

A Review of William Young, *The Shack*

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Young WP 2007. *The Shack*. Newbury Park: Windblown Media.²

1. Introduction to the book and the author

The Shack, one of the most popular and controversial Christian books of recent years, is the fictional work by first-time author William Young, which embodies lengthy conversations between the main character, a man named Mack, and three persons who represent a version of the Trinity. It is a national bestseller widely embraced by some churches and many professing Christians.

The Shack is a fresh, unique, and thought-provoking book that manages to touch the heart in very real ways. Young uses contemporary metaphor to reveal God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Evangelical recording artist Michael W. Smith states, “*The Shack* will leave you craving for the presence of God.”

The Shack has been touted as a modern day successor to *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Eugene Peterson believes “this book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!” In both C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, one can see how the authors use the power of metaphor and association to illustrate the character and attributes of God.

On the other hand, seminary president Al Mohler says that the book “includes undiluted heresy”, and many concur. Given its popularity (number one on the

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New York Times bestseller list for paperback fiction), influence, and mixed reviews, one needs to study the book carefully. Good Christian fiction has the ability to get across a message in an indirect, non-threatening, yet powerful, way. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most successful in the genre and has been mightily used of God to teach spiritual truth. What determines the value of fiction is how closely it adheres to Scripture. One would therefore need to utilise Biblical criteria to measure the value of *The Shack*.

2. A summary of the book

The Shack is a story about an Oregon man, Mack. He is married and has a family of his own, but tragedy strikes when his daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and brutally murdered in an isolated shack. Since her death, Mack has lived in a fog state, The Great Sadness, as he accuses that Great Interferer God for letting an innocent die.

A few years after her murder, during a nasty ice storm, while his wife and the two younger children visit relatives in Washington State, Mack receives an invitation from God in his mailbox to meet Him at the shack where his murdered daughter's blood drenched dress was found. Obviously sceptical, Mack takes a chance that God might really show up and heads alone towards the aptly named Hells Canyon National Recreation Area to confront God and hopefully gain closure. There God, in the form of all three members of the Trinity, meets with him for the weekend. God the Father is depicted as a large African woman named Papa, God the Son is depicted as a middle-eastern looking lumberjack, and God the Holy Spirit is depicted as a small Asian woman named Sarayu.

Mack works through the meaning of suffering as he spends the weekend with the Trinity. God gives Mack new insight about Himself, about life, and about pain and tragedy, and Mack goes home a new man. Mack learns more than he bargained for from Papa, who vows to always wipe away the tears as more will occur over the years.

3. Strengths of the book

3.1. It delves into the question of the purpose of suffering

The Shack is a book to guide one through the answers relating to the purpose of suffering. William Young creates an anguished scene of a family losing its innocence to the brutality of a world we cannot even begin to understand. Left to the prison of his thoughts, a father grapples with the task of understanding how a Creator could truly love in the midst of evil, and emerges from a broken world with a broader, yet admittedly broken, understanding of the WHO of God.

In this book, God meets man in horrific tragedy, specifically at the place of the tragedy—the shack. The core of the book seems to be captured when God speaks to the protagonist Mackenzie (Mack):

Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me. Grace doesn't depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors (p. 185).

3.2. It challenges our perceptions of God

Young reminds all of us of the frailty of our human minds, of the grandeur of God, and of the great mystery behind God's truth. Because we live in a society where truth is often determined by scientific understanding and reason, religion has been reduced to a set of rules and expectations. As a result, we have become a judgmental generation of believers falling devastatingly short of understanding God.

Young challenges his readers' perceptions of God. He challenges our tendency to "put God in a box". Sarayu profoundly captures this when she says:

Just because you believe something firmly doesn't make it true. Be willing to reexamine what you believe. The more you live in the truth, the more your emotions will help you see clearly. But even then, you don't want to trust them more than me (p. 197).

Through *The Shack*, we are reminded of God's omnipotence and omnipresence, and we are chided for our feeble imaginings of God. *The Shack* explains the Great Paradigm: God can never be twisted to fit all perceptions. And although all Truth is God, that Truth can only be found in the mysterious Trinity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Separate from that, we are deceived.

The Shack serves as a great catalyst for theological discussion and thought. It is a tremendous reminder that God is a God of justice and mercy who calls us to be pursuers of the same. And as our minds and hearts reflect upon that thought, Young delivers his greatest lesson: Apart from Christ, we are powerless over everything—even the fiercest darkness.

3.3. It emphasizes a trusting relationship

Relationship is a central overarching theme in *The Shack*. The book both depicts and speaks to relationship well. It emphasizes relationship, such as when Jesus says, “Mack, you don't need to have it all figured out. Just be with me” (p. 178). Likewise, simplicity is emphasized in relationship with phrases like “no agenda” and just being with Jesus. The following quotes are valuable as they capture the theme of relationship scattered throughout the book:

You don't play a game or color a picture with a child to show your superiority. Rather you choose to limit yourself so as to facilitate and honor that relationship. You will even lose a competition to accomplish love. It is not about winning and losing, but about love and respect (p. 106).

You are free to love without an agenda (p. 181).

True love never forces (p. 190).

Young ties love with knowing (and love expands, and so it actually *does* grow). He indicates the importance of living out truly loving relationships instead of trying to fulfil the expectations of man (or placing expectations on others):

[I]f you and I are friends, there is an expectancy that exists within our friendship. When we see each other or are apart, there is expectancy of being together, of laughing and talking. That expectancy has no concrete definition; it is alive and dynamic and everything that emerges from our being together is a unique gift shared by no one else. But what happens if I change that ‘expectancy’ to an ‘expectation’ -- spoken or unspoken? Suddenly, law has entered into our relationship. You are now expected to perform in a way that meets my expectations. Our living friendship rapidly deteriorates into a dead thing with rules and requirements. It is no longer about you and me, but about what friends are supposed to do, or responsibilities of a good friend (p. 205).

Young pushes for a deep, genuine, trusting relationship:

[F]orgiveness does not create a relationship. Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their mind and behavior, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established (p. 225).

3.4. It respects Scripture

Although there are theological tensions in the book, even concerns, Young respects Scripture and eventually gets to what really matters—glorifying God, truth, relationship (especially with Jesus), and the Bible—as demonstrated by the following quotes:

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 (pp. 197-198).

You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming ... And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us (p. 198).

Mack, I don't want to be first among a list of values; I want to be at the center of everything (p. 207).

4. Weaknesses of the book

4.1. Scripture comes in second to inner voices

Young passionately rejects the primacy of Scripture which his character Mack was taught in seminary:

In seminary he had been taught that ... God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects ... Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book (pp. 65-66).

Young would prefer a God who communicates with us in our thoughts rather than on paper (i.e., the Bible) (p. 195). Realising the subjectivity of such revelation, he assures us that we will "begin to better recognize [the Holy Spirit's] voice as we continue to grow our relationship" (p. 196). Scripture comes in second to inner voices in Young's theology. Scripture puts God in a box; inner voices make God alive and fresh. This is what Young wants to convey.

4.2. It downplays the church and other related institutions

Young also has little good to say about the church or other related institutions. While Mack had attended seminary, "none of his training was helping in the

least” (p. 91) when it came to understanding God. He consistently depicts the activity of the church in a negative light: Mack is pretty sure he hasn’t met the church Jesus loves (p. 177), which is all about relationships, “not a bunch of exhausting work and long list of demands, and not sitting in endless meetings staring at the backs of people’s heads, people he really didn’t even know” (p. 178). Sunday school (p. 98) and family devotions (p. 107) both take hits as well. Systematic theology itself takes a post-modern broadside as the Holy Spirit says, “I have a great fondness for uncertainty” (p. 203). However, Scripture does not place such words in the mouth of the Holy Spirit.

4.3. It does not provide a clear understanding of salvation by grace through faith

When Mack asks how he can be part of the church, Jesus replies, “It’s simple Mack, it’s all about relationships and simply sharing life” (p. 178). On an earlier occasion, Jesus tells Mack that he can get out of his mess “by *re-turning*. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just come back to me” (p. 147).

