. Initially, he writes it off as the joke of a particularly sadistic prankster. But eventually — despite his misgivings — he risks everything and goes.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/julyweb-only/128-41.0.html>

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/august/5.44.html?start=1>

The rest of the book is the account of Mack's weekend visit at the shack with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. There is some action that takes place away from the shack, but primarily the conversations take place within or in the immediate area of the shack.

Good things:

Relationship with God. There are several good things that I appreciate about the book. Mark Driscoll posits "The whole premise of the book is the trinity."³ I respectfully and strongly disagree. It is not about the Trinity. It is about a man's journey of faith. A faith that begins in an immature manner, moves into apathy, then into antipathy and depression ("The Great Sadness" he calls it) and finally returns to faith in a deeper way with increased understanding.

William P. Young, himself, describes what he is trying to do in the book and in so doing, gives what I believe is the theme of the book:

"It's a metaphor, really for the decrepit house of the soul that we build over time. It's where we hide our pain, our lostness, our secrets and addictions. Our lies are the fabric that holds the house together and we decorate it with the façade that we want other people to see, changing the colors as people's expectations change. But the corruption inside the shack is never touched by all the performance on the outside."⁴

Accompanying his spiritual journey, Mack is also on a journey of emotional healing. "The Great Sadness" has hung with him for years and is distorting everything in his life.

"I am afraid of emotions," Mack admitted, a bit perturbed that she [Sarayu] seemed to make light of it. "I don't like how they feel. I've hurt others with them and I can't trust them at all. Did you create all of them or only the good ones?" (p. 196)

³ Notes on online lecture by Driscoll.

⁴ Innerview: Extravagant Grace of William P. Young. (Servant, Issue, 88, 2008) p. 10.

That is not to say that the book is not about God. It is. One cannot talk about faith without talking about the one in whom we put our faith. When asked about the central message of "The Shack" Young replies,

It's first of all about the character of God. Is He good and is He involved? So often we paint God as demanding perfection and setting the bar so high we can't reach it and then being disgusted at our inability. If the character of God is uncertain, then everything else is uncertain and we are totally on our own trying to make it. The second question is: who am I to God —the issue of our identity. Ephesians 1.5 says that His whole purpose is to adopt us as sons. And that adoption allows us to enter into the same relationship with the Father that Jesus has; I am not in the middle of the affection of the Father to the Son. In the story of the prodigal there is never any question whether or not the two boys are his sons. The question really is when are they finally going to realize the love of the father? His love is constant, but the boys don't understand and one turns to rebellion and one to religion.⁵

The Reality of Evil. The book emphasizes Mack's (and our) relationship with God. While in the beginning, God is someone to be questioned, challenged and accused because of the presence of evil in the world at the end of the book Mack is falling into the loving arms of God in full submission and devotion.

I appreciate that the book helps clarify the conflict between God's great power and the presence of great evil in our world.

Mack: "But I still don't understand why Missy had to die."

Sarayu: "She didn't have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa's. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish His good purposes." (p. 165)

He lays out (helpfully, I believe) that while God COULD mitigate all the painful results of evil in our world, that would deny his creation it's right to free will...and to freely return God's love.

Instead of mitigating evil, God often takes the evil and brings beneficial, even wonderful, results out of them. God says, "Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies." (p. 185)

⁵ Ibid.

Forgiveness. A strength in the book, that is very, very hard for many people to come to terms with (as it was an agonizing transition for Mack) is learning the importance of forgiving what seems unforgiveable. I have heard many people say that this was the main struggle they had with the book. I think that if it forces people to think about the reality of this truth, then it was worth Young writing the book.

Guilt. Another step in Mack's journey of faith is dealing with the issue of guilt. While I may have wished that Young worded some of his statements about guilt more clearly, he has God say:

Papa: "Son, this is not about shaming you. I don't do humiliation, or guilt or condemnation. They don't produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness, and that is why they were nailed into Jesus on the cross." (p. 222)

God as Trinity. After saying that the book is primarily about one man's journey of faith, and not primarily about God, I do appreciate the way Young depicts the Trinity. This is directly the opposite of the reaction Mark Driscoll and others have had to this aspect of the book. If you know anything about the book, you know that Young depicts the Trinity in a unique way. God the Father is depicted as a large black "mammy" type, named "Papa". God the Son is depicted as a middle eastern carpenter. And the Holy Spirit is depicted as an ethereal Asian woman, named Sarayu. (*Sarayu* is the word for "wind" in the Sanskrit language, just as the word for "Spirit" and "wind" is *pneuma* in the Greek language of the New Testament.)

