



*The Shack*, by William P. Young  
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*The Shack* has enjoyed significant acclaim in some Christian circles, and was popular enough to be made into a movie to be released this Spring. What is also true but apparently not as widely known is that a significant number of well-respected leaders within Christendom have strong objections to the theological positions taken by the author, William P. Young. Several people of my church have asked my thoughts on this book in times past and so I read Mr. Young's book and offer the following observations from a Pastoral perspective that we may keep a proper theological perception when considering what Mr. Young represents as "truth." Bear in mind this review is of the book, the *source material* for the movie and not the movie itself. It is quite possible, therefore that "spoilers" follow.

*Synopsis*

The protagonist of the story is Mackenzie Allen Phillips, a middle-aged man who has lost his precious young daughter Missy to a brutal serial killer. While her body had not been found and no charges filed, the investigation indicated the crime may have occurred in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Through a series of events, "Mack" returns to the "shack" where he experiences a life-changing encounter with all three members of the Christian god-head and the issues of suffering, tragedy, human pain and spiritual life are confronted and discussed in considerable detail.

*Strengths*

Mr. Young chooses for his drama one of the most heart-rending of all possible losses; the brutal murder of a beautiful, intelligent, innocent and much beloved child. The subject matter itself will deeply stir the emotions of all but the most callous of readers. The resulting spiritual and emotional upheaval, the "great sadness" which is Mack's daily nemesis is almost palpable. Then, when met by God herself (that is *not* a typo) in the wilderness at "the shack," which may be the very scene of the crime, the love and the merciful goodness shown Mack by God and demonstrated between the members of the Trinity are very emotionally endearing.

By definition, it is impossible to depict God in action and word without being theological. Anything we say or represent about God is theology both in content and presentation. It has become popular today to reject "theology" as being stuffy, convoluted and irrelevant to "knowing God" – but talking about God or portraying God (in conversation, a movie, a dramatic skit, etc.) *is* doing theology. Mr. Young's depiction of God is very biblical on some counts, reflecting his historical Christian roots. The unity within the Trinity, the substitutionary death of Jesus for the sin of the world, God's love for all humanity and the power of grace are beautifully and, at times, picturesquely presented. God repeatedly

tells Mack that tragedy, suffering and calamity are never Her (again, I'll explain in a moment) doing. It is stated specifically that God does work within tragedy but is never the One causing it (p. 185).

One of the overarching themes is complete dependence upon God; putting God at the center of everything in and about our lives (p. 207) with the utmost confidence that God loves us deeply and will *always* be working for our good, come what may. The pain and trouble of this world are rooted in humanity's decision to be *independent* of God. Adam's sin in the garden began a contagion of events which have produced darkness, evil, suffering, and pain on an immeasurably immense scale. But even within this horrible state of affairs, God is working and will eventually bring this catastrophic and painful chapter of the human experience to an end. Making sense of it all, or at least coming to terms with it, is what Mr. Young attempts to do through Mack and his encounter with God at the shack. Age old questions about evil and suffering are confronted here; some of Mr. Young's positions resemble classical Christian theology. A great many do not and fall very wide of the biblical "mark."

### *Weaknesses*

While there are many laudable and thoroughly scriptural principals set forth by Mr. Young, there are some very disturbing lapses which seem to have their source in mysticism or even new age or postmodern eclecticism. I was in no way offended by the depiction of God the Father as a large, motherly black woman who is a wonderful and willing cook and confidant. Theologians have argued for centuries God has a feminine side (Jesus comparing God to the woman who lost a coin [Luke 15] or the mother hen covering her chicks [Ps 91, Matt 23]). I believe Young's point in doing this is to illustrate how God will come to each of us in the way we best can receive Him. Mack's tortured and horrid relationship with his earthly father demanded what in the human experience would be a motherly tenderness and care – at least at first. Late in the book God *does* appear to Mack as a male figure, the difference is that each contact was tailored to what Mack "needed" at that moment and now the male figure was beneficial because the issue with his earthly father had been resolved.

Nonetheless there is a needless confusion of roles by depicting God the Father as "God the Mother." Young's literary device in the female "father" could easily bring as much confusion as clarity. Some feminists have long argued the Scriptures are the product of their sexist, male-dominated milieu and such a depiction of God's tender side would have been impossible in Moses' or Paul's day. This is a deficient view of the Scripture and inspiration. The point is, God in His wisdom **decided** the revelation of Himself as "The Father" to be the most effective means; to characterize Him any other way is precarious. This is *especially* true in a society and culture under assault to legally and psychologically blur gender differences and legitimize same-sex marriages and relationships. For many this may seem a harmless enough "literary" device, but I do not share their view. The Scripture is the Word of God but it is also literature, and God has intentionally chosen His own literary devices, including the depiction of Himself.

Even more disturbing is the nature of evil as stated by the Holy Spirit Herself (who is also depicted as a female). In a discussion with Mack concerning darkness and evil, the Holy Spirit tells Mack, “Both evil and darkness can only be understood in relation to Light and Good; **they do not have any actual existence**” (p. 136, emphasis mine). This is eastern mysticism or Christian Science, not the teaching of the Bible. The Scriptures are unmistakably clear: evil does indeed exist and is a force to be reckoned with, resisted and *defeated* in this world. There is an arch-enemy of God who was present in the garden (a fact completely and apparently *intentionally* ignored in the book). The Last Adam, Jesus, was also confronted *and tempted* by Satan himself in the wilderness. The redemption event itself is described by the author of Hebrews as the utter defeat of the devil, not somehow overcoming an absence of good. (Heb 2:14)

In *The Shack*, the devil and his demon minions are conspicuous by their *absence*. I am attempting to be congenial in my tone but this is a *very* dangerous disservice to the spiritual seeker. Jesus spoke frankly and plainly about the devil. On multiple occasions Jesus, Paul and others call Satan the “enemy” for that is what the title “Satan” means. This is not some outmoded and ancient mythology, *the devil is real*. True, humanity is sinful and even self-destructive but to ignore or minimize the influence of Satan in today’s world is to disregard the plain teaching of Scripture. The apostle Paul tells us the devil will often disguise himself as “an angel of light,” (2 Cor 11:14) doing his best to lead people *away* from the truth rather than into it. To be candid and without trying to be too blunt, that very “stealth” approach appears to be operative in much of the theology of *The Shack*.