It is clear that Young believes in classic Pelagianism—the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without Divine aid. In short, man has full control, and thus full responsibility for his own salvation, in addition to full responsibility for every sin. According to Pelagian doctrine, man does not require God’s grace for salvation (beyond the creation of his will).

Young’s theology leaves no room for the doctrine of justification by faith, as reflected in the following question: How is a person declared righteous before God? Young lacks a clear understanding of Abraham’s imputed righteousness in the book of Romans. The Bible clearly teaches that a person is saved by grace through faith.

4.4. It does not provide a clear understanding of the gospel message: the death of Christ as the basis of salvation (penal substitution)

Nowhere in *The Shack* is the reader given a clear understanding of the gospel. When Mack asks what Jesus accomplished by dying, he is told, “Through his

death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." When pressed to explain, God says that He is reconciled to "the whole world", not just the believer (p. 192). Does this mean that all will be saved? Young never goes that far, but he certainly gives that impression when Mack's father (who was an awful man and showed no signs of being saved) is found in heaven (pp. 214-215), when God says repeatedly He is particularly fond of all people, when God claims that He has forgiven all sins against Him (e.g. pp. 118-119), that He does not "do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation" (p. 223) and, contrary to large portions of Scripture, God is not a God of judgment. "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 job to cure it" (p. 120).

The Shack shows that Young lacks an understanding of sin and salvation, and the gospel message. On page 225, Papa says, "I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship." And later, "When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment." While Young's comment has some validity, it does not faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture which portrays God as actively involved in the punishment of sin.

It is clear that Young believes the Pelagian doctrine that Jesus' execution (death on the cross) is devoid of the redemptive quality ascribed to it by orthodox Christian theology. Furthermore, Pelagianism views the role of Jesus as "setting a good example" for the rest of humanity (thus counteracting Adam's bad example). However, the Bible clearly teaches penal substitution, which indicates that on the cross Jesus suffered the death penalty in the sinner's place and so appeased the wrath of God.

4.5. It does not provide a clear understanding of what it means to be a Christian

Young further muddies the waters as he has Jesus reply to Mack's question, "Is that what it means to be a Christian?" Jesus says,

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, Baptists or Muslims,
Democrat, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not

part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions ... I have no desire to make them Christians, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my beloved" (p. 182).

With Mack we are confused. "Does that mean," asks Mack, "that all roads will lead to you?" Jesus denies this but then says, "What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you" (p. 182). Jesus apparently means that He will travel any road to "join them in their transformation". The implication is that people are on many roads that lead to their self-transformation. Jesus will join people where they are on that road and apparently aid in that transformation. This is certainly not the teaching of Scripture, which tells us that we must come to the one road, the narrow way that leads to God through Jesus Christ.

4.6. It does not present a clear understanding of God and how we should relate to Him

The main thrust of the novel concerns itself with an understanding of God and how we are to be in relationship to Him. However, the method by which mankind comes into the right relationship with God is cloudy at best in *The Shack*. Young's Trinity is equally confusing. The author does not develop his understanding of God exclusively from Scripture and, in fact, often contradicts biblical teaching. The first issue is that of imagining and presenting human forms for the members of the Trinity. While some slack might be given for Young's portrait of Jesus, who came in human form (although we don't know what He looked like), the first two of the Ten Commandments would forbid us depicting the Father or the Holy Spirit in physical form. When we create an image of God in our imagination we then attempt to relate to that image—which is inevitably a false one. This is the essence of idolatry and is forbidden in the Word.

4.7. It humanises God rather than exalting Him

The portrayal of God throughout the novel is one which humanises Him rather than exalts Him. Young quotes Jacques Ellul,

No matter what God's power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts Himself on our human level and limits Himself (p. 88).

This quote is in contradiction to the entirety of biblical revelation, which often declares God to be absolute Master, yet in no way mitigates the incarnation, as Young and Ellul are trying to claim.

