

# The Shack<sup>1</sup> – A Review

by Craig Smith

As with most books, *The Shack* has a mixture of positives and negatives. If we focus on it exclusively as a story designed to communicate the depth of God's love and passion for us, I would recommend it enthusiastically. If we focus on it as a vehicle for communicating theology, however, I have some reservations.

So which is it? Is it merely a story or does it seek to communicate theological truth beyond the simple, yet profound, fact that God loves us deeply?

This is an important question and yet one which is often skipped over in the discussion of this book (as well as many others). I have heard both Christians and non-Christians dismiss questions about the theological or spiritual content of books simply because "it's just a story." I assume that what they mean is really, "it's a *fictional* story," but fiction or not, there is no such thing as "just a story." Stories have always served as one of the most effective means of communicating truth. Stories engage both the mind and heart in a way that more direct teaching sometimes cannot. For this reason, story is often the vehicle of choice for truth that might otherwise be misunderstood or ignored.

As Richard Pratt argues convincingly in *He Gave Us Stories*<sup>2</sup>, the narrative approach is one favored by no less than God Himself and the Old Testament gives clear evidence of this. Moreover, Jesus was a master storyteller and it should be noted that he didn't restrict himself exclusively to non-fictional accounts. A great many of the parables are obviously not historical accounts but fictional constructs. Do we want to dismiss the truth they communicate simply because the vehicle of their communication depends on fictional elements? Obviously not.

Consequently, we can't dismiss theological assertions simply because they are asserted in fictional accounts. This is especially true when it is clear that the author of the account intended to speak truth rather than just spin a good yarn. Young is not just telling a story. In his own words: "I was pretty serious about trying to do something systematic and organized...I decided that a 'story' would be the right vehicle..."<sup>3</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, Young has never tried to avoid theological scrutiny simply by hiding behind the "it's just a story" defense. He acknowledges that *The Shack* is a vehicle for communicating theology. It is really his readers that seem to want to shield him from criticism.

What criticism, you ask? What is there to find objectionable in a story that speaks so clearly, poignantly and effectively of the fact that God loves us more deeply than we can begin to imagine?

Before I answer that question, let me say this: I was blessed by reading this book. It stirred my soul by reminding me that God is loving, mysterious and almost embarrassingly interested in me as a person, fallen and finite though I am. These are all

---

<sup>1</sup> William P. Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narrative* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.windrumors.com/29/the-shack-update-background-2>

themes that are woven throughout the Bible itself and I am grateful to Young for having reminded me of them in a way that I found so personally encouraging. I have and will continue to recommend the book to others for this reason.

On another positive note, I found that *The Shack*'s depiction of the Trinity was brilliant. This is not to say that I don't think it needs to be tweaked a bit here and there, because I do, but on the whole, I found it fascinating and profitable. Presenting God as a black woman who wanted to be called "Papa" created precisely the kind of cognitive dissonance that forces people to stop and think more carefully about issues that often go unexamined. God isn't really male, though I do believe that "father" is and always will be a better analogy for God than "mother." The analogies we use to speak of God can, if unexamined, have the effect of causing us to miss some of God's multi-faceted nature. Though many Christians have been deeply offended by Young's depiction, I found it refreshing.

In a similar vein, Young's depiction of the Holy Spirit has the effect of forcing us to recognize that the Spirit is a person and not think of him<sup>4</sup> as an impersonal force as I think evangelical Christians are sometimes prone to do.<sup>5</sup> As we encounter the Holy Spirit in *The Shack*, this de-personalizing trend is reversed in a way that could have a positive and lasting effect on the Evangelical community at large.

However, as I started this review off by saying, apart from the Bible itself, no book is without its weaknesses and *The Shack* is no exception. It is not my intent here to offer a blow-by-blow theological analysis. Rather, I simply want to point out that the theology of *The Shack* does not always appear to be perfectly orthodox. For this reason, while I think that reading it can be an edifying experience, it is not an experience that should be undertaken without biblical discernment. There is much here to be commended, but there are significant errors that must be addressed as well.

The greatest of the theological weaknesses of *The Shack* involves the failure to represent God as genuinely sovereign. The god of *The Shack* is a god who hates to see evil, suffering and pain, but allows them for the reason that these things are necessary consequences of human freedom. This is, of course, a long-standing popular Christian explanation for the problem of evil. Personally, I think this explanation inadequate in several respects, but this is not the place for such a discussion. Rather, I want to point out that in *The Shack*, this way of thinking has the effect of making God seem intimately involved in the world as a friend but significantly absent from the world as the sovereign Lord of all things. According to the Bible, He is both. Remember that while Jesus said that his followers are "no longer servants but friends", this was preceded by the statement that "you are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14-15). If our friendship with the incarnate Son of God is predicated upon our recognition of his Lordship, then how much more is this the case with respect to the Father whom even Jesus obeyed (Phi. 2:5-8)?

The presentation of God in *The Shack* inspires intimate relationship, but does it also inspire worship and obedience? I'm not sure that it does and this is a serious issue.

---

<sup>4</sup> I will part ways with Young at this point. I think "he" is a better pronoun for the Spirit just as it is with the Father, though we must recognize that neither are precisely male or female.

<sup>5</sup> This is evidenced by a tendency among Evangelicals to refer to the Spirit with the impersonal pronoun "it."

The desire to present God as loving and interested is understandable, of course, as these are clearly biblical truths that can often be overlooked in contemporary Christianity. However, we must not go so far in emphasizing these facets of God's nature that we ignore others and, in so doing, find ourselves on unorthodox ground. Unfortunately, I think *The Shack* does this to some degree.

While *The Shack* does not explicitly affirm universalism (the belief that all people will eventually be saved and go to heaven) it does seem to suggest it. In *The Shack*, Young has Jesus say that:

“Those who love me come from every system that exists. They are 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...”<sup>6</sup>

The word “Christian” simply means “little Christ” and speaks to the idea that those who follow Christ are being transformed by the Spirit so that we are more and more like Christ. If Jesus doesn't want to make us “little Christs” then this would seem to imply that we are all just fine even though we are not Christ-like. It is possible, of course, that this is reading too much into this statement. Jesus not wanting to “make them Christian,” can be taken in two different ways: we can take it to mean that he doesn't want to make them fit the “Christian mold” of political party, style of dress, musical preferences, etc. or we can take it to mean that he doesn't expect their core beliefs, theology or religion to change. The former would be fine. The latter would be quite difficult to reconcile with what God says in the Bible. Unfortunately, the rest of the above quote - and the larger context of *The Shack* - seems to suggest that the latter is what is intended.

It is possible, of course, that Young merely means that followers of Jesus can come from any background and this would be perfectly true. However, when he says that “many...are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions...” (emphasis mine) the implication is that what was true of you *before* encountering Jesus (i.e. being Buddhist or not being part of a Christian community) can remain true of you *after* encountering Jesus.<sup>7</sup> It would be different if Young had made Jesus say “...many were not part of any Sunday morning or religious institution,” implying that things might well be expected to change after meeting Jesus. But if you were not part of a church *before* meeting Jesus and you are still not part of a church *after* meeting Jesus, then it would seem to follow from this sentence that you could be Buddhist *before* meeting Jesus and remain Buddhist *after* meeting Jesus. Since the theology of Christianity and Buddhism are fundamentally contradictory, this is extremely dangerous ground. The fact that Baptists, Democrats and Republicans (which differ from one another in relatively minor ideological ways) are included with Buddhists, Mormons and Muslims<sup>8</sup> (which are

---

<sup>6</sup> p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> As a side note, it is probably worth pointing out here that the postmodern aversion to “organized religion” comes out quite strongly in *The Shack*. While I understand and sympathize somewhat with this desire to be spiritual without being ‘religious’, participation in Christian community is not an option for believers. It is a command (Heb. 10:23-25).

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Kreider points this out in his review of *The Shack*, available at [http://www.insight.org/site/PageServer?pagename=shack\\_details#home](http://www.insight.org/site/PageServer?pagename=shack_details#home)

fundamentally different ideological/theological positions), suggests that Young thinks that one's core beliefs are essentially irrelevant to salvation. This is simply not true.

Now, this may seem a bit too much to make out of the tense of a verb, but the use of "are" instead of "were" is only one bit of a larger whole. The larger context of the conversation in which this quote occurs bears me out. A bit further Young has Papa say that by Jesus' death He is now "fully reconciled to the world."<sup>9</sup> What precisely this means is not perfectly clear but the most natural way to understand it in its context is as an affirmation of *universalism*.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that Young does have Jesus say explicitly, when asked if all roads lead to God, "Not at all. . . . Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you".<sup>11</sup> This certainly doesn't sound like universalism, so it may just be that Young's actual theology doesn't get expressed clearly.

There are other theological issues, some of them potentially significant, but again, it is not my purpose here to provide a thorough theological critique. Several of those have been written already and you can find links to the best of them at the Shepherd Project Ministries website ([www.shepherdproject.com](http://www.shepherdproject.com) – go to the free resource section). In the end, what I wish to say is this: reading *The Shack* can be a very encouraging and even enlightening experience, but its theology is not entirely orthodox and must be examined carefully in light of what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible.

Read it, but read it carefully. The power of teaching theology via narrative is that it can sometimes bypass the mind and take root in the heart without the reader being aware of what is happening. In the case of *The Shack*, there is some potential for this to be damaging to the development of a healthy Christian worldview. On the other hand, for the Christian whose worldview is firmly rooted in Scripture and who reads discerningly, reading *The Shack* may be an extremely edifying experience.

---

Quite apart from theological issues, *The Shack* is worth paying attention to as a cultural phenomenon. A great many people have read/are reading/will read this book and they are not all Christians. In fact, the book is being read by startling numbers of non-Christians who are very interested in talking about the ideas it contains. As Christians, we must be ready to take advantage of interest in *The Shack* as a bridge to sharing the Gospel. If we are ready to do this, we may well find that *The Shack* provides an important intersection of faith and culture, allowing us to make a significant impact in whatever spheres of influence God has given us. Check out resources designed to help you do this at [www.shepherdproject.com/resources/shackresources.htm](http://www.shepherdproject.com/resources/shackresources.htm)

---

<sup>9</sup> p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> There are several forms of Christian universalism. Some hold that everyone is saved regardless of if or how they respond to Jesus. Others hold that one does not need to "accept" Jesus to be saved but that it is still possible to knowingly "reject" Jesus' offer of reconciliation and thereby to consign oneself to eternity apart from God, though this is not the same as being "condemned". The universalism of *The Shack* would seem to be closer to this latter view.

<sup>11</sup> p.182.