

A Rundown Theology

A review of *The Shack* by Pastor Jason Van Divier

“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” John 1:18

With over two million copies of William Paul Young’s *The Shack* in print, it is no surprise that so many people are asking about the book and whether or not it is helpful reading for the believer. This review is designed to answer this question and serve as a resource for others who may be receiving similar questions, or encountering friends or family members who have read, are reading or are being encouraged to read the book.

The Shack has become somewhat of a phenomenon - A near overnight success, virtually self published (originally distributed from a garage), by a first time author. If you haven’t heard about it yet, chances are you will soon. It is the fictional account of a man (Mackenzie Allen Phillips – Mack) whose young daughter is abducted and murdered. The result is that he is left in a deep depression, with a lot of anger and distrust toward God. He receives a letter in the mailbox from God (“Papa”) calling him to spend the weekend with Him at the shack – the remote wilderness location where his daughter’s blood-stained dress was found a few years earlier.

Mack spends the weekend with God the Father (“Papa”), an African American woman, Jesus, a middle-eastern man, and the Holy Spirit (“Sarayu”), an Asian woman. What he learns redefines his concept of God and what it means to have a relationship with Him. The question is, is this repainting of God necessary, is it good and is it scriptural? The short answer is no. However, masses of Christians, prominent Christian artists, and not a few influential leaders have praised the book. Eugene Peterson, translator of the Bible paraphrase *The Message*, wrote, “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!” It shouldn’t surprise us then that many have had a similar reaction. Still others have recognized problems with the book and some, while recognizing that something is not quite right, are confused. The question is, why such a disparity in response?

Those that praise the book seem to have fallen victim to one of a few different factors. Some have an extreme emotional response to the book. They become so attached to the characters and the story line that their discernment is suspended. Gayle Erwin, author of the popular *The Jesus Style*, said of the book, “Riveting, with twists that defy your expectations while teaching powerful theological lessons without patronizing. I was crying by page 100. You cannot read it without your heart becoming involved.” Others connect with a back story of abuse and psychological deliverance. Still others are the product of pulpits that have neglected the teaching of the Word of God. Whatever the cause, Christianity seems to be ripe for such novels, which fit perfectly into the emerging church philosophy that is attempting to change the truth of the Gospel and God’s Word.

So what’s the big deal, it’s just fiction right? Not exactly. It is fiction with a distinct purpose, to affect how you see and relate to God. In a description of *The Missy Project* (Missy is Mack’s fictional daughter who is murdered in the book) at the back of the book we read, “It offers one of the most poignant views of God and how He relates to humanity that

has been written in our time...a magnificent glimpse into the nature of God that is not often presented in our culture." The author states that he simply wrote the book as a gift for his children, but after approaching 26 publishers unsuccessfully (13 Christian and 13 secular, according to Mr. Young in his comments at Crossroads Church of Denver on September 21, 2008) he and his partners finally created a publishing company of their own. The above mentioned Missy Project is a kind of grass roots effort at promoting the book, which is detailed in its final pages. Clearly, there is now a real purpose in the minds of the author and those who support this book. To suggest otherwise is to not be completely honest.

What then are the errors and how bad are they? I can say that this is one of the most potentially damaging books I have read in a long time. The flaws are not carefully hidden, they are overt and frequent. They generally fall into one of several categories: a mischaracterization of the nature of God, an aberration of the character of God, a watering down of the authority of God, an undermining or denying of the Word of God, universalism (all roads lead to God), a lack of recognition of sin, an elimination of the need for repentance, a denial of judgment, the psychologizing of the faith, vulgarity, an irreverence toward God, a disdain for the Church and a failure to understand what it means to have a relationship with God.

