

A CRITIQUE OF “*THE SHACK*”

By Mike Powell

11/08

William Young’s book, *The Shack*, has sold over one million copies since it was published in May 2007. It has maintained its status as the No. 1 Paperback trade fiction seller on the New York Times best sellers list since June 2008. There are rumors that it is being considered for a movie. Many people are claiming that *The Shack* has changed their lives and understanding of God. Yet many respected theologians and pastors are deeply concerned. Dr. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Seminary says, “This book includes undiluted heresy.” Even Mark Driscoll, the sometimes controversial pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle says, “Regarding the Trinity, it’s actually heretical.”

Though *The Shack* is fiction, it is clearly designed to impact how the reader thinks about God, scripture, the church, and salvation. It is not a book that was written to only share a story. It was written to communicate a theology through the dialogue of its characters. Due to the popularity, influence, and controversy that this book has generated, I have decided to write this review. The following are some of the concerns I have about the book.

The Shack Teaches A Faulty View Of God. The Bible warns us to not to misrepresent God. The second commandment reads, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth (Exodus 20:4). I am afraid that Young has violated this commandment by representing God very differently than He presents Himself in the Bible.

God the Father is presented as a large African-American woman named Papa who likes to cook and listen to “funk” music (90-91). Jesus is represented as a clumsy middle-aged Jewish man who drops a large bowl of batter on the floor and splatters Papa. The Holy Spirit is presented as a diminutive translucent Asian woman named Sarayu. In *The Shack*, God is treated as a common peer. The main character, Mack, uses foul language in the presence of God (140, 224), expresses anger at God (92, 96) and even makes God cry.

Tragically, *The Shack* trivializes God. The way Mack relates to God is not the way people respond to the presence of God in both the Old and New Testament.

Exodus 3:5-6 Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 20:18-20 All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." ²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."

Exodus 33:18-20 Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" ¹⁹ And He said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on

whom I will show compassion." ²⁰ But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"

Hebrews 12:28-29 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with **reverence and awe**; ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Revelation 1:17a When I [John] saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. . .

On page 88 the author quotes Jaques 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.*"

Yet the Bible calls God the Almighty fifty-six times.

On page 99 Sarayu (the Holy Spirit) tells Mack, "*We have limited ourselves out of respect for you. We are not bringing to mind, as it were, our knowledge of your children. As we are listening to you, it is as if this is the first time we have known about them, and we take great delight in seeing them through your eyes.*"

Yet the Bible teaches that God is constantly aware of all that is going on in our lives including our thoughts (Psalm 139). Nothing is hidden from His sight (Hebrews 4:13).

The Shack also teaches an unbiblical view of the relationship of the Trinity. In the book all three members of the godhead took on humanity and human limitations. They suffered on the cross together.

On pages 95-96 "*Mack noticed the scars on her [Papa's] wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his*"

"Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark," she stated softly and gently. "We were there together." 96

"When we three spoke ourselves into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood." 99

The Bible nowhere teaches that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit took on human existence much less died on the cross with Jesus.

The Shack teaches that there is no hierarchy in the Trinity (121-123). Yet the Bible clearly teaches otherwise.

1 Corinthians 11:3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:27-28 For He has put all things in subjection under His feet. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. ²⁸ And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all.

The Shack denies that God judges and punishes sin.

"I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it." 120

Yet the Bible clearly teaches otherwise.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and *to give* relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

Revelation 20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

The Shack challenges the very essence of God. It sounds more like Eastern Mysticism and New Age spirituality than the Bible.

The Jesus figure says of the Holy Spirit, "*She is Creativity; She is Action; She is Breathing of Life.*" 110

The Shack declares that God is a verb, not a noun. 194, 204

Yet the Bible presents God as a person (noun) not an action (verb). The God of the Bible is not just a force. He demonstrates intellect (Isaiah 1:16-20), emotions (Jeremiah 32:41; Zechariah 8:17), and will (John 6:38-40).

The Shack Presents a Negative View Of the Church and Contemporary Christianity. In an interview with World Magazine (June 28/July5, 2008; pp. 49-50) the author, referring to the church, says it, "*doesn't work for those of us who are hurt and those of us who are damaged . . . If God is a loving God and there's grace in this world and it doesn't work for those of us who didn't get dealt a very good hand in the deck, then why are we doing this?*" Young is no longer a church member, nor are his two publishing partners. They are a part of a movement that rejects the institutional church. Young's hostility to the church shows up throughout the book. It comes out in both the narrative and dialogue.

