

Fact or Fusion: A Look at the Foundation of 'The Shack' by William P. Young

The first in a series:

It seems as though a reader either loves this book or hates it. It is the number one selling fiction book on both Amazon and Christian Book Distributors this week, and it has the potential to influence the body of Christ in a big way - that can be either good or bad. In any event it is the basis for much discussion, some of it pretty heated.

I confess that I only read 'The Shack' because it will be the topic of a Sunday school class for the next two weeks. I am not a fan of using fiction books, Christian or otherwise for teaching biblical principles, but I am less a fan of being ignorant of the content that is being covered in class. I also believe it is important for the Church to be aware of what motivates and engages our culture.

As you first open the book, there is some confusion that this is a true story – perhaps misidentified by the use of the word 'foreward' instead of 'prologue' at the beginning of the book. I'm not sure that this was intentionally misleading or just poor word choice by the author, however despite the confusion when the book was first released Young has since made it clear that it is not a true story. Even so, there are those who have been extraordinarily encouraged because they believed it to be true.

The opening chapters are moderately entertaining for a novel; they introduce us to the protagonist's family and the tragedy that has befallen them. They lay a minimal groundwork for his view of God and religion. Mack's real feelings are laid bare as the author moves us into a dream-like encounter with personifications of the Triune God.

At first blush, the author's choices of names and physical descriptions seem innocuous. We meet Elousia/Papa, a 'big, black woman,' first. Despite the fact that her physical characteristics defy common perceptions from 'religious conditioning,' she envelopes Mack with kindness and hospitality that begins to breakdown his own preconceived notions of God as male and white. He is intrigued and captivated while still trying to maintain a bit of distance and control.

Next Mack meets Jesus – a Middle Eastern man of Jewish heritage, who happens to be a carpenter, dressed in jeans and a plaid t-shirt – with whom he has a few 'my buddy and me' experiences while Jesus' extols the virtues of his Papa. Jesus reminds me of Pollyana-ish version of the naïve but lovable Al Borland, side-kick of the condescending but inept Tim 'the Tool Man' Taylor from the '90's sitcom, Home Improvement. Sarayu, an Asian gardener, appears somewhat apparition-like at first but reveals herself more and more to Mack throughout his encounter.

These characters are obviously meant to represent what traditional Christians would call the Trinity. However, upon closer examination neither the author's choices of personalities nor attributes align with Scriptural truth. Elousia, which means tenderness in Greek, is used in orthodoxy to describe the tenderness between Jesus and his mother. And in fact, is often used as a reference to the Virgin Mary. I

find this particularly problematic because Scripture is very clear that God is Father, not mother. Jesus had a mother, her name was Mary, she was not God.

What I find more disturbing is the use of Papa as a name for God. If Young's god figure were depicted as male I might assume that the use of Papa is akin to Jesus calling him Abba – daddy. Since this is not the case, it seems a little odd that the attributes chosen for this character are so similar to the goddess Papa. In Hawaiian mythology, Papa was the goddess who 'birthed' the Hawaiian Island chain into existence. In both Hawaiian and Tahitian tradition, she is the 'creatrix' of humankind. She is the ultimate mother figure guiding each and every spirit to life in their earthly bodies. One ardent promoter of her virtues claims, "From her we find comfort and the care of unconditional love in times of crises and grief. Her intervention instills calming reassurance and healing. All can call upon Goddess Papa for guidance. Using her ancient wisdom and LoveLight she will show you the way." I find the resemblances to Young's character a bit too close for this to be coincidental.

Jesus' attributes are much less thorny to deal with here. Despite the Al Borland-esque persona, which is naturally somewhat endearing, I found that if Jesus were actually present in the dream sequence he would have behaved somewhat similar to Young's vision. He helped Papa in her work by cleaning up the kitchen after she cooked their meals. He got Mack to go star-gazing, something he had avoided since the tragic summer of his life. He even helped Mack walk on water. He was appropriately humble, with a servant's heart. Yet something was lacking in his confidence and demeanor. He seemed too meek, too subservient, too unnecessary to the plot.

Sarayu is often a bit of a mystery to us. Her name is a Sanskrit word which means to flow. As a representation of the Holy Spirit this seems appropriate. At times she is reminiscent of Peter Pan's sidekick Tinkerbell, with flitting and hovering, shimmering behavior giving the impression of pixie dust. At others she is a ghost that disappears around the corner daring you to follow her. Sarayu is also an ancient river into which, in Hindu tradition, Lord Rama is said to have immersed himself in order to return to his real, Mahavishnu eternal state. I can't say that I know the author's intent in choosing this name for the spirit aspect of the trinity, but I am now wondering if Young's theology promotes syncretism.

I imagine that it would be easy to dismiss the incorporation of other religious viewpoints if this were merely a general fiction book. How much more appropriate it would have been to have released it as 'religious fiction.' But to consider it 'Christian fiction' stretches the imagination too far; and that is after only scratching the surface of the characters. Without having touched on the substance of Young's theology, there are already red flags that make me wonder why men of faith such as Eugene Peterson and Michael W. Smith have whole-heartedly endorsed the work as a water-shed piece for Christianity.

