

A New Vehicle for an Old Heresy

A Review of "The Shack"

by William P. Young/Windblown Media

by

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Over the past few weeks I have been asked directly and indirectly (via Facebook and email) to produce an opinion of The Shack, by William P. Young. I took the opportunity to read the book last week and am offering the following. I am also suggesting a longer review provided online which can be found at http://www.challies.com/media/The_Shack.pdf. And I quote from that review by Tim Challies at "Informing the Reforming".

- *"The Shack has been received among Christians with decidedly mixed reviews. While many have acclaimed it as a groundbreaking story that brings to life heart-stirring theology, others insist that some of what it teaches is patently unbiblical. Where Eugene Peterson, Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver says it "has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's The Pilgrim Progress did for his," Dr. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says, "This book includes undiluted heresy." While singer and songwriter Michael W. Smith says "The Shack will leave you craving for the presence of God," Mark Driscoll, Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle says, "Regarding the Trinity, it's actually heretical."*

The Shack, written in narrative form, is the story of Mackenzie "Mack" Phillips, who because of his abuse at the hands of his father and the brutal kidnapping and murder of his youngest daughter has been angry at God for a number of years. He is so embittered by these events that he abandons his studies for the ministry as well as his faith in God. He is mysteriously invited to revisit "the shack" where his daughter was murdered by an unidentified and as yet, uncaptured serial killer called the "Little Ladykiller". He encounters a novel presentation of the Triune God in the form of a large African woman (The Father), a Middle Eastern Woodworker (The Son) and a small Asian woman who is called Saraury (The Holy Spirit) These three lead Mack on a mythical journey that allows him to rediscover his relationship with God and to correct his faulty understanding of who God is.

I found The Shack to be an immensely engaging read. The reader is immediately drawn in to the story because of the very mystery of the shack to which Mack is summoned and the circumstances that have brought him to the place he is in his life. Which one of us cannot relate to the horror of losing a child at the hands of a merciless killer. We are inexorably drawn to this man's pain and in complete understanding of his bitterness. Add in an abusive father and a completely other side of us is touched--for many in our generation in a very personal way. The characters, Papa, the woodworker and Saraury are equally as engaging. They are warm and compassionate, and even a little flawed - and herein lies the rub. It is God created in the image of man. At least in his/her nature, Papa is what we so many have always hoped God would be like - a god who presents himself in whatever way is most comfortable for me, a Jesus who is a laid back, kick your shoes off, let's go for a hike kinda guy, and a Holy Spirit who is kind of flaky and flighty - who loves a mess and (if you believe William P. Young), MAKES a mess from time to time.

While this is clearly presented as a “fictional” work and not a theological study, every critical area of doctrine is touched upon and clearly affected by the author’s unique understanding of the love and compassion of God.

It is important to note, that the author, William P. Young embraces the concept of “Christian universalism.” While he has rejected the concept of “general universalism” which puts forth the idea that “all roads lead to God,” and states that Jesus is the only way to God; he also believes that all persons will be reconciled to God, either in this life or in the after life. In other words - there is no judgement for sin and the compassion of God will win out over the justice of God and all people will eventually be reconciled to God and saved. It is also interesting to note that in his personal blog, Young denies that he is a universalist. However, every indication in the “fictional” work *The Shack* indicates that while he may not belong to an organized Universalist organization such as the Unitarian Universalist - his theology is one of universalism.

Christian universalism (also known as universal reconciliation) has as its main doctrine that love is the ultimate attribute and expression of God and that God’s love trumps all other attributes. If you refuse to accept Christ and be reconciled to God, you will be given another opportunity after you die. The Christian universalist believes that all humanity, fallen angels, and even the devil himself will one day repent and be reconciled to God. One of the primary texts that are used to support his view of universal reconciliation is Philippians 2:6-11 where Paul declares that “every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Christ is Lord,” and that because of that all creatures, great and small, ultimately will be saved.

While there are many heretical views of God and his character in this book, the common thread through it all is Christian universalism which dates back to the third century A.D. and is the basis of the Unitarian-Universalist church. We will not endeavor to address every theological error, though there are many, but address only the most significant.

1. In *The Shack* Love is presented as the pre-eminent aspect of God’s character.” The *Shack* presents love as the attribute of God that is supreme over all others. The author claims that love defines God (p. 101). As the voice of “Papa” he argues that if loving did not take place within the relationship of the Godhead God “could not love. Or maybe worse, you would have a god who, when he chose, could only love as a limitation of his nature. That kind of god could possibly act without love, and that would be a disaster. And that, is surely not me.” (p.102) Love is defined as Holiness (p. 107) What must be maintained here is that while God cannot act without love, He as well cannot act without holiness; He cannot act without justice; He cannot act without truth; because each of these is an expression of His divine character. If one does not declare that holiness and love are equally expressive of God’s character - his nature is distorted.

