

A Review of *The Shack*

by Tim Challies

I am certain that there is no other book I've been asked to review more times than William P. Young's *The Shack*, a book that is currently well within the top-100 best-selling titles at Amazon. The book, it seems, is becoming a hit and especially so among students and among those who are part of the Emergent Church. In the past few weeks many concerned readers have written to ask if I would be willing to read it and to provide a review. Because I am always interested in books that are popular among Christians, I was glad to comply.

The Amazon reader reviews for *The Shack* are remarkable. With 102 reviews already posted, it is maintaining a five-star rating with fully ninety three of the reviewers awarding five stars. Only two have offered one star. A search of blogs and websites turns up near-unanimous enthusiastic (and almost unbridled) praise for the book. "This book is a life-changer, a transformer." "[*The Shack*] has become a favorite book OF ALL TIME." "I am changed. I pray indelibly. My oh my!" This book, which was released in May but which has already gone into its fourth printing, is making a major impact. It has obviously struck a chord with Christians.

I'll warn in advance that this review is going to be long. My major focus will be the book's content though I'll pause to glance fleetingly at the book's style as well. Because I've received so many questions and because the author covers so much ground in the book (and sometimes in a way that is somewhat unclear) I am going to proceed carefully and with many quotes.

There are two things I would like to note about this type of book—theological fiction. First, because of the limitations of the genre, it is sometimes difficult to really know what an author means by what he says. There is often some question as to what comes from the author and what comes from the characters. The author cannot always adequately explain himself; nor can he provide footnotes or references to Scripture. It can be challenging, then, to turn to the Bible to ensure

that what he teaches is true. This makes the task of discernment doubly difficult, for one must first interpret the fiction to understand what is being said and then seek to compare that to the Bible. We will do well to keep this in mind as we proceed.

Second, we must also realize that, because of the emotional impact of reading good fiction, it can be easy to allow it to become manipulative and to allow the emotion of a moment to bypass our ability to discern what is true and what is not. This is another thing the reader must keep in mind. We cannot trust our laughter or our tears but must allow our powers of discernment to be trained to distinguish good from evil (see Hebrews 5:14). Discernment is primarily a Spirit-empowered discipline of the mind rather than an emotional response.

So let's look at this book together, doing the task God requires of us when he tells us to be men and women of discernment—Christians who heed God's admonition to "test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil." We'll simply compare what Young teaches to the Bible.

The Book as a Book

First, a word about the book as it is written. William Young shows himself to be a capable writer, though I would not have believed it through the first couple of chapters. The book began with far too many awkward sentences and awkward sentence constructs (e.g. "One can almost hear a unified sigh rise from the nearby city and surrounding countryside where Nature has intervened to give respite to the weary humans slogging it out within her purview"). But as it went on and as the story took over the book became easier to read. The story itself is interesting enough, though certainly it lacks originality. The last chapter should have been left on the editing room floor and the final paragraph (before the "After Words") was a ridiculously terse attempt to provide closure to remaining plot lines. But on the whole the book is readable and enjoyable. Never does it become boring, even after long pages of nothing but dialog.

But Young did not write this book for the story. This book is all about the content and about the teaching it contains. The book's reviews focus not on the quality of the story but on its spiritual or emotional impact. Eugene Peterson grasps this, saying in his glowing endorsement, "*When the imagination of a writer and the passion of a theologian cross-fertilize the result is a novel on the order of "The Shack."* This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's "*Pilgrim's Progress*" did for his. It's that good!" Could it really be *that* good? Is it good enough to warrant positive comparison to the English-language book that has been read more widely than any other save the Bible? Let's turn to the book's content and find out.

What Is The Shack?

The Shack revolves around Mack (Mackenzie) Philips. Four years before this story begins, Mack's young daughter, Missy, was abducted during a family vacation. Though her body was never found, the police did find evidence in an abandoned shack to prove that she had been brutally murdered by a notorious serial killer who preyed on young girls. As the story begins, Mack, who has been living in the shadow of his *Great Sadness*, receives a strange note that is apparently from God. God invites Mack to return to this shack for a get together. Though uncertain, Mack visits the scene of the crime and there has a weekend-long encounter with God, or, more properly, with the godhead.

What should you do when you come to the door of a house, or cabin in this case, where God might be? Should you knock? Presumably God already knew that Mack was there. Maybe he ought to simply walk in and introduce himself, but that seemed equally absurd. And how should he address him? Should he call him Father, or Almighty One, or perhaps Mr. God, and would it be best if he fell down and worshipped, not that he was really in the mood.

As he tried to establish some inner mental balance, the anger that he thought had so recently died inside him began to emerge. No longer concerned or caring about what to call God and energized by his ire, he walked up to the door. Mack

decided to bang loudly and see what happened, but just as he raised his fist to do so, the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman.