When Mack questions how God could be a black woman, Papa replies:

"MacKenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my [God's] nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or a woman, its because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning." (p. 93)

The stress that God is gender-less is again emphasized when Papa later appears as a male:

The man standing next to him [Mack] looked a bit like Papa; dignified, older and wiry and taller than Mack. He had silver-whit hair pulled back in a ponytail, matched by a gray-splashed mustache and goatee. Plaid shirt with sleeves rolled up, jeans and hiking boots completed the outfit of someone who was ready to hit the trail. "Papa?" Mack asked.

"Yes, son."

"Mack shook his head, "You're still messing with me aren't you?"

"Always," he said with a warm smile, and then answered Mack's next question before it was asked, "This morning you're going to need a father."

I think the falsehood that God has gender is so engrained in our culture that Young's depiction is a helpful technique to confuse the gender of God by depicting him as a woman who is called Papa.

Driscoll and others have two problems with Young's depiction of God as a large black woman.

First, they object that Young depicts God the Father as a woman. Driscoll calls Young's depiction of God in human form "goddess worship" (Driscoll: "Instead of 'Our father who art in heaven' We should have prayed 'Our mother who art in the shack'.")

The blogosphere has played much on this theme. "Watcher on the Wall" (aka J.B.) on Squidoo has noted: "this book is nothing more than a clever re-telling of the Black Madonna Heresy." To Challies, Elouisa in the book is really the Hindu goddess Kali.⁶

Driscoll (and the bloggers) do not note that God is described in scripture repeatedly as a woman or as having motherly characteristics:

God is described as:⁷

- a woman in labor (Is 42.14)
- a mother suckling her children (Num 11.12)
- a mother who gave birth to the Israelites (Deut. 32:18)
- a mother who does not forget the child she nurses (Isa. 49.14-15)

⁶ <http://www.squidoo.com/TheShackBook>

⁷ <http://www.pngoc.com/content.php?r=&c=57>. See this for more reference, including references about the Holy Spirit as feminine.

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- a mother who comforts her children (Isa 66:12-13)
- a mother who births and protects Israel (Isa 46:3-4)
- a mother who calls, teaches, holds, heals and feeds her young (Hosea 11:1-4)
- a seamstress making clothe for Israel to wear (Neh. 9:21)
- a midwife attending a birth (Ps. 22:9-10a; 71:6; Isa 66:9)
- a woman working leaven into bread (Lk. 13:18-21)
- a woman seeking a lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10)
- a female bird protecting her young (Ps. 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 91:1, 4; Isa. 31:5; Dt. 32:11-12).
- a mother eagle preparing her nest and protecting her young: Dt. 32:11-12
- a mother hen: (Mt. 23:37; par. Lk. 13:34; cf. Ruth 2:12)
- a mother bear (Hosea 13:8)

Second, many who object to Young’s depiction of God, object that God the Father is depicted *at all!* Driscoll sees it as an heretical violation of the second commandment [Do not make a graven image...]. One could quibble that the point of the second commandment is forbidding the making of an image to be worshipped, but there is also the truth that ANY physical depiction of God is incomplete and in that sense inaccurate. God is NOT a large black woman. God is NOT a back-woodsy father-type.

But this literary technique has been used before and even Young notes in the above quote that God is something different from the female “Papa.” God is NOT ULTIMATELY ANYTHING physical. But he chooses to appear thus for Mack’s sake.

Although Driscoll calls it heresy to present a physical depiction of God, he allows that biblical precedent makes it OK to depict Jesus as a human and the spirit symbolically as a dove (but NOT as a wispy Asian woman). Driscoll: “But since God depicts himself as a man, we need to worship him as a man.”

Problems:

All the above said, that does not mean that I don't have several problems/issues with the theology depicted in "The Shack".

Individualistic. Unfortunately the book is a perfect fit for 21st century American Christianity: it is highly individualistic and unfalteringly critical of the church. The ideal is depicted as a lone believer in love with God off by himself, ignoring scripture and isolated from all other believers. "Just me and God." (Just Father, Son, Holy Spirit and me. "Us four...and no more.")