From a theological standpoint the book confused and muddled many issues. While it had some good social principles regarding the handling of relationships and the tragedies that befall us in life, it fell far short of God's standards in many other areas. Let me say that I neither hated nor loved the book. As a

work of general fiction, I think it did a fine job of addressing some of the psychological struggles we have as human beings. I was well satisfied as reader with the process of self-discovery and resolution that the author brought me through. But as a Christian, I did not feel it represented the true nature of the Trinity, nor the principles that are central to the essence of the Church.

Tina Picard

July 12, 2008

Second in a two-part series:

I read with interest on Young's blog and in the 'The Story Behind The Shack' (which is at the back of the of the book,) that he and his colleagues rewrote portions of the book to preclude objections to 'questionable theology or potential misunderstands [sic.]' This says to me that the writing team was aware that the content of the book was unorthodox. I must say as a reader I felt lead by the nose in (not a few) places. I found myself wishing that the writers had left some issues to my interpretation, which of course uses Scripture to inform it. Perhaps this was my main discomfort throughout the book. For me there was a constant tension of universal acceptance of the ideas of others, while being told that if I thought differently I was a product of narrow-minded, institutional religion.

As I touched on in my last article, Young's use of pagan symbolism in the telling of his story muddles and confuses the nature of the true Triune God. I'm not sure that the average Christian reader is going to be well-versed in the mythology from which Young draws his inspiration. I think a dangerous by-product of Young's symbolism is that there are now those who are using these names to pray to God. Unwittingly these people are no longer praying to God the Father, the God of the Bible, nor to the Holy Spirit, but to pagan gods and goddesses which are agents of Satan's desire to lure people away from worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth.

I'm sure there are many readers less cynical than I who would cut Young some slack here. After all he claims to have written the story only for his children with no intention of ever having it published. It seems odd to me that in 'The Story of The Shack', he recounts the story of not being able to afford to have it printed for their enjoyment, before he launches into the excitement of suddenly being a published author. This seems disingenuous to me. I now am more than suspicious that there is a greater agenda at work in the promotion of this book. Whether it is a form of universalism or, as I alluded to in Part 1, syncretism, it is still a theology that I believe contradicts what Scripture teaches.

I am convinced that one's theology emanates from their basic assumptions of who God is. Unless those assumptions align with the truth of Scripture, a person's theology will naturally be deficient in its substance and ultimately will lead that person farther away from God. The danger in using a book like 'The Shack' to teach biblical principles is that Young's assumptions about God give a skewed perspective on the Trinity. Without a biblical understanding of His physical and spiritual attributes and how God works in three persons, an individual cannot come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and appropriate the fullness of new life in Him.

There are many excellent resources by theologians who are more qualified than I to break down Young's theological errors. I highly recommend [Tim Challies' review](#). It says everything I had hoped to say about the biblical error found in 'The Shack' and includes an excellent sidebar on how spiritual discernment promotes spiritual maturity. This brings me back to why I read 'The Shack' in the first place.

This book is being taught from in Sunday school at my church. I read the book because I wanted to be able to discern for myself what the book was about as we discussed the material in class. After reading

the book I had hoped that the leaders were going to help us discern the truth from error and be able to offer an apologetic treatment of why we don't agree with the book. This was not the case. To say that I am disappointed is an understatement. I am deeply troubled that this book is being promoted by our leadership as a source for wonderful spiritual truth. Scripture tells us that it is sufficient for us, containing all that we need for life and godliness. It is the inerrant, inspired word of God. In it is contained all of the spiritual truth that God has revealed to man. There is nothing deficient in its communication to us. It is complete.

So I came up with a list of questions to our leadership that I hope will help highlight the dangers of using materials like 'The Shack' to teach such theologically important truths to the body of Christ. Some of it repeats aspects of what you have already read from my perspective. For that I am sorry, but I wanted to include it in its entirety so that nothing was unclear from its context. I hope that you are encouraged in your own process toward discovering the benefits of examining this book in light of Scripture.

Here is my address to the leadership:

I would like to preface my questions with a brief statement of my feelings about the book. As an objective reader, I thought that the story line was valuable in its context – the working through of difficult circumstances that we face in this life. As a parent who has suffered the loss of two children I understand the kind of pain that the character was facing.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, I found that I struggled with some of the imagery and theology that was presented in the book. This is based not just on my own understanding of the book, but on extensive research about the book, on what I believe about the authority of Scripture in my life, and what I understand according to the confessions of our faith.

Please know that I have spent a lot of time in prayer asking Christ and His Spirit to open my heart and mind. I have asked for His guidance as to how to address the concerns I have. I have been fairly certain that He was calling me to convey these concerns to leadership. I felt confirmed in this calling as I listened to Pastor Jeremy's sermon this week about counting the cost of following Christ and being open to what He was calling us specifically to do.