This large and oh-so-stereotypical matronly African-American woman is God (or at least an anthropomorphism of God she chose to take on in order to communicate with Mack). Throughout the story she is known as Papa. Near the end, because Mack requires a father figure, she turns into a pony-tailed, grey-haired man, but otherwise God is this woman. Jesus is a young to middle-aged man of Middle-Eastern (i.e. Jewish) descent with a big nose and rather plain looks while the Holy Spirit is played by Sarayu, a small, delicate and eclectic woman of Asian descent. By this point many people will choose to close the book and be done with it. But for the purposes of this review, let's just assume you are able to get past seeing God and the Holy Spirit portrayed in this way and let's press on.

There is very little action in *The Shack* and the bulk of the book is dialog, mostly as the members of the Trinity communicate with Mack, though occasionally we see glimpses into their relationship with one another. The banter between the members of the Trinity, most of which is geared towards helping us understand the love that exists between them, leads to some rather bizarre dialog. Take this as a typical example:

Mack was shocked at the scene in front of him. It appeared that Jesus had dropped a large bowl of some sort of batter or sauce on the floor, and it was everywhere. It must have landed close to Papa because the lower portion of her skirt and bare feet were covered in the gooey mess. All three were laughing so hard that Mack didn't think they were breathing. Sarayu said something about humans being clumsy and all three started roaring again. Finally, Jesus brushed past Mack and returned a minute later with a large basin of water and towels. Sarayu had already started wiping the goop from the floor and cupboards, but Jesus went straight to Papa and, kneeling at her feet, began to wipe off the front

of her clothes. He worked down to her feet and gently lifted one foot at a time, which he directed into the basin where he cleaned and massaged it.

“Ooooh, that feels soooo good!” exclaimed Papa, as she continued her tasks at the counter.

Young covers a wide variety of theological topics in this book, each of which is relevant to the theme of Mack’s suffering and his inability to trust in a God who could let his daughter be treated in such a horrifying way. The author is unafraid to tackle subjects of deep theological import—a courageous thing to do in so difficult a genre as fiction. The reader will find himself diving into deep waters as he reads this book.

Much of what Young writes is good and even helpful (again, assuming that the reader can see past the human personifications of God). He affirms the absolute nature of what is good and teaches that evil exists only in relation to what is good; he challenges the reader to understand that God is inherently good and that we can only truly trust God if we believe Him to be good; he acknowledges the human tendency to create our image of God by looking at human qualities and assuming that God is simply the same but more so; he attempts to portray the loving relationships within the Trinity; and so on. For these areas I am grateful as they provided helpful correctives to many false understandings of God.

But the book also raised several concerns. Young covers many topics and time would fail me to discuss each of them. Instead, I will look at concerns with some of the book’s broader themes and will do so under several theological headings.

The Trinity

Young teaches that the Trinity exists entirely without hierarchy and that any kind of hierarchy is the result of sin. The Trinity, he says, “are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command or ‘great chain of being’... Hierarchy would make no sense among us.” Now it’s possible that he is referring to a kind of dominance or grade or command structure that may well be foreign to the

godhead. But a reading of the Bible will prove that hierarchy does, indeed, exist even where there is no sin. After all, the angels exist in a hierarchy and have done so since before the Fall. Also, in heaven there will be degrees of reward and there will be some who are appointed to special positions (such as the Apostles). And the Bible makes it clear that there is, at points at least, a kind of hierarchy even within the Trinity. In the act of redemption, Spirit and the Son have submitted themselves to the Father. The task of the Spirit is to lead people to the Son who in turn brings glory to the Father. Never do we find the Father submitting to the Spirit or to the Son. Their hierarchy is perfect—without anger or malice or envy, but it is a hierarchy nonetheless.

There are other teachings about the Trinity that concerned me. For example, Papa says “I am truly human, in Jesus.” This simply cannot be true. God [the Father—a term that the author avoids] is not fully human in Jesus. This melds the two persons of God in a way that is simply unbiblical. Some of what Young teaches is novel and even possible, but without Scriptural support. For example, he teaches that the triune nature of God was an absolute necessity since without it God would be incapable of love. His reasoning is not perfectly clear but seems to be that if God did not have such a relationship “within himself” he would be unable to love. But this is not taught in the Bible.

Overall, I had to conclude that Young has an inadequate and often-unbiblical understanding of the Trinity. While granting that the Trinity is a very difficult topic to understand and one that we cannot know fully, there are several indications that he often blurs the distinct persons of the Trinity along with their roles and their unique attributes. Combined with his novel but unsupported conjectures, this is a serious concern.