One possible sign of this deception is the contempt the God-head has for authority and institutions, a very popular meme in our current culture. Young definitely has a bias here and it comes through loud and clear when God says “I don’t create institutions. Never have, never will” (p. 179). One could hardly argue the earthly Church is perfect, but Mr. Young’s “God” clearly contradicts the Bible. Jesus said the He Himself would “build His Church” (Matt 16:18). That church isn’t some intangible, amorphous thing, it has definite *structure*: Paul says “God has **appointed in the church** . . .” (1 Cor 12:28) and in the very same verse he says within the church operates those with the gift of **administrations** (KJV: “governments”). These are institutional descriptions and terms. God Himself instituted (no pun intended) authority in civil government (Rom 13:1, 2), in the Church (Acts 20:28; 1 Thess 5:12), in marriage (Eph 5:22, 1Pet 3:1), and in the family unit (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20). There is absolutely no question authority has been abused on virtually every level, but this does not change the principle. The contempt shown for authority by God the Mother has its source in someone other than God the Father – who is *Himself* the ground of all authority (Rom 13:1). Suffice it here to say God the Mother in *The Shack* directly contradicts what God the Father says in the Bible.

There is another, very dangerous and unbiblical thing said by God through Mr. Young’s pen. Mack, paraphrasing God, says “Are you telling me that responsibility and expectation are just another form of rules we are no longer under? Did I hear you right?” To which God replies, “Yup” (p. 203). Young’s God says she never expected anything of anybody (p. 206), but Jesus’ definition of a disciple in all three synoptic gospels (Matt 16:24;

Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) includes both expectation and responsibility. The Bible is clear there will be a reckoning and all are responsible to God for their deeds. I am not trying to drag the Mosaic law over into the New Covenant either, I couldn't agree more with Young's assessment of the purpose of the Ten Commandments (p. 202). We cannot get to heaven by anything but faith in the blood of Christ. Period. The Bible, however, clearly says every individual Christian is called to service (Eph 4:12 and elsewhere); that is an explicit expectation on God's part, not something invented by churchmen along the way.

There are many more problems such as the description of debilitating illness or other tragedies being a "good thing," at least sometimes (p. 136). Another point of deep concern is Jesus Himself seeming to be completely uninterested in people becoming Christians (p. 182). That disinterest on the Lord's part plays perfectly to the decidedly universalist (nobody is going to hell) tone of the book but for brevity's sake I stop here, hoping my point has been made.

### *Conclusion*

The Divine imagery of Young's book and the warm intimacy of Mack's communion with God are all very appealing. Small wonder since we were made for intimacy with Him and His desire to be the center of our lives is well stated in the Bible. Trouble is, the disturbing explosiveness of the book can so stir the reader's emotions as to so cloud his or her discernment that it can allow the multiple *contradictions* of Scripture to go unnoticed. In my discussions of this book with some who have read it, when I quoted a given passage, I have heard the response, "that's in there? I don't remember that!" My point exactly. The error has been sown and is all the more insidious lying in the ground of our minds unexamined having been mixed with much which is actually good.

It must be remembered everything in this book is the product of Mr. Young's mind. No matter how real and compelling it may seem, this is a work of *fiction*. Even if it were a "true story," such experience is to be judged by the Scripture, not the other way around. The devil which *The Shack* so artfully ignores is not idle and we are commanded to "test the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1). Young is clearly trying to convince and convert his readers to his philosophy, theology, theodicy or whatever. For the committed Christian, the Bible itself is the final word on all matters, no matter how "tasty" a variant viewpoint might be.

Postmodernism in our educational system has taught an entire generation that emotions are a valid means for testing reality (or "truth" to put it bluntly). Nothing could be more wrong. The very reason we are given the Scripture is to test our thoughts, motivations and emotions and in that way alone are we able to know what is truth and what is error. Multitudes have willingly taken the path to complete personal destruction and great pain because "it felt so right" at the time. At the risk of belaboring my point I will say it again: emotions are *not* trustworthy guides in life and cannot "discern" spiritual, moral, or ethical truth.

Finally, contrary to Mr. Young's God, the God of the Bible does hold people responsible for their actions and words. He does, in fact, establish priorities and has definite expectations (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:11ff). In Matthew 7:26 Jesus clearly says those who ignore His words will meet with unnecessary loss in their personal lives. Universal salvation, no matter how politically correct, philosophically or emotionally attractive, is not the teaching of the Bible.

As a pastor, it is my responsibility to "lead and feed" the sheep. Identifying poisonous plants and guiding the sheep around them is an *expectation* God has of me and every other pastor. Fear of hurting someone's feelings or being considered a troglodyte by the "truly enlightened" is not sufficient reason to be silent. Sometimes the deception is tasty, *that is when it works the best*. This is especially true when it is accompanied by a reasonably large serving of good, Biblical truth. *The Shack* is a riveting, emotionally compelling read which, unfortunately, has several irredeemably poisonous ingredients. Individuals who embrace Mr. Young's philosophy and theology for living will be greatly disappointed in the fruit it produces in and for them.