These are the questions that I have been grappling with after reading the book, researching some of the controversy surrounding it, and attending the Sunday school class at CHPC:

As we used the book 'The Shack' in Sunday school, we were told that we should view it like eating chicken – eat the meat but toss the bones. This implies that there is something in the book that is not good for us. Mature believers should be able to discern what the "bones" are, and yet what if not all who attended the class are mature? Who helps them discover what the bones are if the leadership will not address them?

My assumption about the preceding analogy is that the meat equals truth and bones equal error. Is this a fair assessment of the analogy? If so, is it fair to expect that the leaders of such a class will be able and willing to help separate truth from error as laid out in Scripture and the confessions of our faith? Is this not a hallmark of spiritual maturity – the ability to discern truth and error?

How is it that, if we all have the Holy Spirit to guide us (as was stated in class) in discerning the nature of the book, some in class would say the book is full of truth and some would say it is full of error? What is the final authority on what is truth?

Romans 15:4-6 says: 'For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Not only is it not possible to have "disagreement without divorce," contrary to what the class leaders would have us believe, but God Himself does not want us to disagree at all. He wants us to come to a common understanding based in Scripture and rooted in Christ.

If the goal of CHPC is to "present every man mature in Christ," why is it that we cannot have theological discussions during a Sunday school class? Why would we go to the expense of bringing a dynamic apologetic teacher like Michael Ramsden to speak at our church, only to discourage the practice of such things in our daily living?

If 'The Shack' is not a theological book, why are we being taught the nature of the Holy Trinity using material from the book and not from the Scriptures? In fact, how is it that in two hours of Sunday school there were only three references made to Scripture, when we were led to believe that the leaders would be teaching the 'wonderful, spiritual truth' of the book?

I thought that Pastor Jim's sermon on the hierarchy of church authority was excellent and right in-line with what Scripture teaches on this subject. I did find it rather ironic that one of the central themes of 'The Shack' was the Trinity's rejection of all forms of hierarchy, declaring them to be destructive to relationships with others. Is this one of the bones that we are being encouraged to throw out? Is it profitable to the body for leadership to recommend books that contradict the Scriptural truth we are being taught from the pulpit?

How do you think that what we read in the book aligns with what we as Presbyterians ascribe to in the Book of Confession, esp. in the Westminster Larger Catechism – questions 100 – 114; the Second Helvetic Confession – Section IV, Of Idols or Images of God, Christ and the Saints; and the Westminster Confession – Chapter XXII, Chapter XX – Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience?

*I thought that the vehicle which the author used to tell the story was lacking in some of the essentials of the faith – while the story abounded in the love and grace that God lavishes on us (Eph. 2) – I believe that the author made a grave error as to the source of that grace by declaring that Jesus is the "best" way to a relationship with God, instead of stating as Jesus did to his disciples "I am **the** way, **the** truth, and **the** life." (John 14:6; emphasis mine) What is the leadership's perception of this disparity?*

It has been especially troubling to me that Young's choice of names for his god-figures included the name of a Polynesian Earth Goddess named Papa who is considered to be the creatrix of all humankind. He also chose Sarayu for the spirit-figure, which the book correctly states comes from the Sanskrit for "to flow" or "wind," but it is also the name of the river into which the Lord Rama, of Hindu tradition, throws himself to achieve his eternal state. I find it hard to believe that a man who is as intelligent as Paul Young, would not know the significance of these names.

We know from Scripture as well as Jewish tradition that choosing names is serious business. In fact so serious that

God has commanded us not to take His name in vain. He does not wish His name to be defamed. Much of what is done in the kingdom is to glorify His name. To assign names that do not belong to God but to pagan gods and their traditions is to desecrate His name. To add insult to injury, there are many Shack-lovers who are now praying using these names of false gods. Many believe they are praying to the God the Creator, when in fact He does not answer to these names. They are actually praying to pagan gods and goddesses, whose only source of power must necessarily come from a spiritual realm that is not part of the Trinity, but of Satan's domain and authority.

This has been one of the most problematic aspects of 'The Shack' for me. God has carefully communicated His names to us throughout Scripture. Each of these names describes the true character and nature of God. As we were taught from the pulpit recently, Jesus taught His disciples that God's name is and is to be hallowed, or regarded and venerated as holy. As such we must not take license with His name and ascribe to Him anything but His true name and personality. I submit that in teaching the meaning and character of the true names of God, we can have a much more personal relationship with each of the persons of the Trinity than is possible through reading a fictional account based on an author's fallible understanding. Would it be possible to follow up our class on 'The Shack' with a more biblically-based examination of the Names of God and the characteristics of the Trinity?

I hope that I have posed these questions in a way that causes our leadership to at least consider the inconsistencies of our own church's handling of 'The Shack' phenomenon. For a church whose mission is to help its members strive for spiritual maturity it is essential to encourage the practice of spiritual discernment.

But I hope that you, dear friends, will also consider how the body of Christ at large is to respond. As it says in Hebrews 10:23-25, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 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." When you hear those around you embracing only the 'good' in this book without acknowledging the error, please help them discover the truth!

Tina Picard

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