Now while most of the accusations thrown at the church have some basis in truth, there is no balancing picture either of the reality that the body of Christ on earth has done (and is doing) immeasurable good...more good as a group than the sum of it's individual parts could do alone.

Second, the New Testament consistently describes the body of Christ as a corporate body. The idea of a lone believer is an anomaly. The Christian life of the New Testament CANNOT be lived without relationship to others in the body. One writer noted that the only people who object to Young's depiction of the church in this way are those preachers and teachers who earn their living from serving the church. Such *ad hominem* arguments are pointless. Either the accusation is true or false no matter who makes them. Judge the argument on it's merits, not by a pre-conceived prejudice against preachers and teachers.

The Bible. An accompanying problem is the denigration of the Bible, the Written Word:

In seminary he [Mack is a seminary graduate] had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners' access to God was mediated and controlled by the *intelligentsia*. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book.

Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that gilt edges? (pp. 65-66).

To picture that ANY reputable seminary would really discount the work of the Holy Spirit and prayer seems to be setting up a straw man. I would question that such a seminary would exist, at least for long!

Tim Challies notes "The majority of the Shack's references to Scripture are negative in their tone. They do not affirm the Bible as God's perfect revelation to us, but instead focus on its abuse at the hands of those who profess Christ, or on supposed old-fashioned notions about it."⁸

But the Bible gives no hint that it is a reduction of the power of God.

Isaiah 55:10-11: As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Hebrews 4:12: For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As stated above, "The Shack" is a book perfectly written for the individualistic, iconoclastic, subjective spirit of the times in which we live.

Salvation. An even larger problem for me was the doctrine of salvation promoted by Young. Some have argued that he is unclear in his message that Jesus is the only way to God. I don't think this is the major problem. The quote that those use to say that Young teaches that any way to God is acceptable use one quote, a quote that in fact refutes their accusation:

Papa: "Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian.... Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptist or Muslims.... I have no desire to make them Christian, but I

⁸ Tim Challies, "A Readers' Review of the Shack". Downloadable at <http://www.challies.com/archives/book-reviews/the-shack-by-william-p-young.php>

do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Believed" (p. 182)

Young is not saying that all ways LEAD to God, but that those who follow Christ have come from all different paths.

Young clarifies his positioning an interview in *Servant* magazine:

"Do all paths lead to God? I have never believed this. The path narrows to one man, the second Adam, Jesus Christ. In the book Mac asks Jesus 'Do all roads lead to Papa (God)?' And he's told, 'No, most roads don't lead anywhere. But I will go down any road to find you.'" This is the story of the Incarnation. It's the Good Shepherd leaving the 99 to go and find the one. God knows how lost we are. And He will be the one who bridges the gap. ...He'll go down any road to find us but that doesn't mean that any particular road we're on is The Way."⁹

While I believe that this aspect of the accusation is inaccurate, I believe that there is a related accusation that does hold water. And that is that Young promotes Christian Universalism.

Universalism says that all people will eventually be saved. God is too good, too kind, too loving to eternally condemn anyone to hell. And so eventually, all will be forgiven and all will be re-united with the Father.

Young does not technically advocate Universalism, but a form known as Christian Universalism.

James B. DeYoung, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Western Seminary writes:

"Who is the author? William P. Young, a man I have known for over a dozen years. About four years ago Paul embraced "Christian universalism," and has defended this view on several occasions. While he frequently disavows "general universalism," the idea that many roads lead to God, he has affirmed his hope that all will be reconciled to God either this side of death or after death.

"Christian universalism (also known as universal reconciliation) asserts that love is the supreme attribute of God that trumps all others. His love reaches beyond the grave to save all those who refuse Christ throughout their lifetimes. Even fallen angels, and the Devil himself, will one day repent, be delivered from hell enter heaven. There cannot be left in the universe any being whom the love of

⁹ Young, p. 11.

God does not conquer; hence the words, universal reconciliation. This view of future destinies claims many texts that seem to assert that the reconciliation Jesus accomplished on the cross extends to all creatures (Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor. 5:16-20; Col. 1:19-20), that all universally will confess him as Lord (Phil. 2:6-11), and that God's desire that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) will be accomplished. Nothing can thwart God's will and love."¹⁰

We see a statement of this in the Shack:

"Honey," says Papa, "you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." "The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?" "The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way." (96)

And in another place:

"I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it." (p. 120)

A statement that also *may* reflect Christian universalism is that Papa is not a God who was not separated from Christ because of our sin laid on him, and by implication God is not separated from *us* due to our sin.

Orthodox Christian teaching has been that Jesus' statement, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) as he hung dying on the cross was a statement that Jesus, the perfect Son of God had taken upon himself, on the cross, the sins of the world. Since God cannot be in the presence of evil, (Hab 1:13; Ps. 5:4-5; 34:15-16, Job 15.15), God had to turn his face from the Son, a prospect worse than death for Jesus.

The God of *The Shack* is not a God who could have punished His Son for the sins of others. After all, Papa says, "Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him" (96).¹¹

¹⁰ James B. DeYoung "A Book Review: The Shack" *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal*

¹¹ Challies, p. 10.

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Christian universalism says that Christ died for ALL people and thus ALL people in all times and places will come to obedient faith in Christ, whether in this life or in the next. It will BE THROUGH Christ, (every path does not lead to God) but ultimately all will be saved.

Modalism. A problem that is not immediately apparent, unless one is a student of Christian history, is the hint of modalism in the book.

- Modalism (aka Sabellianism) is the anti-trinitarian doctrine that there is only one God and he only *appears* to be three. Modalism says the Father was born of a virgin; the father died on a cross. Modalism says the father became the son; the father became the spirit. There are not three separate persons in the Godhead.

Orthodox Christian teaching has stated that there is only one God, but he exists in three distinct persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They work together, but are separate. The father sent the son. The son died for our sins, the spirit was sent to regenerate us. Modalism says that there is only one God and he only *appears* in the form of Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

The main hint of this is in two places. Papa says, "I am truly human in Jesus." More explicit is the statement that the marks of the crucifixion could be seen on n Papa's hands: "Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his." (p. 95)

This picture comes directly from the history of Sabellianism which depicted God the father as having the imprints of the nails on his hands. The church found it necessary around 500A.D. to develop the Athanasian Creed to counter the teachings of modalism. A copy of that creed can be found at <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html>.

I would agree that these two statements could be interpreted as modalism, (and I wish they had been edited out...they are unnecessary to the story) but taking the book as a whole, I think that Young draws an adequate enough distinction between Papa, Son, and Sarayu.

Lines of Authority. Related to this is the observation that Young promotes the idea of equality of father son & Holy Spirit, i.e. a rejection of lines of authority. In a quote where all three persons are present (and it is not clear who is speaking) one of the persons of the Godhead says, "They are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or a chain of being, Hierarchy would make no sense among us." (p. 122)

Even if Young draws a clear enough distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit (a statement some would dispute), "The Shack" says there is no deference among the trinity. Hierarchy, lines of authority are "only necessary when sin is present."

And yet scripture depicts a clear line of authority between the three. Jesus says, "The father sent me." In another place Jesus says, "I only say what the father tells me to say; I only do what the father tells me to do."

There is equality but deference.

Driscoll applies the necessity of this doctrine in practical terms: "It is from that that we get the principle that children/wives/Christians/citizens are not inferior/lesser to their parents/husbands/pastors/government officials, but they are to respect, follow and listen to them."

Extending the picture larger than the trinity, Driscoll correctly notes "There is no sin among the angels who have not fallen & followed Satan and yet there is hierarchy within the angels."

CONCLUSION

So... what about that book, "The Shack." I sincerely believe that the book has merit and can be read with profit. I personally benefitted from the depiction of the lengths that God goes to in order to bring healing to Mack. I believe that the strengths I have listed are genuine and worthy of note.

It must be stated, however, that this recommendation comes with serious reservations. It is not a book for young believers to read unaided or at least without "examin[ing] the Scriptures every day to see if what [is] said was true. (Acts 17:11)

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The problems are REAL problems. And for many, the problems will negate the usefulness of the book. That is a decision they need to make. But I believe, that if a believer is grounded in what the scriptures say about God, the Scriptures, the Church, and salvation, that there are some useful things to be learned from this novel, “The Shack.”