



# FAITH FAMILY & CULTURE

## **“The Shack” by William P. Young**

Book Review by Pastor Kevin

Scanning the list of books on a Christian bestsellers list can sometimes be intriguing, confusing, humorous, or sad, depending on how your day is going up to that point. If you're one of the few people I know who occasionally read bestseller's lists (...OK, I'm the only one I know who does this...), you could even feel a combination of more than one of those emotions.

As I write this, the novel *The Shack* by William P. Young, headlines the bestsellers list at ChristianBook.com and it sits at #5 overall at Amazon.com. The book, which seems to have turned into a phenomenon of sorts, has received rave reviews from Christians, particularly among students and those in the emergent church.

Under normal circumstances, this would be good news. But two problems quickly emerge. First, these aren't normal circumstances. And second, I have no idea if I should be intrigued, confused, humored, or saddened.

What's the big deal, you say? Well, I'm glad you asked.

*The Shack* is a story about Mackenzie Allen Philips's journey to know God. Mack's youngest daughter, Missy, “has been abducted during a family vacation, and evidence that she may have been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later, in the midst of his great sadness, Mack receives a suspicious note, apparently from God, inviting him back to that shack for a weekend. Against his better judgment he arrives at the shack one wintry afternoon and walks back into his darkest nightmare. What he finds there will change his life forever.”<sup>1</sup>

Intriguing? Sure, if you're into those kinds of books.

But things move past intriguing when Mack arrives at the shack and begins a weekend-long conversation with the Trinity: God the Father (portrayed in human form as an African-American woman named “Papa”), Jesus Christ the Son (also portrayed in human form as a young man of Middle-Eastern descent; his name is “Jesus”), and the Holy Spirit (also portrayed in human form as a petite Asian woman named “Sarayu”). Mack's desire to go the shack is driven partially by his desperation to confront and overcome the *Great Sadness* that has taken over his life since his daughter's disappearance and presumed murder a few years before.

It's a creative concept for a mystery novel, but the book raises some major theological questions and concerns, particularly for younger generations that are asking—directly and indirectly—some significant questions that will form their theology. The biggest of these questions (primarily because the book revolves around this) has to do with a biblical understanding of the Trinity, their relationship with each other, and their relationship with us.

First of all, I applaud the courage of a guy who writes a book like this that brings up some of the more foundational but difficult questions of our faith. It is important for Christians to be thinking through these things so we can be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV).

At the same time, one plays a very dangerous game when trying to explain God in human terms. Granted, the Bible uses human language to describe God, but it is always done with the understanding that the divine nature of God transcends the limitations of our human emotions and understanding (i.e., the Bible is abundantly clear that God loves us, but his love is described as so wide, long, high, and deep that it “surpasses knowledge,” Ephesians 3:18-19).

With unapologetic strokes of postmodernism and emergent theology, Young paints a picture of the Trinity existing in a “circle of relationship” (p122) rather than in a hierarchical structure. This hierarchy, he claims, is a purely human construct that is ultimately the result of humans being “so lost and damaged that...it is almost incomprehensible that relationship could exist apart from hierarchy” (p124). In other words, Young seems to suggest that sinful humanity invented this structure as an attempt to understand the nature of our relationships with each other and with God.

Scripture, on the other hand, teaches that each member of the Trinity not only has different roles (cf., Ephesians 1:3-14), but that an order of hierarchy (and submission) exists in that relationship (cf., Luke 22:42; John 6:37-38, 57; 10:29-30; 14:26-28; 16:12-15; 17:1-6). What makes human hierarchies sinful is their tendency to breed envy, jealousy, and other sins. Let’s be clear: there is no sin—including envy and jealousy—in the relational and functional hierarchy of the Trinity.

Young’s focus is relationship, not structure. Within the Trinity, Scripture seems to teach both in balance.

Additionally, Papa (the “God” character, in case you’re following in your program) tells Mack that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all “spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God,” and “we became fully human” (p99). Young still maintains the full divinity and full humanity of Christ, but unfortunately, an expression of the entire Trinity becoming human finds no biblical support. In fact, this is an ancient heresy called *modalism*. Basically, modalism is when people try to mold each member of the Trinity into one person who shows himself in three ways, like what Young is suggesting here.