What this does is subordinate God’s justice. Chapter 11 is the heart of the book in which wisdom (Sophia) affirms the principle that God’s dealing with people flows from his love. “He chose the way of the cross where mercy *triumphs* over justice because of love.” Wisdom asserts that is a better way than that God should have exercised justice. (p. 164-165). He asserts that the cross was an act of love that God chose to express *rather than justice*.

There are several problems here. God did exercise justice, fully and completely at the cross. The cross was not a place where God’s love or mercy triumphed over his justice. Love was involved. It was love that led God to pay the price of providing and adequate payment - the life

of His Son. But God's JUSTICE **demanded a sacrifice** to atone for sin, and Jesus was the satisfaction of this demand. (Romans 3:25-26)

Context is very important in all literature - especially the Scriptures. James 2:13 does declare "*and mercy triumphs over justice,*" however the author offers some critical changes. He adds "because of love" and assumes that God's mercy is an *alternative* to justice. If you read the context of James 2:13 you will clearly see that James is not addressing the issue of God showing mercy to people at the cross, but rather exhorting believers to show mercy toward the poor. The author also fails to quote the first part of the same verse which states: "For judgment will be merciless to the one who has shown no mercy." Thus God's judgement is "without mercy" -- the exact opposite of the point the author is trying to make.

The Shack neglects all of the texts that assert that there is a limit to God's mercy. (Romans 11:22-23; Hebrews 4:1-3, 11; 6:3-6; 10:26-31; 12:25-29) and that those who reject Christ in this life will experience judgement afterward (Hebrews 9:27). The book also makes no mention of those parts of the Bible which speak of lasting torment and separation from God that the wicked who refuse to believe Christ will experience. The very strongest words in the Bible regarding judgement do not come from the apostles, but from the mouth of Jesus Himself as He asserts that the wicked will suffer "eternal punishment." (Matthew 25:46)

2. In The Shack there is no eternal punishment of sin. Mack asks of Papa (God) if he is the one "spilling out great bowls of wrath and throwing people into a burning lake of fire." Instead of affirming that such a punishment awaits those who refuse to believe Christ, **Papa asserts that he does NOT punish sin.** Instead, he affirms that God is not who Mack thinks God is, that he doesn'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's my joy to cure it.*" (p. 120) Mack says that he can't imagine any final outcome that would justify all this", Papa replies: "*We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it.*" (p. 127) Despite the clear teaching of the Scriptures that the righteous are "justified by faith."

Under the universalist concept, Hell is "curative" and "corrective" and in the fires of Hell unbelievers, fallen angels, and even the Devil himself will repent and enter heaven. There is NO JUDGEMENT for sin leading to eternal death.

Young completely disassociates God from the punishment of evil. In the critical chapter on judgement (c. 11) Mack acknowledges that he believes that God "will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love." But the story proceeds to show that Mack is *wrong in believing this.* When he is asked to choose three of his children to send to hell. He is willing to be "tortured for eternity" instead of them. It isn't about his children's "performance; it was about his love for them." (p. 163) At this point Mack is told that he sounds like Jesus, that he is loving as Jesus loves (p. 163). The chapter concludes with Papa affirming that "judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right." (p. 169). Many biblical statements affirm that God indeed does have anger or wrath against sin, that he does judge and that he does punish the ungodly (note condemnation in John 3:16-17; and in many places in Romans. chs. 1-5; cf. 2:2-16; 3:5-5; 5:9).

3. In The Shack there is gross error regarding the Trinity. Young indicates that the whole Trinity became incarnate as the Son of God, and that the whole Trinity was crucified (99). In an emotive appeal to the readers that glosses over this distinction, he has both Jesus and Papa

(God) bear the marks of crucifixion in their hands. Yet this idea runs counter to the Bible that attests that at the cross Jesus died, forsaken *by the Father*. The Bible affirms that *the Father laid on the suffering Messiah the sin of all*; that he was “stricken” *by the Father*; and that it was *the will of the Father to “crush” him* (Isa. 53:4-10). This is a clear indication of a division of roles in the meaning of the death of Christ. Yet The Shack claims that “*filling roles is the opposite of relationship*” (148).