Further we are told that Jesus "as a human being, had no power in himself to heal anyone" (p. 100). So how did he do so? By trusting in the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Spirit says, "is just the first to do it to the utmost – the first to absolutely trust my life within him" (p. 100). Although these statements contain a certain amount of truth, they are nevertheless confusing and inaccurate, since they clearly downplay the divinity and power of Jesus. Jesus, never ceasing to be fully God, had all Divine Power dwelling in Him. That He chose to limit His use of that power and rely on the Holy Spirit while on earth in no way diminishes His divinity.

Young further humanises God and contradicts Scripture by teaching that all the members of the Trinity took human form at the incarnation: "When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human" (p. 99). Is Young advocating modalism (an ancient heresy which teaches that the Trinity is not composed of three distinct members but three distinct modes in which God appears throughout human history)? If not, it is abundantly clear that Young believes that the Father died on the cross with the Son and bears the marks of the cross to this day (pp. 95-95, 164). He does not believe that the Father abandoned Jesus on the cross as Scripture implies (p. 96). And any concept of authority and submission in the Godhead is denied (pp. 122, 145), although 1 Corinthians 11:1-3 seems clear that such authority-submission exists. More than that, God submits to *us* as well (p. 145). By the end of the book God is reduced to being our servant as we are His (it's all about relationships, not authority) (pp. 236-237).

4.8. It moves from a biblical understanding of a personal God to an understanding of God in everything (panentheism)

The very essence of God is challenged when Young, quoting from Unitarian-Universalist, Buckminster Fuller, declares God to be a verb not a noun (pp. 194, 204). In a related statement, Young has Jesus say of the Holy Spirit, "She is Creativity; she is Action; she is Breathing of Life" (p. 110). Yet the Bible presents God as a person (noun) not an action (verb). When this truth is denied, we are moving from the biblical understanding of a personal God to an understanding of God in everything (panentheism). The term panentheism (from the Greek) literally means "all (is) in God" (Nikkel 2003). Thus, we are not surprised that when Mack asks the Holy Spirit if he will see her again he is told, "Of course, you might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in creation, or in your joy and sorrow" (p. 198). This is not biblical teaching.

This idea seems repeated in a line from a song Missy creates, "Come kiss me wind and take my breath till you and I are one" (p. 233). At what point do we become one with creation? This is an Eastern concept, not a biblical one. Young reinforces his Eastern leanings with a statement right out of New Age (New Spirituality) teachings: Papa tells Mack, "Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare" (p. 227).

4.9. It downplays the Sovereignty of God

Young unfortunately, in his attempt to personalise the Godhead, does so at the expense of the sovereignty of God. Young's casual approach to illustrate the sovereign God described in the Bible leads one to think that he was influenced by Harold S. Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. This little book was published in the early 1980's and was a big seller. In it, Kushner rejected God's omnipotence and omniscience.

Young's god is similar to the one theorised by Pelagius. According to this view, God created the world and sits back and observes life as it acts itself out—only occasionally intervening, but doing so as to not interfere with man's so-called "free will". Naturally, God often resists the temptation to intervene because of His love for His creatures. This is not unlike a clockmaker who

winds up a clock, places it on the mantle, and watches time go by. The clockmaker's only chore is wind it up from time to time.

5. Conclusion

The Shack, as the cover of the book promises, is "where tragedy confronts eternity". On the one hand, *The Shack* is an interesting contemporary inspirational tale in which a still grieving father learns the truth about his late daughter and why bad things happen to the innocent. It is a strong character driven tragedy, which provides a deep angst-laden storyline in which Mack and the audience understand that God is there for us at our gravest moments, when we feel most abandoned, to help us through the dark into the light.

On the other hand, *The Shack*, while occasionally getting things right, is, in the end, a dangerous piece of fiction. It undermines Scripture and the church, presents at best a mutilated gospel, misrepresents the biblical teachings concerning the Godhead, and offers a New Age understanding of God and the universe. It cannot therefore be regarded as a great novel to explain tragedy and pain. It is a misleading work that will confuse many and lead others astray.

If one is looking for a solid biblically-based book on how to deal with personal suffering, the author strongly recommends Jerry Bridges' book, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. Bridges shows how we must learn about God's sovereignty, wisdom, and love if we want to know Him better.

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