Instead, evangelical Christians believe there is only one God who exists in three Persons, but each of those Persons is distinct in their personhood and in their roles concerning salvation and sanctification. Contrary to what Young writes in *The Shack*, God the Father and the Holy Spirit are not truly human in Jesus; their personhood remains distinct. The Father was not born of a virgin; Jesus the Son was. The Father did not walk on water; Jesus did. The Father did not die on a cross; Jesus did. And ultimately, the Father did not rise from the dead; Jesus did...by the power of the Father (Acts 2:24, 32; Ephesians 1:19-20).

This question about the nature and identity of the Trinity has blown the theological door wide open in *The Shack*. Other major concerns require serious attention, such as our understanding of:

*Biblical submission*: *The Shack* proposes that each member of the Trinity submits to one another—remember, it’s all about a circle of relationship. And not only this, but in order for our relationship with God to be one of “love and respect,” God must submit to us. Papa says, “Submission...is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way...because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship” (p145-146). Scripture offers no validation of this line of thinking.

*Forgiveness*: Mack, the main character, needs to learn to forgive God before he can come to grips with the pain of the tragedy in his own life. Moreover, he offers forgiveness to the one who murdered his daughter, even though that person is not present nor has he asked Mack to be forgiven. Both concepts lack solid Biblical support.

*The father-hood of God*: As mentioned, God is portrayed as a woman. Though Scripture does not define God as male or female (i.e., “God is spirit,” John 4:24), he is frequently revealed as our Father (i.e., Jesus prayed, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...” Matthew 6:9). If, all of a sudden, God is our Mother, then that changes many foundational things. God reveals himself to us as Father, therefore we must worship him as Father.

*The forsaken-ness of Christ*: At perhaps the most critical time in history—that moment when Jesus shouldered the entire weight of our sin, when he experienced the full wrath of God in our place, when he endured full separation from God—Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). In *The Shack*, Papa (“God”) says, “Regardless of what [Jesus] felt at that moment, I never left him” (p96). Later, Papa continues this stream of thought: “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” (p120).

This may be the most unbiblical of all that Young has written. Our preaching series in Romans has taught us that though Christ is the cure for sin, our holy and righteous God cannot let sin remain unaddressed and, where necessary, unpunished (see Romans 1:18-32).

In addition to these concerns, the book speaks to other subjects that raise serious questions, such as free will and salvation.

But the biggest question doesn't revolve solely around the Trinity or any of the other issues mentioned here. Rather, at the core of *The Shack* is the question: Who is God? From there, *The Shack* leaves readers to question how God relates to us and, in some cases, why we even need to relate to God at all. Though Young talks about some important issues, he often reaches one of two ends: unanswered questions or answered questions that have little Biblical grounding.

So why the review on the book? For one thing, the book is receiving enormous amounts of attention in Christian and non-Christian circles alike, and particularly among high school students and young adults. Evangelical theologians like Eugene Peterson are singing the praises of this book, mentioning it in the same vein as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Many Christians are claiming that we finally have a book that helps us understand the Trinity, a concept that has remained a mystery to church fathers and theologians for centuries.

But I digress; after reading *The Shack*, the Trinity is still a mystery, and a deep one, at that.

It's been said that you don't watch movies to learn history and you don't read fiction to learn theology. That may be true, but we can't deny the fact that watching movies has the ability to shape our understanding of history just as reading fiction (or non-fiction) has the ability to shape our understanding of theology. As I understand it, Young's intention in writing *The Shack* was to teach his children about God and their relationship with him, drawing largely on his own painful life experiences. And in the process, Young is teaching readers about his understanding of God, whether he intended to teach us or not.

Maybe you've heard a lot about *The Shack*. Perhaps this review is the first you've heard of it. Maybe you found it took longer to read this review than it would to read the book itself ☺ Nonetheless, the book has become wildly popular.

In the end, I am inclined to agree with Tim Challies' assessment: "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*."<sup>2</sup>

In the end, when it's held in the light of Scripture, it looks like this shack is about to fall over.

### **Resources to help evaluate "The Shack":**

"Discerning Reader": <http://www.discerningreader.com/review/the-shack/>

"Stay Out of 'The Shack'" (Chuck Colson): <http://www.crosswalk.com/books/11575218/>

"A Look at 'The Shack'" (Albert Mohler): [http://www.albertmohler.com/radio\\_show.php?cdate=2008-05-26](http://www.albertmohler.com/radio_show.php?cdate=2008-05-26)

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<sup>1</sup> "The Shack: Publisher's Description," christianbook.com.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Challies, "Discerning Reader: The Shack," discerningreader.com.