In one place the Jesus character says, "*I don't create institutions; that's an occupation for those who want to play God. So no, I'm not too big on religion.*" 179

Yet in the Bible Jesus says, ". . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." **Matthew 16:18**

Hebrews 10:24-25 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

(Cf Matthew 18:17; Ephesians 3:10; 5:25-27; 1 Timothy 3:15)

The Shack Both Downplays Bible Study And Emphasizes Personal Experience as Revelation From God. Bible study and seminary training are ridiculed.

“In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen 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” 65-66

“None of his old seminary training was helping in the least.” 91

“Images of family devotions from his childhood came spilling into his mind, not exactly good memories . . . He half expected Jesus to pull out a huge old King James Bible.” 107

By contrast, *The Shack* encourages people to interpret their subjective experiences as God’s way of communicating to them.

Sarayu, (the Holy Spirit) says *“You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours”* 195

“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.” 198

Yet Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles emphasized the importance of Bible study and the final authority of the Scriptures in our lives. Below are just a very few of the many references that encourage us to go to the Scriptures.

John 5:39 "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me

Acts 17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.

2 Timothy 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

1 Peter 2:2 . . . like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation

Cf Psalm 1; 19; 119 etc

The Shack Down Plays Knowledge And Elevates Theological Uncertainty.

“I have a great fondness for uncertainty [said Sarayu]” 203

Yet the Bible teaches that God wants us to know truth, not uncertainty. Jesus said,

John 8:32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

By contrast fools are said to hate knowledge.

Proverbs 1:28-29 "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently but they will not find me,²⁹ Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the LORD.

The Shack Is Opposed To Authority And Hierarchical Relationships.

“It’s one reason why experiencing true relationship is so difficult for you,” Jesus added. Once you have a hierarchy you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it.” 122-123

Sarayu continued, “. . . Authority, as you usually think of it, is merely the excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want.” 123

Yet the Bible clearly teaches that God has established hierarchical roles in government, marriage, family and His church. Cf Romans 13; Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 2:11-3:7; 5:5

The Shack Has A Wrong View Of Evil

The Shack presents a common, but unbiblical, philosophical view of evil. Sarayu, the Asian woman who represents the Holy Spirit says, “. . . evil is a word we use to describe the absence of Good, just as we use the word darkness to describe the absence of Light or death to describe the absence of Life. Both evil and darkness can only be understood in relation to Light and Good; they do not have any actual existence.” 136

Yet the Bible does not see evil as simply the absence of Good. The Bible sees evil and sin as an active rebellious force at work in us and in the world. The Bible sees evil in the human heart and personalized in Satan and the demons.

Romans 7:19-21 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.²⁰ But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.²¹ I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. cf 7:11

Ephesians 6:11-13 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.¹³ Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

The Shack Wrongly Teaches That God Does Not Confront Us With Our Sins 223

Papa (God) tells Mack, “Son, this is not about shaming you. I don’t do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. They don’t produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness . . .” 223

Yet the Bible says, "And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment **John 16:8**

The Shack Confuses Salvation

In The Shack Jesus indicates that a person doesn’t have to be a Christian to be saved.

“Who said anything about being a Christian? I’m not a Christian [said Jesus]” 182

“Those who love me come from every stream that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists, or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don’t vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institution. . . . I have no desire to make them Christian . . .” 182

Yet Jesus said to a group of false religious leaders;

John 8:44 "You are of *your* father the devil . . ."

Later he said;

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

This is confirmed in other places in the Bible.

Acts 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Cf John 3:36; 1 John 5:11-12

There is no question that *The Shack* is emotionally gripping. It has obviously impacted many people. Some believe that it is a good tool for evangelism. They believe that it will cause the disillusioned and unchurched to come to salvation. But the question is, what God and what salvation is the *The Shack* attracting them to? As we have seen, it presents a faulty view of God and a false gospel. It undermines both the Scriptures and the Church. I am afraid that it will confuse many and lead others astray. Because of this I believe that *The Shack* is spiritually dangerous. Jesus warned:

Matthew 7:15 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

The Apostles echoed His warning:

2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15 But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if one comes and preaches *another Jesus* whom we have not preached, or you receive a *different spirit* which you have not received, or a *different gospel* which you have not accepted, you bear *this* beautifully. . . ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

2 Peter 3:17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness,