

Exploring *The Shack*

A response to William Paul Young's book



by Dr Paul B Coulter

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About Dr. Paul B Coulter

Paul was born and raised in Northern Ireland, where he lives with his Malaysian Chinese wife and their two young children. His background is in medicine, but he also holds degrees in theology and genetics. He currently works full time for a church in the northern outskirts of Belfast. He is passionate about the word of God, the local church and relating the Bible's message to contemporary culture. Nothing excites him more than seeing Christians growing in their faith and living lives of total surrender to Christ in the freedom of God's grace and truth.



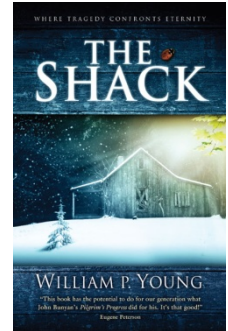
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AN ESTATE AGENT'S GUIDE

What's all the fuss about?

When a book with Christian themes makes it to the top of the New York Times paperback fiction best-seller list, and especially when it sits there for over 36 weeks (since 8/6/08 and still current) it is surely worth asking what makes it such a phenomenon. Even in the relatively secular UK, William P. Young's *The Shack* has, at the time of writing, reached number 24 in rank of sales of all books through *Waterstone's* and number 18 at *Amazon.co.uk*. First published in May 2007, over 6 million copies of *The Shack* are now in print. It is the first publication by author William Paul Young and the first book to be published by *Windblown Media*, which is now reported to have a co-publishing deal with *FaithWords* (publishers for Joyce Meyer and other Christian authors) for future titles and to be in the pre-production phase for a feature-length film of *The Shack*.



This 248-page book tells the story of Mack (Mackenzie Allen Phillips), a father of six whose past is overshadowed by the pain of a difficult relationship with his father. The story is told as if by Mack's friend, Willie. During a camping trip Mack's daughter, Missy, is abducted, and her blood-stained dress is later found at an abandoned shack in the mountains, casting Mack into a deep darkness that he calls *The Great Sadness*. Some time later he receives a letter, apparently from God, inviting him to come to the shack. Mack makes the journey, and upon arrival he meets the three persons of the trinity. God appears as Papa, a plump African American lady who loves to cook; Jesus as a Middle-Eastern carpenter; and the Holy Spirit as Sarayu, a slight Asian lady who likes to garden. Mack arrives at the shack on page 80, and the following 156 pages detail a series of conversations and shared experiences between Mack and Papa, Jesus and Sarayu. During this encounter, a wide range of issues are discussed in varying degrees of detail. The conversations lead Mack through a healing process as he deals with the hurt both of Missy's loss and his own childhood. The final twelve pages of the book complete the story in an unexpected way, and Mack discovers that his time at the shack, which seemed like a weekend, cannot have been more than a few hours, leaving the reader wondering whether it was a dream, a vision or something else. The story flows well and, although the conversations in the shack are often deep and thought-provoking, the book is not a difficult read. Young's writing is technically far from flawless, and the story feels a little superficial at times until the point when Mack reaches the shack, but the end result is still an enjoyable, gripping and, at times, deeply moving tale.

Reactions to *The Shack* among Christians have added to its intrigue. Many reviewers rave about the impact it has had on their lives and the freshness it has brought to their appreciation of God. American country music singer Wynonna Judd typified this when she said, "this story has blown the door wide open to my soul" (quoted on *Amazon.co.uk*). Respected scholar and translator of *the Message*, Eugene Peterson, said the book "has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!", while English evangelist J. John described it as the most important book to read in the next year. On the other extreme, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Seattle's Mars Hill Church, has advised people not to read it, while author Chuck Colson's reaction is succinctly put in the title of his review, *Stay out of the Shack*. How could the same book produce such disparate responses from leading Christian figures? Is this book a must-read message to refresh your heart or a source of dangerous heresy that should be avoided?

Much has been written about *The Shack*, but most reviews either focus exclusively on the book's alleged faults or glaze over them in praise of the book's personal impact on the reviewer. In this response I will attempt to examine some of the major themes of *The Shack* and to highlight what I believe to be its strengths and weaknesses. I do this from the perspective of an evangelical Christian who accepts the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as the inspired word of God and the final authority for matters of faith.

THE BUILDERS' RÉSUMÉS

Who gave us The Shack?

Many of the details in this section relating to W.P. Young are taken from his interviews with Kim Gravel, Terry Meeuwsen and Sheridan Voysey.

Does it matter who wrote it?

Although in a postmodern age it is unfashionable to concern oneself with the author's story, in the case of a book like *The Shack*, which is, as we shall see, born out of the personal experience of its authors, it is important to consider who wrote it and what their intention was in doing so. No creative work is value-free (for example this response is based firmly on the conviction that Scripture is the inspired word of God and that other books must be tested against it), and although it is true that the impact of the work depends to a large degree on the subjective response of the observer and the lens through which they observe it, it also depends heavily on the intended message of its creator. Understanding who wrote *The Shack*, why they wrote it and what they hoped to achieve through it will help us in our attempt to critique its message and, where that message is unclear, may also enable us to gain a clearer understanding of what was intended.

A surprise success

William Paul Young has spoken of how *The Shack* started life as a story written for his six grown-up children in response to a request by his wife, Kim, who wanted him to explain his way of thinking (which Young describes as "outside the box") about God to them. The original version of the book was prepared in 2005 as a Christmas present for his children and a few select friends (15 copies were printed). The positive response of friends led to pressure for publication, and after failing to convince no less than 26 publishers to take the book on (faith-based publishers were apparently afraid that it would be too controversial, while non-faith-based publishers felt it was too openly religious), two of Young's friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, proceeded to publish it through their newly formed company, *Windblown Media*. In preparing the book for publication both of these men were involved in rewriting parts of the book. Although *The Shack's* front cover and copyright declaration mention only Young as its author, the contribution of the other two men is clearly stated in the internal cover page of the book, which describes it as "A novel by Wm Paul Young in collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings". Although Jacobsen and Cummings were involved in writing the book, since it is unclear to what degree they influenced its final form and Young is identified as the holder of copyright, for ease of reading this review will normally refer in the singular to the *author* rather than the plural *authors*. Bobby Downes, CEO of *christiancinema.com*, also helped to bring the book to publication, but was not involved in the writing as such.

William Paul Young's story

Like the book's central character, Mack, Young's story was one of personal pain from childhood. The son of missionary parents, Young spent his early years in the western part of New Guinea, which was then under Dutch rule but is now part of Indonesia. He speaks of having been distant from, perhaps even neglected by, his parents, who were highly focused on what they perceived to be God's call for them and unaware of their own "baggage". He viewed the cannibalistic, stone-age tribe among which his parents worked as his true family, and was highly influenced by their culture. He experienced sexual abuse within this tribe from the age of four, and endured further abuse at the hands of older boys when he was later sent to a Christian boarding school. Young proceeded to study theology and to work in a range of different



William Paul Young

jobs. He married Kim Warren, and the couple now have six children and two grandchildren. Young speaks of how he hid his past, with its shame, in a “shack” inside himself. He continued to build his personal shack until in 1994, when he was aged 38, it was “blown apart” by his wife’s discovery of a three-month affair he had been conducting with one of her best friends. At this point, Young felt he had two options: to commit suicide or to begin to work through his issues with Kim. He chose the latter option and embarked on what would be an eleven year process of working through his shame and rebuilding his relationship with his wife. Young describes how this painful process lead him to transition from a life of false religious perfectionism to one of freedom in a relationship with God based on His unconditional love and acceptance. Instead of trying to earn God’s favour and the favour of others through his own efforts, he can now be open about his weakness and can find his security in God. He is convinced that although God’s actions may be unpredictable, His character is always constant and certain, and is therefore the only basis for certainty in our lives.

The Shack is intended to introduce others to the confidence in God that Young claims to enjoy. In interviews, Young comes across as a genuine person, who speaks with a settled passion about the importance of the book’s message. When asked by Terry Meeuwsen what he hoped to do for people through the book he said:

for me it’s like saying, if I can save you 40 years worth of pain in the process, I would love to do that, and I would love you to be in love with this God that I’m in love with.

When asked in the same interview “What do you want people to walk away from this with, after they read *The Shack*”, Young replied:

I want them to ... have a sense that God is so much bigger than they had thought. That He is totally outside the box ... that even though His behaviour is uncertain in a world full of uncertainty, His character is not. His character is absolutely certain. That’s why the core question is, is he God? Is He involved? And if I can say yes to those, I’ve got some place to plant my feet that I didn’t have otherwise.

Jacobsen and Cummings

Young’s collaborators in the book, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, are co-hosts of internet site *thegodjourney.com*, which claims it is “designed to facilitate an ever-expanding conversation with folks who are thinking outside the box of organized religion”. They are both former pastors who have become personally disillusioned with what they describe as institutionalised churches. Neither is currently committed to a local church, a feature they share with William Paul Young.



Brad Cummings

On the website of his personal ministry, *Lifestream.org*, Jacobsen tells the story of his own difficult experiences of local churches. Although he doesn’t necessarily encourage others to leave their local church he does argue in an article entitled *Why I Don’t Go to Church Anymore!* (available on his website) that the New Testament does not necessarily expect the commitment of individual believers to one particular local church, and that authentic fellowship is most likely when “a local group of people chooses to walk together for a bit of the journey by cultivating close friendships and learning how to listen to God together.” Jacobsen seeks to encourage others to discover the freedom he has discovered to live life in Jesus, and writes that “Our worst days outside the systems of religious obligation are still far better than our best days inside it.”



Wayne Jacobsen

An awareness campaign

One other point that should be made is that those responsible for the book attribute its rapid success to a work of God. In an interview with Sheridan Voysey, Young highlights the fact that only 300\$ was spent on publicity, and that he is not even sure that the website this was spent on played any significant part in increasing awareness about the book. The primary means of publicity for the book was through word of mouth, and reviews (for example on *Amazon.com*) indicate that many people have bought multiple copies for distribution to their family and friends. However, upon further inspection, this “word of mouth” spread is perhaps less amazing than it might initially appear. In the internet age it is relatively easy for word to spread, and once the book had achieved a certain critical mass of supporters it caught the attention of both Christian and secular media, causing substantial publicity that did not have to be funded by the publishers. The “word of mouth” spread of the book has, in fact, not been completely spontaneous. The publishers have set up *The Missy Project*, advertised through the book’s official website (*TheShackBook.com*), which is dedicated to increasing awareness and influence of the book. The webpage about the project says that:



Word of mouth is still the most effective tool for a book like this to gain traction in the wider culture. If you are as taken with the message of this book as we are, you may already have some unique ideas as to how you can best let others know about it. Here are some ideas to help you about ways to let others know about this remarkable book.

It then proceeds to give practical suggestions for how to spread the word including blogging about it, giving copies to others, writing a review (or asking a prominent person to do so) and linking to the website from their own website. This is an active campaign to saturate the internet and other forms of media with news about *The Shack*. I am not suggesting that this is at all inappropriate, as those responsible for the book believe strongly that its message needs to be heard by as many people as possible, but am simply pointing out that we cannot conclude that the rapid spread can only be a miraculous work of God. A message may spread widely and be highly popular, even among professing Christians, but still be false. Scripture warns that (II Timothy 4:3):

the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

When a book becomes popular and has the potential that *The Shack* has to influence people it is vital that we exercise spiritual discernment to determine whether or not its message is consistent with “sound doctrine”, with what Jude calls “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

Conclusion – the purpose of the book

This book, then, is intended to introduce the reader to a new way of thinking about themselves and a new kind of relationship with God. It is highly reactionary against what the authors perceive as a false version of Christianity that is based on rules, obligation and guilt, and which allows people to hide their true brokenness, weakness and shame beneath what Young, in his interview with Kim Gravel, calls “a little, thin veneer of perfectionist performance”. The decision to package this message in an emotive story about one man’s experience of suffering and loss was intended to increase the power of the message and to connect in a profound way with the reader, giving them access to Young’s way of thinking (it was initially intended to do this for Young’s own children, but subsequently for a broader readership). The responses of many readers who speak about its impact on their lives bears testimony to the fact that the book has achieved its intended purpose for many.

AN ARCHITECT'S ANALYSIS

What genre of literature does it represent?

The Shack is an unusual style of book, and in many ways it defies a simple definitive classification. It is, however, important to establish what kind of book this is, as different genre of literature should be read according to different approaches. Our conclusion to this question will determine whether or not it is even fair to analyse its message. Some reviewers argue that since the book is written as a fictional novel it should not be examined theologically. For example, Cindy Crosby, writing in the magazine *Christianity Today*, suggests that:

Rather than slicing and dicing the novel, looking for proof of theological missteps, a better approach might be to look at significant passages as springboards for deeper discussion. The Shack is a novel, after all, not a systematic theology.

Is she right? Are we in danger of committing an injustice by looking for the theology of *The Shack*? There are two problems with Crosby's warning. Firstly the phrase "slicing and dicing" suggests that any examination of the book's theology will involve brutally butchering it. Surely it is possible rather to perform a respectful and careful dissection that can inform us about the book's message. Secondly, Crosby assumes that any detailed examination of the book must be biased about it; that those who seek to analyse it will necessarily be "looking for theological missteps". Is it not possible that we can analyse the book fairly, to identify what it says about theological concepts and to celebrate everything that is good whilst highlighting whatever is misleading or simply wrong? Whilst a book like *The Shack* may well be a useful starting point for discussion, this discussion will be much more informed and valuable if it proceeds on the basis of looking beneath the surface to the book's underlying message.

So, then, should we follow Crosby's advice and ditch our dissection kits in favour of our gym kits, preparing for the springboard into "deeper discussion"? Before we lose ourselves in extended metaphors, let us consider the various terms that have been used to describe the genre of this book:

Fiction ➞ noun

Literature in the form of prose, especially novels, that describes imaginary events and people

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

The information panel on the back cover of *The Shack* describes it as fiction, and it is listed in the fiction charts. Critical reviews of the book have been attacked by some on the basis that it is only fiction and it should not, therefore, be analysed it as if it is true. However, the central section of the book, Mack's encounter with God, is not truly fiction, as it contains real characters, namely the persons of the trinity. As we have seen, the author clearly intended the reader to discover what he perceives to be the truth about God and relationship with Him through the book. As such, although the message of the book is packaged in a fictional story, it does claim to speak about ultimate truths. An extended quote from William Paul Young's website, *windrumors.com* serves to illustrate this:

Is the story 'real'? The story is fiction. I made it up. Now, having said that, I will add that the emotional pain with all its intensity and the process that tears into Mack's heart and soul are very real. I have my 'shack', the place I had to go through to find healing. I have my Great Sadness...that is all real. And the conversations are very real and true. While Mack experiences some particulars that I have not (the death of my niece the day after her fifth birthday was a horrible accident, but not a murder), there are depths of pain and shame and hopelessness that I have experienced, that Mack did not. And I know people who have suffered exactly what Mack suffers in the story. So is the story true? The pain, the loss, the grief, the process, the conversations, the questions, the anger, the longing, the secrets, the lies, the forgiveness...all real, all true. The story in particular... fiction... but.... Then there is God who emerges so very real and true, unexpected and yet not unexpected, but surprising and...

So... is all this real? Is all this true? I suppose each of us has to decide for ourselves, don't we?

Novel ¹ ➞ noun

A fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically presenting character and action with some degree of realism

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

The inside cover page of the book describes it as "A novel". This designation is potentially misleading. Although the parts of the book before and after Mack's time in the shack could accurately be described as a novel, the experiences and conversations in the shack are quite a different style of literature. The suggestion in the book that this encounter may have been a dream or a special distortion of time by Sarayu (p.243) further emphasises that there are two distinct parts to this book with distinct literary styles.

Metaphor ➞ noun

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

The book's author, William Paul Young, said in an interview with Kim Gravel that:

The Shack is a metaphor. It's the house of the soul that you build on the inside. And people help you build it by what they inflict on you, what they do to you... You have rooms where you store your secrets, rooms where you store your lies and where you hide your addictions, and you put up a façade on the outside... a little, thin veneer of perfectionist performance, and underneath it is a whole ocean of shame

Metaphor is similar to allegory, but a metaphor can only really include one concept or word rather than a whole story. In this statement Young does say that the whole book is a metaphor, but that the concept of the shack is a metaphor for something that he believes exists in the heart of all people, an internal hiding place for hurtful and shameful aspects of our lives. The book is intended to teach us how we can visit our own "shack" and find healing from God.

Allegory ➞ noun

A story, poem, or picture which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

Some reviewers have described the book, or at least the encounter in the shack, as allegory. Eugene Peterson's comparison to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is probably the most famous allegory of all, seems to support this idea. Although the meaning of Mack's discussions with Papa, Jesus and Sarayu is hardly "hidden", especially given the fact that the true identity of Papa, Jesus and Sarayu is openly explained, there are other elements that are typical of allegory. These include the setting of the story in a place with a metaphorical meaning and the experiences that Mack is introduced to, which have a significance that lies beneath the literal meaning of what is described (e.g. the garden in Chapter 9, the meaning of which is explained on p.138).

Theology ➤ noun

The study of the nature of God and religious belief

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

If theology is indeed concerned with the nature of God, then this is truly a theological book, as it conveys the author's understanding of God. It is, therefore, appropriate to respond to the book's message in theological terms, and in fact it is vital that the book should stimulate theological enquiry and discussion. Otherwise, the reader will simply absorb the book's message, allowing it shape their understanding of God without questioning its accuracy or validity.

Theology may be simply defined as our words about God. The traditional Christian view distinguishes theology from Scripture, which contains God's words about Himself. *The Shack* blurs this distinction as the core of the book, rather than being a discussion between human characters about God, is a discussion between the central character and God. In other words, it places words about God on the lips of God. This creates the potential for great misunderstanding to arise, especially in a genre that does not readily permit references to Scripture. The author could have helped to encourage interaction with Scripture by adding footnotes indicating Bible references or by including words from Scripture in the speech attributed to God. The reader must remain aware that the words attributed to God in the book are not truly God's words, but the author's perception of how God might speak.

Crosby was correct in her identification of one of the great potential strengths of the book, that it can serve as a springboard into serious theological debate, but she neglects one of its great dangers, which is that, particularly given the emotive story surrounding the central theological discussion, the book's message could slip in "under the radar" and shape the reader's perception of God profoundly in ways that he or she barely realises. For those who are committed to Scripture as the inspired word of God by which all other claims to truth about Him must be tested, it is vital that we return to Scripture for answers where a book like *The Shack* raises questions. Otherwise our conception of God will be highly subjective and ultimately based on experience rather than God's revelation of Himself. Its basis will be our own subjective reaction to reading the book, which itself is the product of Young's subjective experience of God.

Autobiographical ➤ adjective

Dealing with the writer's own life

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

A final complicating factor when trying to categorise *The Shack* is the degree to which the story reflects the personal experiences of the author and the characters represent his thoughts and beliefs. As William Paul Young writes on his personal website, windrumors.com:

The Shack will tell you much more about me than a few facts ever could. In some ways my life is partly revealed in both characters—Willie (who is actually mostly based on Kim's father Willard who lived with us for 18 years), and Mack. I am also an amalgam of Mack and Missy. But an author is always more.

Again, on the same website, Young writes that:

My children would recognize that Mack is mostly me, that Nan is a lot like Kim, my wife, that Missy and Kate and the other characters often resemble our family members and friends.

In an interview with Sheridan Voysey, Young stated that the book tells his own story, but "wrapped up in fiction," and that, "It's true, but it's just not real in the exact same sense that it's in the book". This idea that the story is "true but not real" reinforces our earlier claim that this is not strictly a work of fiction.

Conclusion ➔ noun

The summing-up of an argument or text

The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998

The Shack, then, is a presentation of the theological convictions predominantly of one man but with contributions from two others. It is potentially misleading to call it either fiction or a novel. We may, instead, classify it as **a semi-fictional, semi-allegorical tale with theological themes and autobiographical elements.**

The Shack's approach to conveying theological concepts is creative and innovative, and it clearly appeals to the postmodern mindset in which people are much more likely to find meaning in stories that appeal to the emotions than in objective statements of principles. Packaging theology in a semi-fictional semi-allegorical tale increases the likelihood that it will impact the reader at a profound level and lead to a change in their thinking and feelings. This kind of impact is welcomed by the authors of *The Shack*. As Young said in an interview with Sheridan Voysey:

A lot of people's responses to it will tell you more about what's going on in their heart than it will tell you about the book itself, because they will read it based on their perceptions of theology, or doctrine or reality, their history or whatever. The beautiful thing is that the book is doing something that nobody anticipated, most of all me, and that it is penetrating to the heart of people across every age group, religious perspective, and it is introducing a conversation about ... who is God.

If the book succeeds in starting conversations about who God is then it will indeed be most welcome, so long as those engaged in the conversations will turn to God's self-revelation in the Bible for greater insights and a firm foundation in their knowledge of Him. This document is intended to be a contribution to that kind of conversation. The danger is that Christians will not always engage in such conversations, and may not exercise the spiritual discernment that is so essential if they are to recognise error and cling to what is true. It is, however, important for the reader to exercise discernment in their response to the story. If this document can help them in that process, and can help to furnish them with the skills to read and to listen with discernment, then it will have fulfilled its intention.

SURVEYING THE SHACK

What does it say about major theological themes?

To engage fully with every aspect of theology that *The Shack* touches on would require a substantial volume, and is therefore beyond the scope of this document. *The Shack* is not a theological textbook or systematic theology, and as such it neither seeks to provide exhaustive explanations of theological concepts nor to engage with the range of theological perspectives held in the contemporary church or throughout church history. Furthermore, the nature of the discussions between Mack and the persons of the trinity is at times enigmatic, and it is clear that the book's God does not always intend to give complete answers to Mack's questions. The exchanges frequently raise more questions than they answer, and the reader's impression of God is shaped as much by the manner in which God interacts with Mack (for example his informality, patience and humour) as by what is actually said. Having said all of this, there are a number of key themes that surface in the dialogue between Mack and God, and we will attempt to say something about what the book says about each of them and how this compares with what the Scriptures say.

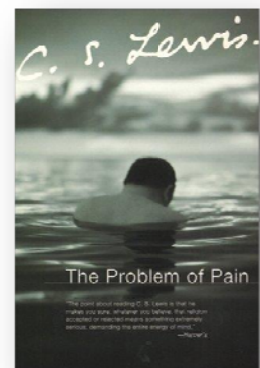
It should also be said at the outset of this discussion that we cannot always assume that the views of the God presented in the book reflect Young's own views. Hence when quoting the book we will refer to the ideas of Papa, Sarayu or "Young's Jesus" (to distinguish from quotations of Jesus from Scripture). Any references to Young's own views will be based on interviews with the author.

The Shack on ... Suffering

God's response to human suffering is perhaps the major theme of the book. The summary on the back cover of the book says that "THE SHACK wrestles with the timeless question 'Where is God in a world filled with unspeakable pain?'". Unsurprisingly, given Mack's story, the theme of suffering is central to his encounter with God, and the foremost question on his mind is "If you couldn't take care of Missy, how can I trust you to take care of me?" (p.92). This is no abstract discussion of the problem of suffering, but the struggle of one man to find something concrete on which to base his life and to process his own loss, pain and anger. The result is that, although the book is not the most complete treatment of, or even the best introduction to, the theology of suffering (C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* is a much better introduction to the issue), it is one of the most thought-provoking and moving ones available. The author does not attempt to place neat and tidy answers on the lips of God, and the force with which he emphasises God's desire to heal Mack's pain and to draw him back into a trusting relationship is compelling. As Papa says (p.92):

That's why you're here Mack ... I want to heal the wound that has grown inside of you, and between us ... Honey, there's no easy answer that will take your pain away. Believe me, if I had one, I'd use it now. I have no magic wand to wave over you and make it all better. Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship.

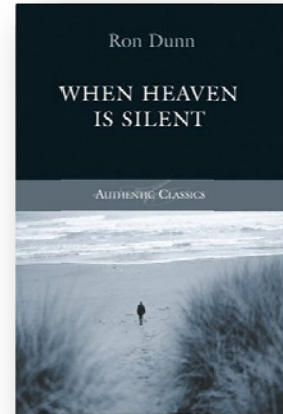
So, then, God's remedy for our pain, according to *The Shack*, is not answers to our questions but a relationship of trust with Him. This response certainly seems to be consistent with the biblical message about suffering, but the question remains what kind of God we are being called to trust in. In general, Young succeeds in presenting God's compassion for those he loves whilst at the same time leaving room for the mystery of unanswered questions. God's power and holiness are, however, less clear, a problem that will be discussed in the section entitled *The Shack on ... God's character*.



Readers may be considering passing this book to people who are currently suffering. Susannah Clark, Public Theology Researcher for Evangelical Alliance UK suggests in her online review of *The Shack* that:

this book would be especially relevant to anyone experiencing suffering in his or her own life. Indeed, I think The Shack has the potential to be a source of healing and encouragement. It will not be what you expect, it may be uncomfortable and it is certainly not conventional, but I would thoroughly recommend that it is well worth reading.

Given the concerns expressed in this response about other aspects of the book's theology, this writer must fall short of whole-heartedly recommending *The Shack* to people who have experienced suffering. In the immediate, early stages of grief or pain the words of Scripture will be of greatest help, and there are other books that have the potential to lead the reader to a more balanced view of God's character (Ronald Dunn's *When Heaven is Silent* or even C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* may be more appropriate).



The Shack on ... the Trinity

The nature of the trinity is another major theme of *The Shack*, and Young's caricatures of the persons of the trinity are probably the most immediately and strikingly unusual aspect of in the book. The representation of Jesus as a large nosed Middle-Eastern carpenter is likely to be uncontroversial. This representation is clearly based on the biblical record of Jesus, although it may also be intended to be corrective to the familiar but unhelpful depictions of Jesus as a fair skinned, fair-haired northern European man.

The Holy Spirit appears as a semi-transparent Asian woman named Sarayu. Young explains in his interview with Kim Gravel that this name, which is a Hindi word for a refreshing wind, was suggested to him by an Indian friend. He had been looking for a word that carried a sense of the Spirit as a wind, which is a biblical image of the Spirit's activity (John 3:8; Acts 2:2). In fact, the Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, also means wind. The derivation of the name and the ethereal nature of Sarayu make this depiction of the Spirit relatively easy to accept, especially since most Christians are unlikely to conceive of the Spirit as either male or female. In fact, the clear depiction of the Spirit as a person is probably a healthy redress to the tendency some believers have to think of Him as merely an impersonal force to be referred to as "it".

It is the idea of the Father appearing as a black woman called Papa that is most likely to cause surprise, and perhaps concern, for the reader. The name Papa is taken from Mack's wife's affectionate name for God, and its significance is clear enough. According to Young (in Kim Gravel's interview), Papa's character is based largely on a friend of his, but I agree with other reviewers who have commented on her similarity to the Oracle from the Matrix movies (both are black women who have great knowledge and great tenderness, who love to bake and who speak to an enquirer in somewhat enigmatic terms).

Concerns about the portrayal of the trinity in *The Shack* are highlighted in a video clip of Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, which was part of a series of teaching on doctrine. Driscoll advises anyone who hasn't already read *The Shack* not to do so, and warns those who have that they should not think that they understand the trinity based on the book. In fact, he says, the book's teaching on the trinity is "actually heretical". Driscoll lists the following bases for this accusation:

- That the portrayal of the Father in human form breaks the second commandment, which prohibits the making of "graven images" of God for use in worship. Driscoll also cites John 4:24, where Jesus says that



Mark Driscoll

God (the Father) is Spirit. He does not have the same concern about Young's portrayal of the Son and the Holy Spirit in human form because the Son became human and the Spirit appeared physically in Scripture (albeit in the form of a dove).

- That the portrayal of the Father as a woman encourages "goddess worship".
- That the book teaches the heresy of Modalism because it says that the Father suffered with Jesus on the cross.
- That the book says there is no hierarchy in the trinity, and suggests that hierarchy only exists because of sin, whereas Scripture describes deference within the trinity and hierarchy within the angelical beings, neither of which are the result of sin.

Since these points seem to summarise the main concerns that have been expressed regarding *The Shack's* portrayal of the trinity, we will use them as a framework for the discussion that follows.

On the portrayal of the Father in human form

Driscoll argues that this breaks the second commandment, which says (Exodus 20:4-5):

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

The prohibition here is against the use of images of God or any created thing in worship, but not the use of verbal descriptions of God. Scripture uses many verbal images to describe God, particularly in the Old Testament, and if we accept that the part of *The Shack* where Mack meets with the trinity is allegorical, then it is unfair to suggest that Young intended to create an image of God for use in worship. Hence, Driscoll's accusation based on the second commandment does not seem to be fair. This kind of excessive reaction to the book is careless and only likely to cause its fans to dismiss Driscoll's comments altogether. This would be unfortunate, as Driscoll's other reason for concerns about the idea of representing the Father in physical form, based on verses like John 4:24, bears more weight. In the book Papa herself talks on about the limitations of any description of the Father in male *or* female form in expressing who the Father is. She suggests that her choice to appear as a woman was at least in part to break Mack's "religious stereotypes" and that the alternative of appearing as "a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf" would be no more accurate or helpful for Mack (p.93). This rather misses the point, though, as nowhere in Scripture does the Father appear to anyone in *any* physical form. In fact, Scripture says that no one has ever seen God (John 1:18; I John 4:12) and that God is invisible (Colossians 1:15; I Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). The Father chose not to reveal Himself to human beings in human form, whereas the Son became fully human whilst remaining fully divine.

In conclusion, then, it was perhaps at best unwise of Young to present the Father in human form. Young's desire, voiced by Papa in the book and in person in interviews with Sheridan Voysey and Kim Gravel, to break down stereotypical views of God seems rather ironic since his decision to portray the Father in human form and to place so many words on the lips of each person of the trinity is only likely to create a more fixed view of God in the mind of the reader. Young is quite right that the stereotype of God as a Gandalf, Santa Claus or Zeus-like figure is decidedly unhelpful, but the solution to this is hardly to replace it with an alternative image. Rather, we need to have our understanding of God enhanced by immersing ourselves in Scripture and silencing ourselves before Him.

On the portrayal of the Father as a woman

The reasons for Young's choice to present God in female rather than male form in the book appear to be twofold:

- a) To break down stereotypical preconceptions about God in Mack's (and potentially the reader's) mind.
- b) Because Mack (and Young himself) had experienced such a difficult relationship with his father, and so could not accept God as a father figure. Indeed, before the end of the book Papa appears as a wiry, older man with ponytail and goatee (p.218), although there is no suggestion that this is a more true reflection of who He is than the earlier female figure.

Frankly, Driscoll's suggestion that *The Shack* encourages "goddess worship" finds no basis in the book or in any of the interviews with Young referenced in this document. It smacks of exaggeration and mockery

intended to dismiss the book altogether rather than engaging in serious discussion. Young does not intend to present a goddess to be worshipped as an alternative to the one true God of Scripture. Rather his intention was to help to alter the reader's conception of who the true God is by presenting God in a different light, or, as he would argue, emphasising aspects of God's nature that have not traditionally been emphasised. Young agrees with mainstream Christian belief when he argues through Papa in the book that God is, "neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature" (p.93). He is also correct in pointing out in his interview with Sheridan Voysey that the Scriptures use female imagery to describe aspects of God's character. For example Deuteronomy 32:18 and Isaiah 42:14 liken God to a mother giving birth to Israel; Psalm 131:2, Isaiah 49:15 and 66:13 compare Him to a mother caring for her child.

Having accepted that it is not heretical to use female imagery to speak about aspects of God's character and behaviour, it is still important to note that the Bible normally speaks of God in male terms. The masculine pronoun, "he", is always used, never the female "she", and by far the predominant image of God's relationship to His people is as Father. This is particularly evident in Jesus' references to His own Father and in how He taught His followers to pray to "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). It is predominantly in masculine terms that God had chosen to reveal Himself to us. It is not that God is male in the sense that a human being can be male, having neither anatomy nor chromosomes to fix Him as either sex, but that the role God plays is best understood in male terms. The Bible clearly expects that male and female are different, and that they have complementary but distinct roles. Fatherhood derives from God, as does motherhood, but the Father's relationship to Jesus and to us is to serve as the model for perfect fatherhood, and the concept of God as Father is connected with the biblical concept of headship (the concept of headship will be discussed in the section entitled *The Shack on ... Hierarchy and Authority*). In his interview with Sheridan Voysey, Young expresses his concern that, "Many people have projected their own fathers onto the face of God", and that this has led to wrong perceptions of His character. I do not doubt that this is true for some people, but Young could turn this around to more positive terms by suggesting that human fathers can learn what good fathering is by relating to God as Father and that people who have never known a loving human father can find the Father they need in God.

On Modalism

Modalism is an understanding of God that is essentially non-trinitarian. It teaches that God is only one person and that the three persons described as divine in the New Testament represent modes of the same God, who appears as Yahweh in the Old Testament, became human in Jesus Christ and then came to indwell Christians as the Holy Spirit. Modalism can be demonstrated to be unscriptural and heretical (see McGrath p.254-255 for a longer discussion of Modalism), but is Driscoll correct in accusing *The Shack* of promoting it? In actual fact, Young's description of the trinity and the relationship between the three persons has much to commend it. He does a fantastic job of describing intimacy and mutual love and respect within the relationships of the three persons. He manages to present God as three persons but also clearly as one. This is far from easy, especially given his decision to present all three persons of the trinity in human form. The book even attempts to correct a commonly used but inadequate illustration of the trinity, with Papa explaining that (p.101):

We are not three gods, and we are not talking about one god with three attitudes, like a man who is a husband, father, and worker. I am one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely the one.

On what, then, does Driscoll base his claim that *The Shack* teaches Modalism? There are two passages in the book that could be understood to indicate this heretical view:

a) The three became fully human – Papa says (p.99):

When we three spoke ourself into 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.

This way of describing the incarnation goes beyond what Scripture says. It is misleading to suggest that the Father and Spirit spoke themselves into existence as the Son. According to Scripture, the

Son eternally existed with the Father, one with Him and in very nature God (John 1:1; Philippians 2:6-8), and was sent into the world by the Father (John 3:16-17; Galatians 4:4).

- b) The Father suffering with the Son** – The other contentious passage is on page 95, where Papa is revealed to have scars on her wrists. The implication is that the Father suffered on the cross with Christ. As Papa says, “We were there *together*” (p.96). This appears to fall into an ancient heresy known as patripassianism (literally “father-suffering”), which is generally derived from Modalism (see McGrath, p.254). Although Colossians teaches that the fullness of the deity lived in bodily form in Christ (Colossians 1:19, 2:9), and Jesus did say that He and the Father are one (John 10:30), nowhere does the New Testament suggest that the Father became human or suffered physically on the cross. Of course it may be unfair to suggest that Young was intending to convey patripassianism, and it would not seem to fit with the quotation above from page 101, which presents an orthodox view of the trinity. It seems likely that the image of the Father bearing wounds was simply intended to emphasise the spiritual and emotional pain that He experienced as Christ died on the cross. In this sense Young is countering another deficient view which is the impassibility of God, meaning the claim that God is incapable of suffering, which entered Christian theology from Greek philosophy (see McGrath, p.210). It may also be an attempt to challenge poor illustrations that are used to describe the cross, and especially the explanation of the atonement that is generally called penal substitution. One writer famously suggested that this concept sounds like “cosmic child abuse”, but this accusation is based more on poor illustrations than on careful explanations of the concept. Having given Young the benefit of the doubt we must still conclude that this description of the Father’s involvement in the cross is confused and potentially misleading.

So, then, Driscoll would appear to be unfair in claiming that the book represents Modalism, but these two passages of the book certainly do have the potential to lead the reader into error if not compared carefully with Scripture.

On hierarchy in the trinity

The Shack suggests that hierarchy of any form is the result of sin, and we will return to this claim in the section entitled *The Shack on ... Hierarchy and Authority*. For now, however, our attention must turn to the issue of hierarchy in the trinity. Young’s Jesus says (p.145):

We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I am to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her.

This is simply unbiblical. Whilst it is entirely correct to say that Jesus lived in submission to His Father during His time on earth (see, for example, John 5:19 and 8:28), there is no suggestion in Scripture that the Father submits to the Son. This appears to be an attempt by Young to avoid the obvious implication that submission does not always have to be equal in both directions between two parties. Scripture speaks of the Father sending the Son into the world (Galatians 4:4) and the Spirit into the lives of believers (John 14:16), and of Jesus baptising people with the Spirit (e.g. Matthew 3:11), which establishes an order of submission or as Driscoll calls it “deference” of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It may be wrong to call this a hierarchy, as all three remain equal in power, but it is equally wrong to deny that there is an order within the trinity that cannot be equally valid if reversed. Scripture never speaks of the Father submitting to the Son or Spirit, or of the Son or Spirit sending the Father.

So, then, Young’s description of the trinity is profound in some ways but potentially misleading and even unscriptural in others. Before leaving the topic of the trinity, it is worth remembering that it is impossible for us to fully understand the trinity. As Papa says (p.101):

that you can’t grasp the wonder of my nature is rather a good thing. Who wants to worship a God who can be fully comprehended, eh? Not much mystery in that.

Some reviewers appear to have given Young the benefit of the doubt on the basis that no one can hope to explain the mysteries of the trinity fully. Although this is true, I would argue that an inability to explain something fully should not be an excuse for missing what can be known about it or presenting a distorted version of it.

The Shack on ... the Character of God

Creating God in our own image?

If theology is the study of God, there can be no greater question for theology than what God is like. So much of our understanding of other aspects of theology depends on our core understanding of God's nature. Helping people to have a correct understanding of God's character was central to Young's intention in writing the book. He has said in an interview with Sheridan Voysey that many people have projected their own fathers onto the face of God, resulting in a:

God who is distant, angry. He's the deistic g-o-d who is out there, who is looking for an opportunity to hurt us, punish us, or whatever, and it all comes down to our behaviour

This concern finds expression in the words of Papa (p.98):

The problem is that many folks try to grasp some sense of who I am by taking the best version of themselves, projecting that to the nth degree, factoring in all the goodness they can perceive, which often isn't much, and then call that God. And while it may seem like a noble effort, the truth is that it falls pitifully short of who I really am. I'm not merely the best version of you that you can think of. I am far more than that, above and beyond all that you can ask or think.

Scripture would agree with Young's claim that a distant, angry concept of God is inaccurate, and Papa's warning of the severely deficient understanding of God in the minds of many people is faintly reminiscent of Paul's great doxology in Romans 11:33-36. Young's central assertion that certainty in life depends on God's character, which is entirely certain, is also consistent with Scripture. God is the faithful one who never changes (James 1:17). His character is always perfectly consistent, and hence He can be fully trusted. So, we can agree with Young that God's character is fundamental to theology and to Christian living, but can we agree about what God's character is?

Before answering that question, we must first comment on Young's basis for his description of God in the book. *The Shack* grew out of an eleven year period of deep personal reflection during which time Young became convinced of a new way of understanding God's character. He does not talk at any real length in interviews about what influenced him in the conclusions he came to, and it is unclear how much of this thinking was shaped by reading and meditating upon the Bible. The problem with the book is that Young has created representations of the persons of the trinity based on his own understanding, and he has placed his words in their mouths. It could be argued that he has recreated God in his own image, which is exactly what he had accused others of doing! There is no point responding to people's self-imagined unpleasant concepts of God with one's own self-imagined pleasant concepts. It is to Scripture that we must turn to establish a true understanding of who God is.

Full of grace and truth

Scripture reveals two core qualities in God's character:

- **Grace** – also described as love
- **Truth** – also seen in His justice, holiness and faithfulness

These two qualities are consistently held in balance in the Old Testament revelation of God as the one who is, "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The Psalms pick up this theme repeatedly – see Psalm 36:5; 40:10,11; 57:3,10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 88:11; 89:1,2,14,33 etc. It is to the perfect coming together of grace and truth in the character of Jesus that John appeals in his declaration that Jesus was none other than God become human (John 1:14). The wrong perception of God that Young is eager to correct may be described as an imbalanced view that places excessive emphasis on his truth, justice and holiness. *The Shack* does much to demonstrate the love of God, but in doing so it says almost nothing about these other attributes of God. His holiness is described in these terms: "I am what some would say 'holy, and wholly other than you'" (p.98). Whilst the core meaning of God's holiness is correctly defined as His "otherness", in Scripture this includes the concept that he is separate from sin, or rather that sin separates us from Him (Isaiah 59:2). Once again, *The Shack* presents a half-truth that misses an important aspect of Biblical truth. In a reaction against concepts of God that neglect His love, Young has strayed into the opposite error, of emphasising His love

to the exclusion of His justice. In his interview with Kim Gravel he stated that: “everything God does is about love”. This is presumably drawn from John’s assertion that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and indeed, on p.101, Papa says “I am love”. What Young appears to have missed, as other authors do, is John’s other statement that “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). To neglect either of these two core qualities of God – His love and His justice – is to create a false god.

Where is the glory?

The book’s lack of emphasis on God’s power and holiness is reflected in Mack’s responses to Him. Mack finds himself surprised and helped by God’s willingness to deal with his accusations and to enter into dialogue with him, a response that is reminiscent of God’s willingness to respond to the complaints of Biblical figures like Habakkuk and Job. In comparison with these Biblical examples, however, Young’s God falls somewhat short of the powerful, majestic, wholly “other” figure encountered by Job or Habakkuk. Young’s God seems weaker and more accessible, and he is certainly less quick to remind Mack of his holiness and sovereignty. Mack’s response is also significantly different from the response of people in Scripture who had special encounters with God. Job’s response was (Job 42:5-6):

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Isaiah said (Isaiah 6:5):

Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.

Habakkuk spoke of standing “in awe of your deeds, O LORD” (Habakkuk 3:2). In the Revelation of Jesus Christ to the apostle John, the most striking thing about God, which causes the heavenly beings to cry out, is His holiness (Revelation 4:8). Mack’s encounter with God seems to lack the sense of awe, wonder and humility that the Bible speaks of. Although Young speaks in interviews (notably with Kim Gravel) about wanting to help people not to limit their understanding of God, I fear that his description of Mack’s encounter may actually contribute to a taming of God. It is not sufficient to excuse this on the basis that Mack was suffering great pain, and that God may approach him differently as a result, as each of the Bible characters mentioned above were also in situations of loss or pain. John was elderly and on a prison island; Habakkuk faced the threat of Babylonian invasion; Isaiah was mourning the death of King Uzziah; and Job’s suffering was famously intense. Although Mack does come to a position of humble trust in God through his time in the shack (his last words to Jesus are “All my best treasures are now hidden in you ... I want you to be my life”, p.236), this is through a slow and gentle process which omits the kind of open and simple confession of his own sinfulness and inadequacy that is so central to the accounts of Job and Isaiah.

Consequences of a lop-sided god

The imbalanced view of God’s character leads to a number of other errors in the book, which will become clear in subsequent sections of this response. God’s response to evil seems to be only “goodness” (p.165), and His wrath is re-imagined as a mild frustration of a parent with their wayward child (p.119) rather than a settled, burning anger against sin as it is revealed in Scripture (e.g. Romans 1:18). God’s law is no longer an expectation for human behaviour – its role is reduced to simply revealing our sin (p.203). I accept that this is a vital function of the Law, but Scripture also envisages it as the standard against which God will judge us, and a reflection of His character, and *The Shack* does not seem to appreciate these functions.

The Shack on ... Scripture and Truth

Does *The Shack* present a “low view of Scripture”?

In his review of *The Shack*, Chuck Colson writes:

my problem ... is the author's low view of Scripture... The Bible, it seems, is just one among many equally valid ways in which God reveals Himself. And, we are told, the Bible is not about rules and

principles; it is about relationship. Sadly, the author fails to show that the relationship with God must be built on the truth of who He really is, not on our reaction to a sunset or a painting.

Is Colson fair in accusing Young of a “low view of Scripture”? The Bible is not a major theme in the book, but we can note a number of things:



Chuck Colson

- **The book implies a high regard for the historicity of Scripture.** This is apparent from Papa's reference to a real individual Adam (p.99).
- **The book claims that the primary aim of the Bible is to paint a picture of Jesus.** Sarayu tells Mack that, “The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus” (p.197). The primacy of the picture of Jesus in Scripture appears to be a fair conclusion, as Jesus is indeed the central figure of Scripture and its ultimate object, but this statement is severely limited as it appears to suggest that the picture of Jesus is all that may be usefully taken from Scripture.
- **The book fails to confirm that all Scripture is true in its portrayal of God.** When Mack asks Papa “Weren't you always running around killing people in the Bible? You just don't seem to fit the bill” (p.119) he does not receive an answer. This leaves open the possibility that parts of the Bible, for example the Old Testament accounts of massacres, are merely man's thoughts about what God may be or should be like. It would be interesting to hear Young's answer to Mack's question, and we may wonder how he deals with Bible passages that speak of God's judgement on sinners and hell (see below).
- **The book seems to play down the Bible's uniqueness as God's self-revelation.** At one point Sarayu speaks about the various ways Mack will see God including “in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow” (p.198). Although Scripture is also mentioned as a means by which Mack can know God, there is no suggestion that it is to be treated as a more accurate or complete revelation of God to us than these other means. This is clearly dangerous, as the other means of “seeing God” are highly subjective and are fundamentally based on experience. There is no sense that Scripture is uniquely inspired by God and can be used to correct our wrong ideas and establish us in truth (II Timothy 3:16). I do not dispute that we can learn truth about God from many sources, but I maintain that Scripture is, to borrow D.A. Carson's phrase, the “norming norm” by which all other ideas can and must be tested.
- **The book suggests that Scripture should be read through the lens of relationship.** On page 198, Sarayu continues to say:
And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship – a way of coming to be with us.
 Again there is a partial truth in this statement. Head knowledge of Scripture is worthless if not accompanied by heart knowledge of God, and if we do not realise that the Scriptures are intended to lead us to Christ and into relationship with Him we have missed their point entirely (John 5:39). Having said this, it should also be said that we must not approach Scripture with any pre-conceptions and we should never read it selectively for what we want to find there. For example, we cannot decide based on our own subjective ideas that rules are unhelpful and therefore ignore anything in Scripture that seems to suggest otherwise. When we read the Bible, if we believe it to be God's word, we must make ourselves subject to it allowing it to speak and having open minds to hear, rather than subjecting it to our own judgement.

So, then, we must conclude that Colson is fair in accusing the book of presenting a low view of Scripture. *The Shack* does not help to direct Christians to the Bible but rather presents the authors' own form of spirituality and then encourages the reader to read Scripture through its filter.

Can certainty be found in the Bible?

In an interview with Terry Meeuwsen, Young said of God that:

even though His behaviour is uncertain in a world full of uncertainty, His character is not. His character is absolutely certain.

This is a key theme of comments made by Young (he says something similar in his interview with Kim Gravel) and of the book. Whilst I agree with him about the certainty of God's character, I am troubled by the fact that he fails to emphasise that certainty in life can also be found in the promises of God and in His word, the Bible. Although we must be careful about drawing conclusions from silence, this seems to be further evidence of a lack of confidence in the Bible on Young's part. He seems to encourage a certainty in the person of God based on subjective experience, without the sure foundation of what God has promised. The Bible tells us that God's word can be trusted (II Samuel 7:28, Psalm 119:42). True, this is because His character is consistent, and so His words must be truthful, and He will keep His promises, but one wonders if Young genuinely sees the Bible as the inspired word of God.

A suspicion of objective statements of truth?

Tied up with this ambivalence about the Bible is a reticence about any statements of truth which surfaces in the book's imbalanced view of rules and laws. On page 202, the Ten Commandments are described as a mirror that reveals our sin to us (echoing Romans 3:20). The book is right that this is the most important function of the Law, and that the Law can never save us, but it fails to see that the Law is also a way through which God teaches us and shapes our thinking and that it reflects His character in its holiness. The book creates a false dichotomy between living in relationship with God and understanding God's truth, between the Spirit and the word, although in fairness to Young this false dichotomy is increasingly common in modern Christian books. On page 198 Sarayu says that:

religion is about having the right answers ... But I am about the process that takes you to the living answer and once you get to him, he will change you from the inside.

Again, this is partly true. God intends the Christian life to be a dynamic process of being led by the Spirit, and a life lived in step with Him will automatically fulfil the Law's requirements (Galatians 5 describes this principle). This does not mean, however, that there *are* no right answers or that, where there are, it is a bad thing to know them. The Spirit of God teaches us *through* the word of God, which is His sword (Ephesians 6:17)! There is no need to choose between the "living answer" and right answers. Right answers come from Him and lead us to Him, and by listening to Him we will be able to recognise right answers and know His truth. This suspicion of statements of truth is undoubtedly a large part of the reason why the book does not encourage a high view of Scripture.

As we have seen, the name Sarayu, means a type of refreshing wind, and this echoes the root meaning of the biblical word spirit (Greek *pneuma*). It is interesting to note that the concept of wind is popular with the author and publishers of *The Shack*. Young's website is called *windrumors.com*, while the publishing company set up by Jacobsen and Cummings is called *Windblown Media*. Although the book is on solid theological ground in using the term wind to refer to the Holy Spirit, on Young's website the action of this Wind is described in terms that are less than clear:

There is a Wind... that wraps itself around the edges of necessity, tugging and pulling until those boundaries become torn and begin to move to the motion of that which is not visible.

It seems as if this Wind is less concerned with guiding God's people into truth, as Jesus promised the Spirit would do (John 16:13), and more with creating a degree of uncertainty, with unclear boundaries.

Verbs or nouns?

Another example of the book's suspicion of statements of truth is found on page 204, where God expresses a preference for verbs over nouns and says that:

To move from something that is only a noun to something dynamic and unpredictable, to something living and present tense, is to move from law to grace.

Once again, the book presents us with a false dichotomy. Verbs are set against nouns, as if we have to choose one or the other to be pre-eminent. To have action, both a noun and a verb are necessary –

someone must be doing something! Our faith is based on both nouns (the objective realities of who God is and how things are) and verbs (the historical and continuing present action of a God who is real). A faith which is based solely on the noun would be ancient, dusty and dead, powerless to transform lives, but a faith that is based solely on the verb would be subjective, speculative and without foundation, susceptible to deception and distortion.

The Shack on ... Hierarchy and Authority

Given the current trend in Western countries towards suspicion of authority, it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Shack* should have something to say about it. In particular it speaks about the issues of hierarchy and submission.

Is submission always intended to be mutual?

On the issue of submission, *The Shack* has an important message for modern Christians that redresses a common imbalance. Submission is an important Biblical concept that is little understood or practiced in the highly individualistic church of today, and the book certainly seems to encourage its rediscovery. Young's Jesus says (p.146):

When I am your life, submission is the most natural expression of my character and nature, and it will be the most natural expression of your new nature within relationships.

Although this statement is a healthy rebut to the individualism and consumerism that blights the church today, it does not tell the whole Scriptural story of submission. In addition to an expectation that all believers should mutually submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21), the New Testament speaks of several relationships within which submission is expected to be unidirectional:

- Citizens to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1,5; I Peter 2:13)
- Wives to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24)
- To the leaders in the church (Hebrews 13:17)

These forms of authority and patterns of submission are, according to Scripture, ordained by God, and must therefore be healthy and helpful. At this point *The Shack* departs from Scripture. Young has Papa saying that (p.122):

Once you have a hierarchy you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it. You rarely see or experience relationship apart from power. Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you.

The clear implication is that all forms of authority and hierarchy are unhelpful and are not part of God's intention for Creation. Yet the Bible speaks of hierarchies among the angels (Ephesians 3:10; Colossians 1:16) and the need for proper authority in human society. Although power is open to abuse, there is no reason to believe that power is bad in itself. On page 123, Sarayu says that, "Authority, as you usually think of it, is merely the excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want". Although she then agrees with Mack's suggestion that authority can be helpful to keep order she adds that it can also be used for great harm. The inference is that all authority in itself is wrong, which is directly opposed to what Paul says in Romans 13. Authority must exist in an ordered human society, and the only question is how it is used – whether in submission to God and according to His word or not. One other context in which Scripture envisages authority and leadership is the local church, and one wonders whether the authors' suspicion of authority is partly at the root of their rejection of organised local congregations or, perhaps conversely, whether their suspicion of authority is partly because of having experienced local churches where it was abused.

Young's Jesus seems to regard all systems of power as something evil to be overcome with his help (p.181):

I can give you freedom to overcome any system of power in which you find yourself, be it religious, economic, social, or political. You will grow in the freedom to be inside or outside all kinds of systems and to move freely between and among them. Together, you and I can be in it and not of it.

This confusion over authority and submission reaches its zenith on p.145 where, in the same passage that has all the persons of the trinity equally submitting to one another, Young's Jesus says:

Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.

To suggest that God is in submission to human beings is surely far beyond anything that Scripture says and must entail either a complete distortion of the meaning of the word "submission" or a lack of due reverence for the Sovereign God.

What happened to headship?

The Shack also comments on the nature of relationship between men and women. This is another big issue that we cannot examine in depth here, but we must note that the book undermines the principle of headship as described in I Corinthians 11:2-16. Verses 11-12 say:

In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

This passage is alluded to in a discussion between Mack and Young's Jesus on p.148. Young's Jesus refers to a "circle of relationship" between man and woman that was established by God's creation of Eve out of Adam and the subsequent birth of men from women. On this basis Young's Jesus explains that men and women are "fully equal" but that they are also "unique and different, distinctive in gender but complementary, and each empowered uniquely by Sarayu". This emphasis on equality but complementarity is helpful, especially given the history of abuse of power by men in their relationships with women, but the conversation does not complete the story of I Corinthians 11. In verse 3 Paul demonstrates the headship of the man over the woman in parallel with the headship of God over Christ. He writes: "Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God". God and Christ are equal, but God is head over Christ, and so man and woman are also equal but the man is to be head over the woman. This is not a result of sin, but is based on the order of creation as verses 8-9 state: "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man". It is also to the order of creation that Paul appeals in I Timothy 2:12-13 when he forbids women from teaching or having authority over men in the church.

There are three truths here, which are all part of the Biblical picture of relationships between men and women:

- *Equality in status:* men and women are equal in their relationship to God and in the value that He sees in them. Both were created in His likeness (Genesis 1:27).
- *Complementarity in roles:* men and women have different, distinct roles based on the differences God has created them with.
- *Headship in relationships:* men are to be the head over the woman both in family life and as the authoritative teachers of the church.

It is the third of these principles that seems to be missing from *The Shack* and which does not fit with its view of authority. Remember that the book describes the Father and the Son submitting equally to one another (p.145), yet I Corinthians 11:3 speaks of the Father as the head of the Son. Likewise, there is a sense in which wives are to submit to their husbands that does not apply in reverse.

The Shack on ... the Church

The Shack does not have much to say about the church, but what it does say is found in a conversation between Mack and Jesus on pages 177-178. Mack seems to share the disillusionment of the book's authors with institutionalised churches. When Young's Jesus explains to Mack that the imagery of the New

Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 speaks about the Church, His beautiful bride, Mack expresses his disappointment with the local church he attends, which seems to lack this beauty. Jesus replies (p.178):

Mack, that's because you're only seeing the institution, a man-made system. That's not what I came to build. What I see are people and their lives, a living breathing community of all those who love me, not buildings and programs.

Young's Jesus proceeds to remind Mack that only He can build the Church, and to say that church is simply about relationships and sharing life. There is a welcome response here to a tendency in modern Christianity to proliferate organisation, programmes and management theories in the church, often at the expense of the simplicity of genuine fellowship. Some churches have become enamoured by various strategies and theories that will supposedly grow the church, rather than depending on the Lord who promised to do it. I also agree entirely with the representation of the universal church as the spiritual union of all believers with Christ, as described by Young's Jesus. I am, however, concerned that the book does not complete the picture by speaking of the importance of the local church as an expression of this universal body of Christ. Questions remain such as how a local gathering of believers can be under the leadership of recognised elders and how can every member be enabled to use their gifts if there is no organisation whatsoever, and as to whether there is any room for leadership by elders given the book's negative view of authority and hierarchy. Just because buildings and programmes have the potential to distract from the genuine sharing of lives does not mean that they must always do so and that they are always to be avoided. In balance, I think the message of this short section of the book is a helpful corrective to some unhelpful tendencies in modern churches, but that the book is in danger of undermining the importance of local church life.

***The Shack* on ... human Freedom and Choice**

The Shack places great emphasis on human freedom and choice in relationship with God. Mack is free to leave the shack if he chooses to, although Papa explains the range of things that limit the freedom that we humans sometime think we have (p.94-95). In other words, man does not have completely free will, and our freedom is limited by many factors both inside and outside ourselves. Papa says that "Only I can set you free ... but freedom can never be forced" (p.95). According to Papa, man's desire for freedom, or "independence", is the root of sin, and God's response was to allow man to follow his choices as (p.190):

If I take away the consequences of people's choices, I destroy the possibility of love. Love that is forced is no love at all.

Our response to the book's presentation of human freedom will depend on our own convictions about doctrines such as election, predestination and the sovereignty of God, a full discussion of which is beyond the scope of this document. The book's emphasis on human freedom as allowed by God will be greeted by some as a welcome concept, although it goes beyond what Scripture says in presenting conclusively the reason for God's allowing this freedom as being His very nature of love (see also p.225). Scripture simply does not tell us whether God's allowance of choice on our part is because he chose it to be like that or because it reflects His fundamental nature. We may suspect that the moral universe could not have operated in any other way, but we stray beyond Scripture if we describe God stating that this is fact. It is a dangerous thing, no matter how sure we are of our convictions, to claim that our speculative explanations for what God has not explained in Scripture are true beyond questioning (placing them on God's lips implies this). This is simply one of many cases illustrating the weakness of the genre of the book for discussing theology and the need to remember that the words of "God" in *The Shack* are actually nothing more than one man's opinion.

Although some will not disagree with the book's emphasis on the part of human choice in salvation, much of what it says about human freedom and choice would be problematic for advocates of Reformed theology, especially those who hold to "five-point" Calvinism (the five points as summarised by the acronym TULIP are T – total depravity; U – unconditional election; L – limited atonement, more commonly called "definite atonement" or "particular redemption"; I – irresistible grace; P – perseverance of the saints). The book certainly denies the ideas of particular redemption and irresistible grace, and its view of human nature does not seem to fit with the concept of total depravity as it is generally understood in

Reformed circles. *The Shack*'s concept of election and its view on eternal security are unclear, although these issues become somewhat irrelevant if, as I argue later, the book, in fact, expects universal salvation.

The Shack on ... Sin and Judgement

The Shack is faithful to the Scriptural understanding of a perfect original creation that was spoiled by mankind's sin and into which God has entered in the person of Christ to bring salvation, as this quotation of Papa shows (p.99):

We created you to share in that. But then Adam chose to go it on his own, as we knew he would, and everything got messed up. But instead of scrapping the whole Creation we rolled up our sleeves and entered into the middle of the mess – that's what we have done in Jesus.

There are, however, some potential areas of concern in the book's description of sin.

Is sin simply "independence"?

The word sin is not common in the book, and the persons of the trinity tend rather to speak of mankind's "independence" (e.g. p.132, p.190). This is not entirely unhelpful, as the primary Biblical meaning of sin is mankind's attempt to live apart from God – in that sense, we have declared independence from Him, we have gone astray to follow our own way (Isaiah 53:6). The Biblical concept of sin, however, is broader than this. It also includes the idea that we have rebelled against God (Romans 1:18-20), replacing Him with other gods (Romans 1:21-23), and falling short of His glorious standard (Romans 3:23). Sin is not simply a problem for us because we are trying to live without relationship with God, and hence missing out on His peace and joy, but because it is an offence against God that leaves us guilty when judged against an objective standard of right and wrong (James 2:9). *The Shack* lacks this dimension of the problem, perhaps because of its imbalanced understanding of the character of God.

Is guilt ever helpful?

The result of this limited definition of sin is that guilt is redefined from the Biblical concept of an objective position of being wrong and found guilty before God (e.g. Exodus 20:3) to a subjective feeling that we have about ourselves. According to Papa (p.187):

Guilt'll never help you find freedom in me. The best it can do is make you try harder to conform to some ethic on the outside. I'm about the inside.

Although we must agree that guilt in itself cannot make us right with God, it is wrong to suggest that guilt is never helpful. Guilt can do better than leading us to attempt to conform to an external ethic – it has one useful purpose, which is to lead us to God. Once it has done so it serves no further purpose, and continued guilt in the heart of a person who has honestly repented before God, or a feeling of guilt for something that is not actually wrong, is pathological. When we have done wrong it is appropriate that we feel guilt or shame (which of these we predominantly feel will depend on culture and personality), and this is often a result the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting us of our sin and our need of forgiveness (John 16:8). For Sarayu (p.206):

Responsibilities and expectations are the basis of guilt and shame and judgment and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as the basis for identity and value.

To deny that guilt and shame are sometimes useful pointers to a need to return to God places us in greater danger of having a faith that is based on our own subjective experience rather than God's objective truth.

Will God judge sinners?

The Shack's God does not expect anything of us, and so the basis for guilt is removed, but with it the basis for judgement is also removed. The book exchanges the Biblical concept of God's righteous judgement for our sin (see Romans 2 for Paul's explanation of God's just judgement) for a concept of punishment that sees it as purely something that we inflict upon ourselves because of our sin. As Papa says (p.120):

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.

The book does not exclude the possibility of judgement by God, as Papa tells Mack in a conversation about the man who murdered Missy, "you have no duty to justice in this. I will handle that" (p.226), but neither does it conclusively say that God *will* judge anyone. These words of Papa are subtly, but significantly, different from the actual words of God as explained in Romans 12:9:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.

Papa is right to say that justice should not be taken into the hands of the individual, but Scripture leaves no doubt that God's wrath is real and that His judgement will come, whereas *The Shack* casts significant doubt over this. We will discuss this further when we turn to the book's teachings about salvation.

What, though, of Paul's declaration that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)? Perhaps Young is simply presenting the new reality for those who have been forgiven for their sins. As Papa says (p.223):

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.

There are three problems with this statement:

- Whilst Young may be correct in his claim that many Christians are not living in the freedom of God's grace, and that many are trapped by guilt that is unhealthy because it is based on expectations they have set for themselves or that they perceive from others, it appears that he has strayed to the opposite extreme. There does not appear to be any place in the shack for the kind of mourning for sin that James commands for believers who have a divided heart (James 4:7-10). *The Shack's* God could hardly expect such a demonstration of repentance.
- Whilst it is true according to Romans 8:1 that God does not condemn those who are "in Christ Jesus", it is simply wrong to make a blanket statement that he does not "do ... condemnation" at all. God certainly *will* condemn people who reject Him, and indeed those who do not believe in Christ are "condemned already" (John 3:18). It is only for those who are *in Christ* that there is no longer any condemnation, and this still does not mean that guilt never has any role to play in their lives.
- The final problem is that this statement makes no distinction between people who are in Christ (those who are genuine believers) and those who are not. As we will see in our discussion of what *The Shack* says about salvation, this is not the only place where the book fails to make a distinction.

What happened to the sinful nature?

One final concern I have with *The Shack's* portrayal of sin is that it seems to have no concept of the sinful nature. Scripture teaches that sin is not simply something that we do, but it results from a corruption of our heart (Matthew 15:18). The sinful nature is set against God and in conflict with the Spirit (Galatians 5:17). It results in death, is hostile to God and cannot submit to Him, and those who are controlled by it cannot please God (Romans 8:6-7). The only solution to the problem of the sinful nature is the sin offering Christ made at the cross (Romans 8:3) and the fact that through faith in Christ the sinful nature can be cut off (Colossians 2:11-13). The sinful nature remains a problem for Christians, and we must decide not to think about how to gratify its desires (Romans 13:14), we must not use our freedom to indulge it (Galatians 5:13) and we must live by the Spirit if we are to avoid its desires (Galatians 5:16). Despite this important Biblical understanding of the Christian life as a struggle between the Spirit and the sinful nature, *The Shack* does not appear to say anything about the sinful nature. The closest it comes is a reference to our "new nature" on page 146, but there is no mention of what the "old nature" is, and we are left to assume that it is simply an old way of living outside relationship with God.