The pathway to this heresy is another heresy—what is called **modalism**. This perversion of the truth teaches that the Trinity of three-persons-in-one is wrong and that God is singular who at different times assumes the different modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the church condemned this as heresy!

The one-sided emphasis on love leads the author to speak also about a circle of relationship based on love to which the Trinity belongs, and in this circle humans join. **There is no hierarchy, but only mutual submission on the part of all to all**. Yet if this is so, why should even the title “Father” for God be used, or “Lord” for Jesus, since these suggest authority and submission that is not mutual or equal? Jesus calls us “brothers” (Heb. 2:11) and “friends” (John 15:14-15), but he never calls us “lord.” Yet believers call on Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9-14). Jesus’ sending the Holy Spirit, who would not speak on his own initiative but only from what the Father and the Son say (John 16:13-15), suggests a subordination in the Godhead that is not equal in the roles that are exercised. While in essence the three persons-in-one are equal, their roles are different and distinguished. Again the author’s teaching leads ultimately to a denial of the Trinity he professes.

Finally, the author indicates that from “time to time” the Trinity actually submits itself to man as he is drawn into that sweet intimacy that they share. There is no place in Scripture which would support the idea of the Creator standing in submission to the creation. A major tenet of the “emerging church” movement is the evolution of God, and the position that God often doesn’t know what He will do until He sees what man will do. What we see here is an “evolution” of God from sovereign ruler to dependent deity - dependent upon how man will react to his overtures.

4. At The Shack there is no need for faith to be reconciled to God. Classic universalism requires no need for the expression of faith in God in order to be reconciled to God. In both Universalist creeds (1878 and 1899) there is no mention of the need to “believe” as a criteria for salvation. Similarly, the author espouses universal reconciliation without an explicit confession of Jesus Christ by which his atonement is effective for each individual. For the author to claim that Jesus died for all shows that he espouses **unlimited atonement**. This is not a heretical belief but one embraced by many evangelicals in contrast to the limited atonement of strict Calvinists. ***But it is what Young does with unlimited atonement that is disturbing and heretical.*** When he explicitly addresses the specific issue of reconciliation to God, he has Papa affirm that he is reconciled to the whole world, not just to those who believe. God is “now fully reconciled to the world.” When Mack suggests that by the “world” Papa really means those who believe in him/her, Papa replies: “**The whole world, Mack.**” She adds that reconciliation is a two way street and that she has done her 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” (192).

If faith is denied as necessary what is the other part of the “two-way street”? For Papa as God affirms that he/she has reconciled the whole world *already* and not just those who believe. Papa

virtually rejects the requirement of faith that Mack supposed. Yet in the passage that probably lies in the background of this discussion, the Apostle Paul speaks of the role of faith in reconciliation. He affirms that reconciliation is the potential for everyone, and Christ died for the purpose of reconciling everyone. *But no one is reconciled to God without believing*, and God is not reconciled with the rest who do not believe God (see Col. 1:19-23). It is universal *provision* of reconciliation but not universal reconciliation. While reconciliation was available, the Colossians were *not* reconciled until they believed. Instead, they were far from God (note v. 21 ff.). All who do not believe are going to be conquered and thrust under Jesus' rule (Phil.2:6-11; Heb. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:25; 2 Cor. 5:18-21). Finally, the author is wrong to say that "forgiveness does not establish relationship" (Papa says this twice (225)). "In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship." Yet the Bible reveals just the opposite of this! Forgiveness is only potential for all; it does not belong to all. And only when one accepts Christ as one's atoning sacrifice—believes and trusts him—does this forgiveness become effective (1 John 1:7-9). But this then *is* the basis for relationship; it does, indeed, *establish* relationship (contrary to the author). One is so intimate with Christ that he/she can be said to be "in Christ" (Col. 2:10-15).

5. In The Shack there is no future judgment. There is overt denial that God will ever force his will on anyone, including God in his capacity as judge, for this is contrary to love. "To force my will on you,' Jesus replied, 'is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission . . .'" (145). Thus the universalists' preoccupation with the love of God voids any ultimate transcendent view of God and his acting as judge of anyone. God becomes submitted to humans, and humans are submitted to God. Yet Scripture teaches that Jesus will fill the role of judge of both Christians and unbelievers (Rom.14:10-12; 1 Cor. 5:13; Jam. 5:9). "The God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end." Universalism's language is reflected by asserting that "love will burn" from the murderer "every vestige of corruption" (227). Love takes the form of the corrective fires of hell so that all—people, fallen angels, and the Devil—repent in order to escape hell.