Getting specifically to the errors then, let's take the mischaracterization of the nature of God, and it's a big one. The Father and the Holy Spirit are portrayed in some ways as indistinguishable from the Son. For example, the Father, Son and Spirit all bear the marks of the crucifixion. This is a form of an ancient heresy known as Sabellianism or modalism, which in part fails to distinguish between the three Persons of the Trinity. It is also a form of another ancient heresy known as patripassionism, which ascribes the suffering of the cross to the Father as well. In the previously mentioned messages at Crossroads Church of Denver, Mr. Young confirms his belief in these false doctrines as he explains his view of 2 Corinthians 5:19, which says "...that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself..." His explanation was that God "was in Christ" on the cross. On page 96 of the book he writes, "'We were there together.' Mack was surprised. 'At the cross? Now wait, I thought you left him – you know – 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" It was Scripture that had often haunted Mack in *The Great Sadness*. 'You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he felt at that moment, I never left him.'" This misses the point that while Jesus was bearing the sins of the world, he experienced the separation from God that comes with it as a fulfillment of Psalm 22:1, because God in His holiness cannot look on sin or have fellowship with sin of any kind (Isaiah 59:2, 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, 1 John 1:5-7). This dialog also brings up a couple of other problems, one of which is the undermining of Scripture, which we will discuss later. The second problem it introduces is a misunderstanding of the nature of Christ.

The Shack portrays Christ as fully God and fully man, which is true. However, it also indicates that Jesus never drew upon His nature as God for power, but relied solely on the power of the Father. "'Jesus is fully human. Although he is fully God, he has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything...' 'So, when he healed the blind?' 'He did so as a dependant, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him...Jesus, as a human being had no power within himself to heal anyone.'" (pages 99-100). When Jesus healed the woman with an issue of blood (Luke 8:46), he said, "'...I perceived power going out from Me.'" In Matthew 9:4, we see that Jesus also had the power to understand people's thoughts. In *The Shack*, we see vignettes of a flawed Jesus who in one instance clumsily drops a bowl of batter or sauce and is then teased for His humanity by the Father and Spirit (page 104). This is not the Jesus of God's Word.

The fact that the Father is a mixed metaphor of an African American woman who is called "Papa" is problematic in its own right and can't be overlooked. We know that God is Spirit (John 4:24), but when He does choose to reveal himself in human terms it is always as a father. To change Him into a woman is to approach the ancient practices of goddess worship and to suggest that His revealing Himself as a father is insufficient and can be improved upon. It is to imply that His revelation of Himself in His Word is incomplete for some people with a poor concept of fathers. Ironically, those with a poor sense of what a father is need to see the true Father (Psalm 27:10).

Unfortunately, God's character is dramatically and unscripturally altered in the book as well. Young favors God's love over His holiness. God is in fact loving, and at the same time holy and just. The problem arises when we favor one aspect to the exclusion of the other. When we do, we don't have the God of the Bible. The god of The Shack is not interested in judging sin. "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." (page 120). Further, Young's version of God is one with a questionable sense of humor (pages 88-89), who listens to foul music (page 91) and who calls men "idiots" on occasion (page 192).

The god of The Shack is a god without authority and hierarchy. Sarayu (the Spirit) says on page 122, "Hierarchy would make no sense among us." Papa adds, "Such a waste!" Authority is described as destroying relationships and a means of the strong to use the weak (page 123). However, the Word says that Jesus was in submission to the Father (Luke 22:42), and the Spirit was subject to both the Father and Son (John 14:26, 15:26). Romans 13:1 says that there is no authority but from God, and that the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Authority and hierarchy are in fact inherent in the Godhead.

We also see an undermining or outright denial of the Word of God. In his comments at Crossroads Church of Denver, Mr. Young spoke at length of how people who were dying in hospice care were being given copies of his book. Many had been offended by the Bible, but not his book. What the Bible was unable to do, his book overcame. Earlier we talked about Mack's low regard of Scripture. It was always something that caused him problems. The author has a low regard for the Word, and it is revealed in his characters. He says on pages 65-66, "In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper...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?" However, Hebrews 4:12 says that "the word of God is living and powerful", and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reveals that God's Word is profitable and essential in all areas of human life, that we may be complete and equipped.

