

Book Review - *The Shack* by William P. Young

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by David Dunlap

The novel *The Shack* has taken the the Christian community by storm, and it is likely that someone you know has read *The Shack*. This self-published work has sold well over one million copies in a single year. *The Shack* has stood at the number one position for paperback fiction on the New York Times' bestsellers list for a number of months. The author, William P. Young, has been interviewed by numerous news outlets. Many Christian leaders have applauded the book. Eugene Peterson of Regent College, Vancouver, B. C., writes, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!"¹ Recently, *World* magazine, a weekly Christian periodical, printed a two-page review largely praising the book.

***The Shack*: A Remarkable Book and A Disappointing Book**

Ironically, *The Shack* is a remarkable book and yet, at the same time, a disappointing book. It is remarkable because of the large number of copies sold in a single year. It is remarkable because the story is engaging, creative, and at times profound. Yet, it is also a disappointing book. It is disappointing because of the unorthodox theological perspective to which the author returns time and again. Although this book is a fictional novel about the spiritual and emotional journey of the main character Mackenzie Allen Phillips, the author also intends it to be a theological work, dealing with the nature of God, the Trinity, salvation, faith, and other biblical doctrines. It is this theological perspective of *The Shack* that we will seek to explore. When interviewed, author William Young makes it known that although he is a Christian, he does not attend any church and has little interest in the current institutional churches. This being said, the author has a strong Christian background. He was raised in a Christian home, the son of an evangelical church pastor. He spent part of his childhood among the Dani tribe in West Papua, where his parents were missionaries. Later he attended and graduated *summa cum laude* from Warner Pacific College, a Church of God (Indiana) four-year liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon. As one reads this novel, it causes one to wonder how a writer with such a strong Christian background could get so much wrong about fundamental Christian doctrine.

Theological Foundation of *The Shack*

Some have called "The Shack" edgy; others say it is "unorthodox"; and still others call it "unbiblical." In interviews with Young, when asked about some of the unorthodox theological content, he immediately seems to bristle and become defensive. He states that this book was initially written for his young children, and so it is not a theological book. In his interview in *World* he says: "It's a work of fiction that's really focused on the journey of a human being to deal with the junk in his life that includes his misunderstanding of the character of God and nature of God."²

Initially, *The Shack* appears to be just another novel, but as one reads further, the theological precepts and teaching of the Emerging Church movement become more and more evident. This work serves to reinforce the ideas of Emerging church leaders such as Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and Donald Miller. On the acknowledgment page of *The Shack*, the author mentions those who have influenced his thinking, including Anne LaMott, a popular writer among Emerging Church leaders and Donald Miller, the author of *Blue Like Jazz*, and a national leader of the Emerging Church movement.

Theological Content

Jason Carlson, the vice president of Christian Ministries International, was, for nearly six years, deeply involved in the Emerging Church movement. Carlson was mentored by Emergent leader Doug Pagitt, the pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During those years, Carlson spent time with Emergent Church leaders such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and others. In 2006, Jason Carlson wrote an important article called "My Journey Into and Out of the Emergent Church." In this article, he listed numerous characteristics of the Emergent Church.³ Interestingly, in his novel, Young develops at some length many of these characteristics. Let us take a look at six characteristics.

1. “A Quasi-Universalistic View of Salvation”

William Young follows other Emerging Church leaders in teaching a universalistic model of salvation. Little is ever said about repentance, faith, or conversion to Christ. On the other hand, Young repeatedly states that sin is not punished, all individuals are forgiven of their sins, and all that God now seeks is a relationship with man. He has God say: “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 another place: “...you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world” (p. 192). Also, “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some have chosen relationship” (p. 225)

2. “A Lack of Proper Appreciation for Biblical Authority over and against Personal Experience or Revelation.”

The Shack over and over again sends the message that personal experience with God trumps the biblical authority of Scripture. Moreover, the commands and precepts of Scripture are not to be taken too seriously, for God does not have high expectations for His people (p. 206). Concerning Scripture, Young writes: “...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?” (p. 66)

Mack, the main character, asks God where people will find Him: “You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in creation, or in your joy or sorrow...you will see me in the Bible but just don’t look for rules or principles...” (p. 198).

3. “Openly Questioning the Relevance of Key Historical Biblical Doctrines such as the Trinity.”

Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity is at the very heart of *The Shack*. But the Trinity is reinterpreted in a way which theologians throughout church history would never have imagined. God the Father is portrayed as “...a large beaming African-American woman named...*Elouisa...or ...Papa...*” (pp. 82-87). God the Father, bears nail print wounds in his hands just as Jesus does (p. 107).

Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, is described as “...a Middle Eastern man dressed as a laborer...Jesus...” (pp. 82-87). Although fully divine, this Jesus is portrayed as more human than divine. Yet, Scripture depicts the very opposite. The Bible shows Christ’s human nature to be subject to His divine nature. In the novel, Mack asks Jesus: “You created the world...?” “I created it as the Word, before the Word became flesh. So even though I created this, I see it now as a human” (p. 109). “Although He is fully God, he has never drawn on His nature as God to do anything...,” Papa explains (p. 99). “So when he healed the blind?” (questions Mack...) “He did so as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone”, replies Papa (p.100). The third Person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, is depicted as “...a small, distinctively Asian woman ‘...I am *Sarayu*...keeper of the gardens among other things...’ ” (pp. 82-87). Young teaches that the Holy Spirit was a created being. Mack says, “Sarayu, I know your are the Creator...” Sarayu replies, “*A created being* can only take what already exists and from it fashion something different” (p. 131). Evangelical theologians have always insisted that the Holy Spirit as a Person of the Godhead was not a created being. (Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that the Holy Spirit was a created being.) At another point in Young’s book, Mack queries, “Speaking of Sarayu, is she the Holy Spirit?” “Yes.” Replies Jesus, “She is Creativity; she is Action; she is the Breathing of Life; she is much more. She is my Spirit.” (p. 110).

4. “Little or No Talk of Evangelism or Saving Lost Souls.”

Unlike the New Testament, *The Shack* never speaks of people who are outside of Christ on their way to a lost eternity. It never speaks of the need for Christians to bring a message of salvation to those who are unsaved. William Young teaches that all people are reconciled, redeemed, and forgiven. The problem is simply that some have not come into a relationship with God. We read in *The Shack*: “So how do I become part of that church?” “It’s simple, Mack,” Jesus replies. “It’s all about relationships and simply sharing life...being open and available to others around us. My church is all about people and life is about relationships” (p. 178).

5. “Highly Ambiguous Handling of Truth.”

Unfortunately, when Young begins to deal with biblical themes, he either deviates, evades, or misrepresents important doctrines of Scripture. For example, God the Father says, “I don’t do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. They don’t produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness, and that is why they were nailed into Jesus on the cross” (p. 223). Needless to say, Scripture never speaks in these terms; this is a viewpoint in the mind of the author that he wishes was true.

6. “An Unbridled Cynicism Towards Conservative Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism.”

At times in *The Shack* William Young displays bitterness and cynicism toward fundamental and evangelical churches. He often has Mack exhibit a bitter disdain of evangelical churches. He dislikes their zeal, their love for country, their “agenda”, their preaching, and rules, etc. (p.181). Early in the book, Mack realizes that: “...Sunday prayers and hymns weren’t cutting it anymore, if they ever had....He was sick of God and God’s religion, sick of all the little religious social clubs that didn’t seem to make any real difference or affect any real changes” (p. 66).

7. Environmentalism (not listed by Carlson)

One of the key issues of the Emerging Church movement is environmentalism. Scripture personifies nature but never deifies it. Young, takes the radical environmentalist viewpoint of giving the earth a consciousness, intellect, and will. On one occasion he deifies the earth, ascribing to the earth the power to punish man. Author William Young has God say: “Humans, who have been given the task to lovingly steer the world, instead plunder her with no consideration, other than their immediate needs...So they use her and abuse her with no consideration and then when she shudders or blows her breath, they are offended and raise their fist at God.” “You’re an ecologist?” Mack responds (p. 144).

Conclusion

The message of *The Shack* has the potential to strengthen and encourage Christians who have experienced great tragedy or personal loss. It is unfortunate that such a moving story is set in a backdrop of so much wrong biblical teaching and imagery. Sadly, this is a book that many would want to give to a hurting friend but cannot do so in good conscience because of its doctrinal content. *The Shack* is rife with theological liberalism, Emerging Church ideology, and startling irreverence. As we would not welcome a Bible teacher into our churches who taught these doctrines, even so we should not bring these doctrines into our homes and lives in book form. Those Christians who are interested in reading *The Shack* should be strongly warned about the errors contained in it.

Endnotes

1. *The Shack* - endorsement page
2. Susan Olasky, “Commuter-Driven Bestseller”, *World*, June 28, 2008, 50
3. Jason Carlson, “My Journey Into and Out of the Emergent Church”, *Worldview Magazine*, Sept. 6, 2006