6. In The Shack all are equally children of God because of his love. There is the declaration that all people are children of God and loved equally by him (155-156). Yet in Acts 17, the Apostle Paul, in one of his greatest "sermons," makes a clear distinction between being the "offspring of God" in a general sense (vv. 28-29) and "all people needing to repent because God has appointed a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, by giving proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead" (vv. 30-31). Verse 18 makes it clear that Paul was "preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection." Young fails to point to this distinction by saying that God loves "all his children the same." Yet John says: "As many as received him, to them God gave the authority to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name" (John 1:12). Jesus castigated the Pharisees saying, "You are of YOUR FATHER the Devil."

7. At The Shack the church is presented as a product of sin and an institution that God never has, and never will have association with. William P. Young has Jesus claim regarding the creation of institutions that he "*never has, never will*" (178). This view ignores such texts as Matthew 16:18 (Jesus said, "I will build my church") and Hebrews 10:25 ("not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together"). Quite obviously, if people are to be in the relationship of the church they have to get together, be instructed, worship, and conduct matters of organization (such as finding out about needs, spending funds, choosing leaders with authority

over others, etc.). The author's view virtually has no place for spiritual gifts including the gift of leadership (Rom. 12:8) and its exercise at some place!

In addition, Baptism and the Lord's Supper; two specific ordinances of the church which are the great means of promoting and experiencing relationship with Christ and with one another— matters that Jesus and the Apostles commanded (Matt. 26; 1 Cor. 11). It is the place where the community of faith expresses its union with Christ in a deep relationship. Yet these go unmentioned by the author.

What does a stance opposed to the institutional church have to do with universal reconciliation? Just this. Universalism seeks to reach across all denominations and all religions to discover where God's children are. **Evangelical churches** represent an obstacle to universal reconciliation—they always have, and always will. Evangelicals insist on proclaiming the gospel that only those who place faith in Christ are delivered from God's final wrath with its everlasting suffering.

Finally, the Bible is discounted in this novel. The Shack represents it as a book of guilt rather than hope, encouragement, knowledge, and light. The Shack does not present God as He is revealed in the Scriptures. In fact, he discounts much of God's revelation of Himself as the misrepresentation of men. The God (Papa) that William P. Young presents in NOT the God of the Bible, and in fact bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible, He is the God of a fertile imagination in which Young says, "let us make god after own likeness." It was an immense and miraculous event that took place when the Son poured Himself out and was found in the form of a servant. However, as man - he never relinquished His deity. While He was fully man, He remained fully God. However, in Young's presentation of the Trinity - it is hard to see God as anything but a lovable old black woman, a quiet minstral, and a flighty fairy

These then are really just a few of the errors of reflected in the novel. How does one answer Christian universalism? Scripture is the best, complete answer to universalism. There we find Jesus Christ making the strongest declarations of the everlasting suffering of those who reject him (Matt. 25:46; Luke 16).

Here is the important question. Many have countered the doctrinal arguments against this book by saying, "This is not a theological book, it is a fictional story. It doesn't have to be theologically correct. The question then is this:

Does a work of fiction have to be doctrinally correct?

In this case the answer is yes, for The Shack is *deliberately theological*. While the story is entertaining and engaging, the fiction promotes theological understanding that is in stark contrast to the revelation of Himself God gives us in the Scriptures. **Another question is:**

Does not the good points of the novel outweigh the bad? Again, if one uses doctrinal impurity to teach how to be restored to God, the end result is that person is not restored in a Biblical way to the God of the Bible. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." There are not many "ways" to God; there is only one way - and that way is presented in the theology of the Bible.

William P. Young has written a creative, provocative novel. Its story line is interesting and the narrative moves at an effective pace. Unfortunately, it is creative theologically in the sense of reinforcing universal reconciliation that distorts the evangelical understanding of God, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the meaning of the death of Christ, the necessity of belief in Christ, the final judgment, and the destiny of all humanity. **In the sixth century the church called universal reconciliation heresy, and it has treated this belief as such ever since.**

Let it suffice to say, I do not endorse this book, even as enjoyable reading. If you, like many believers have read it and feel its a good book to recommend to your friends - *don't*. Read deeper and you will uncover a portrayal of the Living God that is offensive and heretical to the transformed mind. It was recommended to me that I read it with an open mind. I chose rather to read it with a transformed mind because I am not, nor should any believer be, "open" to an "emerging" view of God. Many of you have heard me speak of the dangers of the "emerging church" movement. This is a prime example of the reasons for those repeated warnings.

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