In The Shack, we are being told an age old lie – that all roads lead to God. This heresy is known as universalism. On page 182 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..." The author said at Crossroads Church of Denver that he later added the line at the end of the paragraph and the following paragraph about all roads not leading to God. The ambiguous language actually did not clarify anything but only created a contradiction and double speak. The problem is that the original idea of universalism is preserved throughout the context of this story. All roads do not lead to God (Matthew 7:13-14, John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

The gospel of The Shack is a gospel without sin. The concept is almost nonexistent, and certainly not ever discussed in a Biblical construct of failing to meet God's standard. In fact the god of The Shack has no standard and no expectations. Papa says, "'Honey, I've never placed an expectation on you or anyone else...And beyond that, because I have no expectations, you never disappoint me.'" (page 206). Micah 6:8, on the other hand shows that God does require things of us. In Genesis 6:7, God was sorry that He created man prior to the flood because of his wickedness – He was disappointed because He has desires and expectations for us. Mr. Young reduces sin to a "legacy of brokenness" and rebellion to "independence". He regularly excuses sin. On page 187 Mack says, "'But, what you said. I mean, about hiding inside lies. I guess I've done that one way or another most of my life.' 'Honey, you're a survivor. No shame in that. Your daddy hurt you something fierce. Life hurt you. Lies are one of the easiest places for survivors to run.'" So, the idea is that there is no shame in lying or sin if you have a reasonable excuse. Yet, in Proverbs 16:6-7, God says that a lying tongue is one of the seven things that are "an abomination to Him". Lying is sin, and sin is a problem (Romans 3:23, 6:23).

If there is no sin, then there is no need to repent. On page 225 Papa says, "'In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship.'" Since there is no real concept of hell in The Shack, God forgives everyone regardless of whether they repent (the Biblical basis for forgiveness). As a result, their risk is limited to not having the kind of relationship God desires. However, 1 John 1:9 tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Jesus died for the world. His death made redemption possible, but it is only accessed through true grace, repentance and forgiveness.

The Shack unfortunately also denies the reality of God's judgment. At one point, Mack has a dramatic encounter with Sophia, a female "personification of Papa's wisdom". Mack is given the task of choosing two of his children to go to heaven and three who will go to hell. As he naturally struggles with the task, Sophia responds, "'I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does.'" (page 162). This is followed by more double speak, which only confuses the issue and fails to overcome the overall context of the book that there is really no judgment. The fact is that God does not send anyone to hell (Matthew 25:41, 2 Peter 3:9), but hell is real and judgment is real (Revelation 20:11-15). If we do not place our faith in Jesus Christ, then we will go to hell.

It is clear from reading this book and listening to Mr. Young speak that he has comfortably blended his faith with modern psychology. However, at the heart of psychology is a fundamental desire to understand and address human behavior apart from God. This makes the two incompatible. On page 154, Sophia says to Mack, "'...some parents are too broken to love (their children) well and others are barely able to love them at all...'" This not so subtle psychological notion not only excuses sin, but virtually renders some people, presumably because of their backgrounds, incapable of living a Godly life and loving their children. On page 197, Sarayu gives the standard psychological evaluation of feelings when she says that emotions "'...just are. They are neither bad nor good; they just exist.'" The problem is that our emotions can often be very sinful. They can include things like bitterness, hatred, jealousy and pride. These all stem from the heart, which as God says is "desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). In his messages at Crossroads Church of Denver, the author made it clear that he attributes much of his problems in life to the abuse he endured from his father as a child. He blames his mother for being a "follower". He also, in a sense blames his wife after his affair for not understanding "people who aren't normal". The problem with psychology and excuses is that they can prevent a

person from ever facing and accepting responsibility for their sin. Unfortunately, many of these ideas come out in the book as well, since the author will tell you that Mack in many ways represents himself.

The Shack is a book that demonstrates a complete lack of the fear of the Lord (Psalm 111:10). The characters use multiple vulgarities in the presence of God. However, Mr. Young is not unaccustomed to doing the same. He was not restrained from openly cursing in the pulpit at Crossroads Church of Denver. This unfortunately fits in with an overall irreverence toward God. There was a time when the scribes so revered God and his name as holy, that they wouldn't even pronounce it or write it, and if they did write something in its place they would bathe first and pick up a new writing instrument. We don't need to lose respect to develop intimacy with God. When we lose a sense of His holiness, we recreate God in the image of sinful man.

The author seems to have a disdain not only for the God of the Bible, but the Lord's Church as well. He mocks the simple practices of devotions and praying before a meal on a couple of occasions. On page 120, Papa says to Mack at the breakfast table, "'What?'...in mock horror. 'You aren't even going to bow your head and close your eyes?'...Tsk, tsk, tsk. What is the world coming to?'" The Jesus of The Shack goes so far as to debunk the notion of being a Christian when he says, "'Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian.'" The word Christian denotes a follower of Christ. So the book is actually minimizing the importance of being a disciple of Jesus, something the Word of God promotes. We are told that "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (Acts 11:26).

When you read this book, you get a sense that things are very complicated with God and that having a relationship with God is therefore very complicated. God tells us just the opposite though in His Word. We must come to Him in the humility and simplicity of a child (Mark 10:15). We can find rest in Jesus and learn from Him because He is gentle and lowly and His yoke is easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:28-30). Mack is lost in the book more than once, and I can say that at times I don't think the author even knows what exactly he is trying to say. In his messages to Crossroads Church of Denver he said that this story was beyond him and that even his family recognized that. He also discussed, briefly, some of the controversy and indicated that communicating such ideas was not his intention. I believe him in part. However, I also believe that this book is beyond him and the source is not God. The enemy did intend for the things that were written. I believe that this, and the "extensive rewrites" with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, created a situation with a lot of error and double speak that may not have always been intended, but was the resulting communication nonetheless.

It shouldn't surprise us then that the author has a totally different understanding of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. On page 149, Mack says to Jesus, "'You mean...I can't just ask, 'What Would Jesus Do?'" Jesus chuckled. 'Good intentions, bad idea.'" In an interview with the 700 Club Mr. Young explained that in his view Jesus didn't come to be a model for us to pattern our lives after. He seems to prefer "What Will Jesus Do?" He stated that being a follower of Jesus is "not modeling our life after His", but "allowing Him to be Himself in the uniqueness of our own personhood." In other words, Christ did not come to transform us, but to live in us as we are. However, the Apostle Paul said, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Fitting perfectly with his theology, Young paints an image in *The Shack* of a god who is comfortable and content with untransformed lives in a state of disarray. On page 158, Sophia says to Mack, “‘You are a glorious, destructive mess, Mackenzie, but you are not here to repent.’” Young’s idea of being a Christian then is not the Biblical concept of being born again, delivered from sin, daily being conformed into the image of Christ and having a deep personal relationship with Him. When Mack asks Jesus how he becomes part of the church on page 178, Jesus says, “‘It’s simple, Mack. It’s all about relationships and simply sharing life...being open and available to others around us.’” His idea of a relationship with Christ is this loose relationship with God and others without “agenda” “expectations” or “priorities”. On page 207, Sarayu says to Mack, “‘If you put God at the top, what does that really mean and how much is enough? How much time do you give me before you can go on about the rest of your day, the part that interests you so much more?’” The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ...”

There are a host of other issues in *The Shack*, including an entire section dealing with what appears to be the new age concept of the human aura (pages 209-217). Young also reveals a strong bias to guns, fighting for your country and patriotism (pages 84,160,181). However, these issues are somewhat less significant compared to the greater doctrinal issues we have already addressed. The real problem with this novel can be recognized in the After Words where the author within the story describes the overall effect as his relationships having “been touched deeply and altered in ways that truly matter.” A relationship with Jesus Christ is so much more than that, and *The Shack* leads readers in the opposite direction. His closing comments reveal his final error that somehow, one day, all will be saved. *The Shack* is a nice concept on the surface, if only it weren’t filled with such a rundown theology and false picture of God and what it means to know Him.

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