Submission

Young uses the discussion about the Trinity as a bridge to a the subject of submission. Here he teaches that each member of the Trinity submits to the other. Jesus says, “That’s the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and

Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and will always be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.” Why would the God of the universe seek to be submitted to mere humans? “Because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship.” Genuine relationships, according to the author, must be marked by mutual submission. “As the crowning glory of Creation, you were made in our image, unencumbered by structure and free to simply ‘be’ in relationship with me and one another. If you had truly learned to regard each other’s concerns as significant as your own, there would be no need for hierarchy.” Submission, according to this book, must be mutual, so that husbands submit to wives while wives submit to husbands, and parents submit to children while children submit to parents. While the Bible does teach that we are to submit to one another, it also teaches that God has ordained some kinds of hierarchy. While a husband is to submit his desires to his wife, even to the point of sacrificing his life for her, he is never called to submit to her in an authoritative sense. Wives, though, are commanded to submit to their husbands, acknowledging that the husband is the head of the family. Similarly, all people are to submit to the God-given authorities and every person is responsible to submit to God.

This understanding of absolute equality not just in value (which the Bible affirms) but also in role and function (which the Bible does not affirm), leads to a strange idea about why God created Eve out of Adam. He teaches that it was crucial for man be created before woman, but with woman hidden inside man. Had this not happened, there could not have been a proper circle of relationship since otherwise man would always come from woman (through childbirth), allowing her to claim a dominant position. She came out of *him* and now all men come out of *her*. This allows total, absolute equality, says Young. I can think of absolutely no biblical proof for this and neither does the author offer any.

And so we see that Young uses *The Shack* to teach an unbiblical understanding of submission. And he uses this topic to bridge to another.

Free Will

Young's understanding of free will seems to follow from submission. "I don't want slaves to do my will," says Jesus. "I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me." Speaking in veiled terms about conversion or something like it, Jesus says, "We will come and live our life inside of you, so that you begin to see with our eyes, and hear with our ears, and touch with our hands, and think like we do. But, we will never force that union with you. If you want to do your thing, have at it. Time is on our side." God, it seems, has already forgiven all humans for their sin and has willingly submitted himself to them, though only some people will choose relationship. He is fully reconciled to all human beings and simply waits for them to do their part. Never does Young clearly discuss the consequences that will face those who refuse to accept this offer of union.

Overall, Young presents a God who is unable or unwilling to break into history in any consequential way. He is sovereign at times, but certainly not so in conversion (a topic that receives only scant attention) and is limited by the free will choices of human beings. Scant attention is paid to God's fore-ordination, the understanding that nothing happens without it somehow being part of His decree (even while God cannot be accused of being the author of evil). Papa explains to Mack, "There was no way to create freedom without a cost." But nowhere in the Bible do we find that God is somehow made captive by human free will and that He has to allow things to proceed in order to maintain His own integrity as Creator. Always God is sovereign, even over the free will choices of men. Our inability to understand how this can be does not preclude us from the responsibility of believing it.

Forgiveness

Much of the story focuses on forgiveness. Mack has to learn to forgive first God (or at least to come to an intellectual understanding of why God was unable to

intervene to save Missy) and then, at the book's culmination, to forgive the murderer. I am adamantly opposed to the idea that we would ever need to forgive God for anything. However, because this teaching is seen only vaguely in the novel, I will pass over it for now and turn to another area of forgiveness—that of unconditional forgiveness.

Nowhere in Scripture will we find the idea that we can or should forgive an unrepentant person for this kind of crime. Rather, Scripture makes it clear that repentance must precede forgiveness. Without repentance there can be no forgiveness. This is true of God's offer of forgiveness to us and, as we are to model this in our human relationships, must be true of how we offer forgiveness to others. So when, at the book's climax, Mack cries out "I forgive you" to the murderer (who is not present and has not sought forgiveness) he cannot offer true forgiveness. Neither can true forgiveness exist where Mack is unable to pursue reconciliation with this man. Forgiveness makes no sense and means nothing if we require it in this way. It may make a person feel better about himself, but it cannot bring about true forgiveness and true reconciliation. And so Young teaches a therapeutic, inadequate and unbiblical understanding of forgiveness.

Scripture and Revelation

There are few doctrines more important to Christian living than this one—understanding how it is that God chooses to communicate with human beings. Though the Bible teaches that Scripture is the "norming norm," many Christians give precedence to other supposed forms of revelation, and particularly promptings, leadings and "still, small voices." Sure enough, such an emphasis is seen clearly in *The Shack*. How will we hear from God in day-to-day life (away from the miraculous shack)? "You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours," says Sarayu. "Of course you will make mistakes; everybody makes mistakes, but you will begin to better recognize my voice as we continue to grow our relationship." And where will we find the Spirit? "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 it will always be tuned to Papa's goodness and love. 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.”

Beyond looking for new revelation, *The Shack* says little about how God has communicated or will continue to communicate with us in Scripture. There are a couple of times that it mentions the Bible, but never does it point to Scripture as a real authority or as the sufficient Word of God. “In seminary [Mac] 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... Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges?” Here we see Young pointing *away* from Scripture rather than towards it. Through Mack he scoffs at the idea that God has spoken authoritatively and sufficiently through the Bible. And if he points away from Scripture he points towards subjective promptings and leadings.

Though common, such teaching is dangerous and directly detracts from the sufficiency of Scripture. When we admit that God has not, in the Bible, said all that He needs to say to us, we open the doors for all manner of new revelation, much of which may contradict the Bible. What authority is there if not the Bible? Ultimately the issue of revelation is an issue of authority and too many Christians are willing to trust their own authority over the Bible's. What authority does Young rely on as he brings teaching here in *The Shack*? Does he look to a higher authority or does he look mostly to himself? The reader can have no confidence that Young loves and respects God's Word has He chose to give it to us in Scripture.

Salvation

The book contains surprisingly little teaching about salvation. When Young does discuss conversion, he places it firmly in the camp of relationship but also uses the stereotypical phrases such as “this is not a religion” and “Jesus isn’t a Christian.” Jesus apparently loves all people in exactly the same way, having judged them worthy of his love. Young also wades dangerously close to universalism saying that Jesus has no interest in making people into Christians. Rather, no matter what faith they come from, he wishes to “join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa.” He denies that all roads lead to him (since most roads lead nowhere) but says instead, “I will travel any road to find you.” Whether Young holds to universalism or not, and whether he believes that all faiths can lead a person to God, the book neither affirms nor refutes.

Conclusion

Many other topics receive less attention but also raise concerns. For example, Jesus comments on religion, politics and economics saying “They are the man-created trinity of errors that ravage the earth and deceives those I care about.” But Young offers no biblical proof that this is something Jesus would teach. In other places God seems to gloss over sin, judging certain sins almost inconsequential. And so it goes.

So where does all of this leave us? It is clear to me that *The Shack* is a mix of good and bad. Young teaches much that is of value and he teaches it in a slick and effective way. Sadly, though, there is much bad mixed in with the good. As we pursue his major theological thrusts we see that many of them wander away, by varying degrees, from what God tells us in Scripture.

Despite the great amount of poor theology, my greatest concern is probably this one: the book has a quietly subversive quality to it. Young seems set on undermining orthodox Christianity. For example, at one point Mack states that, despite years of seminary and years of being a Christian, most of the things taught to him at the shack have never occurred to him before. Later he says, “I

understand what you're saying. I did that for years after seminary. I had the right answers, sometimes, but I didn't know you. This weekend, sharing life with you has been far more illuminating than any of those answers."

Throughout the book there is this kind of subversive strain teaching that new and fresh revelation is much more relevant and important than the kind of knowledge we gain in sermons or seminaries or Scripture. Young's readers seem to be picking up on this. Read this brief Amazon review as an example: "Wish I could take back all the years in seminary! The years the locusts ate???? Systematic theology was never this good. Shack will be read again and again. With relish. Shared with friends, family, and strangers. I can fly! It's a gift. 'Discipleship' will never be lessons again." Another reviewer warns that many Christians will find the book difficult to read because of their "modern" mindsets. "If one is coming from a strong, propositional and, perhaps, fundamentalist perspective to the Bible, this book certainly will be threatening." Still another says "This book was so shocking to my "staid" Christianity but it was eye opening to my own thoughts about who I think God is." At several points I felt as if the author was encouraging the reader to doubt what they know of Christianity—to deconstruct what they know of Christian theology—and to embrace something new. But the faith Young reconstructs is simply not the faith of the Bible.

Eugene Peterson says this book is as good and as important as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Well, it really is not. It is neither as good nor as original a story and it lacks the theological precision of Bunyan's work. But really, this is a bit of a facile comparison. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, after all, is allegory—a story that has a second distinct meaning that is partially hidden behind its literal meaning. *The Shack* is not meant to be allegory. Nor can *The Shack* quite be equated with a story like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where C.S. Lewis simply asked (and answered) this kind of question: "What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia, and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?" *The Shack* is in a different category than these more notable Christian works. It seeks to represent the members of the Trinity as

they are (or as they could be) and to suggest through them what they might teach were they to appear to us in a similar situation. There is a sense of attempted or perceived reality in this story that is missing in the others. This story is meant to teach theology that Young really believes to be true. The story is a wrapper for the theology. In theory this is well and good; in practice the book is only as good as its theology. And in this case, the theology just is not good enough.

Because of the sheer volume of error and because of the importance of the doctrines reinvented by the author, I would encourage Christians, and especially young Christians, to decline this invitation to meet with God in *The Shack*. It is not worth reading for the story and certainly not worth reading for the theology.