

Reviewing “*The Shack*”

William Young’s *The Shack* has become a nationwide bestseller, as well as a source of significant theological controversy. It tells the story of “Mack” Phillips’ encounter with God. He is struggling with “The Great Sadness” in the years following the brutal murder of his daughter. God calls him back to the scene of the crime, a wilderness shack transformed into a cozy cottage. There he meets “Papa” (first as an African American woman, later as a pony-tailed man), Jesus, and Sarayu (the Holy Spirit as a slight, ethereal Asian woman), as well as Sophia (a personification of divine wisdom). This experience helps him deal the pain of his loss, his self-imposed estrangement from God, and his need to forgive his alcoholic father.

This is an engaging book. The journey from alienation to reconciliation with God is the fundamental challenge of life. *The Shack* explores this theme in the context of the pain of a broken life. The questions it raises are those that create an opportunity for Christians to offer others the hope found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the book fails to deliver answers that are consistently biblical. Some of its key claims about God and the human condition are outside the bounds of orthodox Christian belief. *The Shack* presents a different gospel, a different god, and a different way of knowing its god.

1) The “different gospel” found in *The Shack* denies that God exacts a punishment for sin. Papa says, “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.” (p. 120). In this gospel, sin is something to be cured, but never punished, by God.

The cross is a sign of God’s love (John 3:16) as well as the means of reconciliation with God (Rom 5:11). But the cross is also a sign of God’s justice. My sin is not just a disease; it is an offense against the purity, holiness, and law of God. Christ had to die in my place to take the penalty for this offense. The doctrines of human sin, divine wrath, and the atoning substitutionary work of Christ may seem obsolete to some, but they are themes at the heart of the biblical gospel (see Isa 53:5, 10; Rom 3:25-26; 4:25; 5:9). The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. Christ was our sacrificial Lamb. Without this gift, we could not experience reconciliation with God. Christ’s pain *is* our cure. Thanks be to God!

The gospel according to *The Shack* also veers toward universalism, the belief that all will be saved, whether or not they have believed in Christ. *The Shack’s* Jesus says, “Those who love me come from every system 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 institutions. . . . I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa” (p. 182).

This god is unconcerned with making Christian disciples. Rather, people of other faiths can bypass the choice to receive Jesus as Lord and be accepted as children of God, as though Jesus’ claims to uniqueness (e.g., John 14:6) are irrelevant. Unlike Young, the early believers embraced their identity as Christians (Acts 11:26). We ought to own this title with humility and conviction as well. We must affirm, with our first-century brethren and sisters, that “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The gospel according to *The Shack* is a different gospel in its universalism and its denial of Christ's work of taking the punishment for our sin. Paul warned the Galatians not to turn to a different gospel; preaching a different gospel is worthy of condemnation (Gal 1:6-10).

2) *The Shack* describes a different god. Though it portrays the Trinity as three persons who are one, it presents both Father and Spirit as incarnate as well as the Son. This denies the uniqueness of Jesus Christ the God-Man, the Word made flesh. In scripture, the Son is the visible representation of the otherwise invisible God (Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:15-16; Heb 1:3). Yet in *The Shack*, "Papa" says, "When we three spoke ourself 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" (p. 99).

Incarnating the Father and Spirit makes the god of *The Shack* seem more warm and inviting. Yet it is not faithful to the biblical record. Young idolizes the immediacy of God at the expense of His transcendent glory. He sacrifices the invisibility of Father and Spirit, detracting from their majesty and inscrutability. But in scripture, Jesus alone is the "exact representation" of the invisible God. In contrast to Young's Trinity, C.S. Lewis incarnates only the Christ-figure, Aslan, in his *Narnia Chronicles*. The Father (the Great King) and the Spirit remain invisible, maintaining a transcendence more in line with scripture.

The god of *The Shack* also has a relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit different from the biblical account. In Scripture they are equally divine, yet with roles of functional subordination. *The Shack*, on the other hand, makes a point of denying that there are any lines of authority among the three persons.

On page 122, Sarayu tells Mack, "We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command or 'great chain of being' as your ancestors termed it. What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours. . . . Humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge."

This functional egalitarianism runs contrary to the scriptural relationship of functional subordination of the Son to the Father. Jesus taught his submission to the will of the Father, not vice versa (John 5:30; 8:28; Matt 26:39; see also 1 Cor 15:24-28). Though He is equal to the Father, Jesus willingly lets go of that equality and submits to the Father's will (Phil 2:6). The authority Jesus has is given to Him by the Father (Matt 28:18; John 5:26-27).

3) Finally, *The Shack* also presents a different way of knowing God. In scripture, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10:17). But *The Shack* trashes scripture in its disparaging of Mack's seminary training. "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?" (pp. 65-66).

The Shack offers mystical and sensory experience as Mack's primary path to knowing God. While God may choose to reveal himself in innumerable ways, the standard for evaluating personal subjective experience is the objective written revelation found in scripture. The apostle Peter placed greater certainty in the writings of the prophets than even his own eyewitness experience of Jesus' transfiguration (2 Pet 1:16-21). In contrast, the few references to scripture in *The Shack* are generally belittling toward the high view of scripture typical of the most robust periods of historic Christianity prior to our present age.

How then should we approach *The Shack*? By raising the problem of alienation from God, this book creates a buzz for those seeking a way home to reconciliation with God. It may be possible that by engaging seekers who are reading the book, some opportunities may be available for Christians to present the true gospel of reconciliation with God. But the path back home to God necessitates the work of justification accomplished only when Christ took our place of penalty on the cross, as taught in his holy Word. Unfortunately, *The Shack* overtly rejects this core element of the biblical gospel, putting an obstacle between the seeker and the way of the cross.

The Shack is home to a different gospel, a different god, and a different way of knowing its god. Therefore, I would not recommend it as a source for evangelism or spiritual edification. Those who read it should exercise careful biblical discernment. While much of the book depicts the Persons of the Godhead in interesting and seemingly biblical ways, the book is peppered with statements such as those cited above that contradict core biblical teachings. Perhaps the time could be better spent reading books more consistent with biblical teaching, such as C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* or the Narnia series, or Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, a real-life story of a great sadness and personal loss during the Holocaust, through which the author discovered true forgiveness and glorified God through her pain.

We know that "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). They will deceive many (Matt 24:11). None of us are totally immune to such deception. The false teachers of our day whisper to us that we ought to jettison core biblical truths such as salvation through Christ alone, the substitutionary death of Christ for the penalty of our sin, and the necessity and sufficiency of scripture for discovering saving faith in Jesus Christ. To guard ourselves against these trends, we must commit ourselves to daily scripture reading and prayer, so that we will not be "blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph 4:14). Then we will be equipped to offer the true gospel of Jesus Christ with compassion and discernment to those struggling to find their way home to our loving heavenly Father.

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