Perhaps it is worth looking at II Peter 2 in this context. Peter speaks about "the unrighteous" who are held by God for the day of judgement while currently experiencing ongoing punishment from him (v9). How different this is from the way in which *The Shack* speaks of judgement and punishment. Peter warns that "This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority"

(v10). A view of human nature that does not acknowledge the corruption of the sinful nature and that has little respect for authority is dangerous indeed! We must heed Peter's warning about men who will (v18):

mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

The Shack may not go as far as to constitute "empty, boastful words" and it may not openly appeal to the desires of the sinful nature, but the theology it espouses may well be used as a basis for false teachers who will appeal to the sinful desires of their hearers.

The Shack on ... the Christian Life

The nature of Christian living is a major theme of *The Shack*. It says many good things:

- That God wants the whole of our lives and to be centre of everything we are and do rather than just our first priority (p.207).
- That we should live in faith in God in the present rather than fear about what the future may hold (p.141-142).
- That we should not try to live by following Christ's example or by a maxim like WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?), but in an ongoing relationship with Christ (p.149).
- That the Christian life is about trusting Christ and learning to love others with His love (p.181).
- That the Christian life entails a real relationship of sharing life with Christ. As Young's Jesus says in response to Mack's question about what he should do (p.175):
What you're already doing, learning to live loved. It's not an easy concept for humans. You have a hard time sharing anything... so, yes, what we desire is for you to 're-turn' to us, and then we come and make our home inside you, and then we share. The friendship is real, not merely imagined. We're meant to experience this life, your life, together, in a dialogue, sharing the journey.
- That God cannot be disappointed with us because He already knows us fully (p.206).

Although all of this is helpful, it is still not the full story. As discussed above, the sinful nature and the Christian's struggle with it is entirely missing. Also, the key to Christian living no longer seems to be submission to God, as expected by the Bible (see II Chronicles 30:8; Job 22:21; Hebrews 12:9; James 4:7), but a relationship with God of mutual submission (p.145)! Surely it is wrong to speak of God submitting to us, but *The Shack* does seem to envisage God relating to us on our terms. Furthermore, the idea that God is not disappointed with us does not mean that it is correct to say that He expects nothing of us. Without resorting to semantics, there is an important distinction between God *knowing* our weakness so that sin does not shock Him and God *accepting* our sin without hoping for better. Sarayu's declaration that, "To the degree that you resort to expectations and responsibilities, to that degree you neither know me or trust me" (p.206) is potentially misleading. Whilst the Christian life cannot be lived by a system of rules and regulations (that would be legalistic religion) but in a dynamic relationship with God, Scripture does not avoid speaking of the aim of our lives being to please God and to win His approval (Galatians 1:10; Colossians 1:10; I Thessalonians 4:1; I Timothy 2:3; Hebrews 11:5,6; 13:16). This is not the slavish desire to please a deity who does not love us, but the free surrender of our lives to seek His glory and to live for Him because we know He does love us. It is not effort expended in the hope of earning His acceptance, but willing service in gratitude for the acceptance we have found with Him. The contrast is not, as Young seems to imagine, between living for expectations and not living for expectations, but as Paul describes it in I Thessalonians 2:4, between living to please men (which is a dreadful slavery) and living to please God "who tests our hearts" (which is true freedom). There is no dichotomy between relationship and expectation. A loving relationship that does not have expectations is simply about the comfort of the loved one rather than seeking their best.

***The Shack* on ... the Cross and Salvation**

We come finally to discuss what *The Shack* says about salvation. The discussion of this issue has been left to the last not because it is of least importance because it draws on much of what has already been said about the character of God and the nature of sin and judgement. *The Shack* is very clear that salvation cannot be obtained through religion or works and that it leads to a relationship with God. Young has described this in an interview with Sheridan Voysey:

A lot of us are very tired of all the "work your way into God's affection" kind of religious systems, and we just don't want that any more. It hasn't worked – it hasn't healed us – it hasn't changed us, and I don't believe that's the God of Scripture. The God of Scripture ... is the God of relationship, and we get invited into that.

The question remains, however, how we enter into that relationship with God. On this question the book is less than clear. So what does the book say about the cross and the means of salvation?

What happened at the cross?

The Shack says several things about the cross:

- **The cross is described in terms of the exchange of one life for another.**

Papa speaks of stories in our world that reveal God's heart (p.185):

Stories about a person willing to exchange their life for another are a golden thread in your world, revealing both your need and my heart.

Likewise, when Mack speaks of his willingness to suffer in the place of his children, Sophia (the personification of God's wisdom) says "Now you sound like Jesus" (p.163). So, the cross was about the exchange of one life in the place of others. Thus far we can agree with the book, but the question remains how the cross made any difference.

- **The Father did not leave Christ at the cross.**

When Papa says that she and Jesus were suffering together at the cross (hence the wounds on her wrists), Mack reminds her of the fact that Jesus said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Mack had understood this to mean that the Father left Jesus at the cross, but Papa replies that "You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him" (p.96). She continues to say:

Don't forget, the story didn't end in his sense of forsakenness. He found his way through it to put himself completely into my hands.

The clear implication is that Christ merely *felt* abandoned at the cross, and that it was an ordeal He endured, but that at its end He was able to put himself in the Father's hands completely, presumably a reference to Jesus' words in Luke 23:46, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit". Is Young correct in this understanding, or is it possible that *he* has missed the real mystery of the cross? The hours of darkness at the cross, which are not mentioned in *The Shack*, indicate that something more than a personal ordeal was going on. The epistles explain that Christ "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (I Peter 2:24) and that Christ's death was a sin offering, an offering of atonement, during which He bore God's wrath for our sin (Romans 3:23; I John 2:2). In this sense, Christ was made sin for us (II Corinthians 5:21). Young does not engage with any of these scriptural concepts (which together constitute the doctrine of penal substitution) in his book, perhaps because they do not fit with the book's understanding of sin and the character of God.

- **In the way of the cross "mercy triumphs over justice because of love".**

This kind of cliché (spoken by Sophia on page 164) is not uncommon in evangelical circles, but is fundamentally a misrepresentation of the atonement. It sets two aspects of God's character (His mercy and justice) at odds with one another and imagines a struggle between them, with mercy finally overcoming justice. As we have already seen, it is doubtful whether *The Shack* truly conceives of justice as a characteristic of God's nature, and Sophia may well be referring to justice simply as a principle in the world that comes from the human tendency to make rules. If justice is understood to

be part of God's character, it is simply nonsensical to imagine His mercy triumphing over it. Whereas we may experience tension and conflict internally between different aspects of our character, to suggest that God can experience such conflict within Himself would be to recreate Him in our likeness. The cross does not involve a triumph over God's justice. Rather, the apostle Paul wrote that the cross demonstrates His justice (Romans 3:26) and upholds it! Through the cross God was able to exercise His mercy and grace in forgiving sinners whilst still upholding His justice fully by pouring His wrath out on Christ, our substitute. Perhaps Young is simply guilty of careless use of language here, but it is equally possible that his use of language reflects a distorted theology of sin, wrath and judgement. Without an understanding of God's wrath the atonement simply does not make sense, and Christ's death is reduced to being little more than an example for us to learn from or a vain demonstration of God's commitment to us. Unless it actually accomplishes something, the cross is meaningless.

- **Jesus' life achieved the possibility of salvation.**

On page 137, Sarayu says that Jesus, "gave up everything, so that by his dependent life he opened a door that would allow you to live free enough to give up your rights". The danger with this statement is that the emphasis is removed from the death of Christ onto his life. Whilst Christ's sinless, obedient life was necessary for His death to be acceptable as a sacrifice for sins, it is misleading at best to speak in terms that suggest that His life accomplished the possibility of salvation. Once again, the significance of the cross is watered down.

Who will be saved?

So, then, *The Shack* does not present a biblical understanding of the cross. It is perhaps unsurprising given this fact, and what we have already seen about the book's silence about God's judgement for sin, that Young is equally unclear about who will actually be saved. There are several concerns here:

- **Forgiveness for everyone?**

Papa says "In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship" (p.225). Some, but by no means all, Christians understand Scripture as describing Christ's death as the sacrifice for the sins of all people (1 John 2:2), but nowhere does Scripture speak in terms of God having forgiven everyone for their sins. Forgiveness is not simply something that is decided by the person who has been wronged, although it can be offered by them. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34), although in that case the forgiveness He prayed for was for a crime they had committed in ignorance and it is by no means certain that they were actually forgiven. The Bible simply does not make a distinction between a person having their sins forgiven and being in relationship with God. In fact, it clearly teaches that forgiveness is dependent on repentance (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38), which is directly contradictory to Papa's claim. The book does speak about repentance, for example when Papa, speaking about people who enter into relationship with God, says (p.225):

Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their mind and behaviour, a relationship of trust is not possible. When you forgive someone you certainly release them from judgment, but without true change, no real relationship can be established.

Papa is right to insist that change, which includes acknowledgement of what is true, is at the heart of repentance, but it is wrong to suggest that forgiveness and release from judgement can come without repentance. This seems to suggest that all people have been released from the possibility of judgement by God because God has already forgiven them, even if many do not live presently in the relationship God wants them to have with Himself. The end conclusion of this line of reasoning is that all will be saved.

- **Is Jesus not interested in people becoming Christians?**

Perhaps one of the most controversial passages in *The Shack* is found on page 182. Mack asks Young's Jesus what it means to be a Christian, and Young's Jesus dismisses the very idea of talking about people as Christians on the basis that He is not a Christian Himself. It is rather obviously true that Jesus was not a Christian, as a Christian is, by definition, a *follower* of Christ, but is it wrong to use the

word of people who believe in Christ? The term “Christian” was not originally used to describe Jesus’ followers, with the terms “disciple” and “believer” being used earlier. It was in the cosmopolitan Gentile city of Antioch that believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), presumably because it clearly identified them with Jesus Christ as opposed to the numerous other gods worshipped in the city. There is no suggestion in Acts 11 that Luke, or any of the other early Christians, objected to the term, and it is likely that it was helpful in distinguishing Christians from Jews as the faith spread from its Jewish beginnings into a Gentile context. Since that time, the term has been accepted by believers, although its meaning may need to be explained in an age when it could mean many different things. Young’s Jesus proceeds to explain that (p.182):

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, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved.

In his interview with Kim Gravel, Young explains that his original manuscript said “They *are* (rather than *were*) Buddhists or Mormons ...” This demonstrates that he is not simply referring to people who are now dead but people who are actually alive. He admits that he changed the verbs tense simply to lessen controversy with his American readers. Could we imagine these words from the mouth of the real Jesus? We must once again tread carefully as there is some truth in what Young has written. People from all backgrounds do come to faith in Christ, and not all of these are part of organised churches or would openly accept the name “Christian”. It is also right to emphasise that adherence to religion will never save anyone. Many Christians also believe that the Bible allows for the possibility that people may be saved *through* Christ without hearing *about* Christ, particularly those who have never had the opportunity to know about Him, but if this is what Young is referring to, how can it be right to call them people who love Christ? Are we to believe that God does not care what belief systems people follow, and that there is no need for them to come to believe the message about Jesus as opposed to any other system? The inference appears to be that it is immaterial what a person actually believes so long as they know and love Jesus. This is clearly different from the biblical emphasis on “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saint” (Jude 3) and the gospel that is based on objective facts that are “of first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Furthermore, how can it be true that people from *every* system could be saved? What about adherents of systems that are directly opposed to Christ? How would this suggestion fit with New Testament descriptions of false teachers and the dangers of their teachings? In addition, surely it is simply wrong to suggest that Jesus does not care about whether people are Christians or not? If a Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ, then Jesus wants everyone to have the opportunity to become a Christian. That is the thrust of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), which forms the basis for Christian mission. If Young’s objection was simply to the term “Christian”, could he not have had Jesus saying that he is not interested in seeing people becoming Christians but he does desire them to become his disciples? What are the implications of this line of thinking for Christian mission? Is *The Shack* suggesting that we should not, or do not need to, engage in evangelism?

- **Will Jesus travel any road to find us?**

The obvious accusation that could be levied against Young based on what we have already seen is that he is suggesting that “all roads lead to God”, but he anticipates this in the book. Mack directly asks Young’s Jesus if this is what he means when he speaks of people from every system loving Him, to which Young’s Jesus replies, “Not at all ... Most roads don’t lead anywhere, What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you” (p.182). This is another example of Young’s ability to convey potential heresy in seemingly innocuous ways. It is a highly appealing thought to imagine the loving Jesus travelling down any road necessary to find us. It even seems to echo the stories of the lost coin and the lost sheep (Luke 15), and Young refers to Jesus as the shepherd when he discusses this passage in his interview with Kim Gravel. He describes God as the one who “pursues us relentlessly”. Appealing, yes, but, is it correct? What did Jesus actually say about roads? Near the end of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges His hearers to respond by using a number of metaphors. One of them involves two roads with different destinations (Matthew 7:13-14):

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

This is a wholly different image from Young's. Jesus made the journey into our world to rescue us, but whether or not we find life in Him as opposed to destruction depends on whether we travel the popular, broad road of living for ourselves, or whether we enter through the narrow gate of faith in Christ and His words. Only those who repent and believe will be saved, and only through the death of Christ. Jesus was not afraid to emphasise the exclusivity of His claims (John 14:6), and neither should we be!

- **Are all people God's children?**

The Shack is inconsistent on this question. In one place (p.182) Young's Jesus speaks about people being transformed into God's sons and daughters, but elsewhere he seems to say that all people are already God's children. Missy is described as God's child on page 156, as is the man who murdered her on page 224. On page 211 we read about "the children of the earth, Papa's children". The Bible is clear that although all people are created by God, only those who have come to faith in Christ Jesus have the right to be called God's children (John 1:12). Jesus even referred to some of the religious leaders of His day as children of the devil (John 8:44). *The Shack* fails repeatedly to make any distinction between those who are in Christ and those who are not, yet the Bible consistently makes the distinction.

Does the Shack teach that all people will be saved?

So, *The Shack* presents a confused picture of salvation, and from all that has been said so far it should be obvious that one vital question remains: are all people going to be saved? The idea that all people will eventually be saved, is generally known as universalism. There are two main concepts in *The Shack* that seem to lead towards a universalist conclusion:

- **Universal reconciliation?**

Universalists often appeal to Colossians 1:20, which speaks of God reconciling "all things" to Himself through Christ. If God will reconcile all things does this not mean that all people must be saved? The reconciling work of Christ will indeed bring all things into a proper relationship with God. No possibility of continued decay or of future rebellion against God will be left. This includes human beings, whose rebellion is responsible for the whole of creation being in bondage to decay (Romans 8:20-21). Based on Scripture we can say, then, that all human beings will be brought back to a proper recognition of who God is. This does not, however, mean that all human beings will be brought into a saving relationship with Him. Papa says that (p.192):

reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way.

This statement leaves open the possibility that some people will not be reconciled, but once again the book is unclear. The apostle Paul envisaged a day when every knee will bow "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). This phrase is taken up on p.248 of *The Shack* (in the brief *After Words*), where it is changed to say:

And one day, when all is revealed, every one of us will bow our knee and confess in the power of Sarayu that Jesus is the Lord of all Creation, to the glory of Papa.

This statement, and particularly the phrases "when all is revealed" and "in the power of Sarayu" which have been added by Young, seems to anticipate universal salvation. Yet, the Bible describes people being lost in the final judgement and spending eternity outside a relationship of love with God (this is a constant theme in many of Jesus' parables, and is abundantly clear in Revelation 20:11-15). How do we explain Philippians 2:9-11 in light of these passages? The only explanation that is consistent with the whole revelation of Scripture is that for some people the bowing of the knee and the confession of Christ's Lordship happens during their lifetime as they come to Him in repentance and faith. These people will be saved. Others will recognise the reality and confess it at the final judgement, but for them there is no possibility of salvation as their destiny was already settled during their lifetime. In this

sense, all things, including all people, will be reconciled to God, but this is very different from the claims of universal reconciliationists.

- **Salvation through the “second Adam”?**

In an interview with Kim Gravel, Young speaks about Jesus Christ as the second Adam:

The narrow road narrows to one person, Jesus Christ, and that is all, and everything is because of what happens in the life ... He is the second Adam, all of humanity is taken up into Him, so that is what the centrepiece is.

This concept is known as corporate headship and is based on two passages from the apostle Paul's letters, Romans 5:12-21 and I Corinthians 15:20-28. The basic concept behind corporate headship is that only two people in history have been able to represent the whole human race. The first was Adam, since he was the only man at the time of his creation and all mankind is descended from him. The second is Jesus, since He was the only perfect man to have lived since sin entered into the world. The key verses from these Paul's two passages about corporate headship are Romans 5:18:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men

and I Corinthians 15:22, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive”. A superficial reading of these verses may appear to suggest that all people will be saved on the basis of Christ's death, but once they are understood in context this interpretation is seen to be wrong. The epistle to the Romans clearly teaches that only those who have faith in Christ will benefit from the justification that His death has made possible (Romans 3:28; 5:1). The verse from I Corinthians makes this same truth clear in itself, as it is only those who are “in Christ” who will be made alive. All human beings are “in Adam” (descended from him) and so share in his sinful nature, but not all are “in Christ”, only those who have received God's grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Young seems to miss this point, as he speaks of “all of humanity” being “taken up into” Christ.

One of the more enigmatic parts of *The Shack* is Chapter 15, where Mack sees a great number of people gathered around Christ and changed. This scene seems to imply universal salvation as all the people of earth are there (p.211) and there does not appear to be anyone left outside. There is certainly no reference to Hell or any alternative destination at this point. In his interview with Kim Gravel, Young states that this chapter was one of the few that entered the final published book unchanged from his original manuscript, and so one wonders if this chapter gives a more clear indication of Young's own beliefs as opposed to those of Jacobsen and Cummings.

Final questions about *The Shack's* theology

Does the book place the emphasis where Scripture does?

We have spent some time considering specific theological themes in *The Shack*, but there is another important question to ask when considering whether or not any writing is theologically orthodox, and that is whether it places the emphasis in the same places as Scripture. A book could perceivably contain no heretical statements but still be heretical if it omits important biblical truths or emphasises minor themes of Scripture as if they were major. *The Shack* certainly leaves much unsaid, and, as we have noticed, it is often impossible to decide conclusively what its message is because some statements are confusing, incomplete or even apparently contradictory. The message of Scripture, in summary, is: that God created mankind (creation); that we rebelled against Him in sin (Adam and Eve); that He must and will judge sin but can and will rescue those who have faith in Him (the Flood and Noah); that He made a plan through one man (Abraham) to produce a Saviour who would bless all peoples; that He spoke to Abraham's descendents (Israel) through Moses and the prophets, revealing His character (His justice and love) and providing the pattern for forgiveness of sins through sacrifice; that ultimately He sent His Son into the world to live as Jesus Christ and to die as a sin offering so that all those who repent and believe in Him can be saved; that Christ will one day return to judge all people and that some will enjoy eternal life with Him whilst others will be condemned to eternal punishment. This is the core message of the Bible, and is

enshrined in the ancient creeds of the Church. *The Shack* does *not* tell this story. Some aspects of the story (for example, judgement and atonement) are largely or entirely missing, and others are emphasised out of proportion. The book does agree with Scripture in placing Christ at the centre of God's plan (p.192), but it does not declare the apostolic message of "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2). The cross is not central to this book, and hence its gospel is distorted. If a person who had no prior knowledge about the Christian faith read this book, they would not come away with a clear idea of what the gospel is and how they could enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is quite possible that they would be left believing that they are already God's child, that He has already forgiven them simply on the basis of his love (it would not be clear that this forgiveness depended on the death of Christ), that they should stop feeling guilty or judging themselves against objective standards, and that they can know God and love Jesus but remain within whatever system of belief they already have. This is disappointing given that *The Shack*'s high profile means that it may well be the only "Christian book" some people will read.

What is left unsaid?

As we have seen, there are many gaps in the theology of *The Shack*. Available interviews with the author often fail to clarify or raise more questions. There are several concerning trends in the book and in the interviews with Young, and one wonders what books Young, Jacobsen and Cummings will produce in future. The money, reputation and influence they have gained through this book puts them in a powerful position to publish and spread future books. It would seem wise to reserve final judgement about *The Shack* until time has allowed us to see what its authors produce next. Perhaps they will help to allay some of the concerns raised in this review by clarifying their theology, or perhaps they will continue further along the trajectories that the book sets towards a false gospel.

Is *The Shack* part of the emerging church movement?

The emergent church is, by its very nature, difficult to define as it is primarily a movement of protest. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D.A. Carson lists three dimensions of the protest that characterises the movement:

1. Protest against past experience of evangelical (often fundamentalist) churches
2. Protest against Modernism that is seen in "an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thoughts and rationality; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion" (Carson, p.29)
3. Protest against the seeker-sensitive megachurches

Based on these criteria it would certainly appear that *The Shack* fits broadly within the emergent movement. The authors, and the main character, share a protest against traditional churches, and there are many indications in the book that experience is valued more than truth and inclusion is chosen over exclusion. Neither the book itself nor available interviews with the author comment explicitly on megachurches, but the concerns about institutions and programmes in church mentioned above would certainly seem to be at variance with megachurches. Of course, the protests that typify the emergent church may at times be perfectly valid, and they do not in themselves imply that the movement is heretical. In fact, within the emerging church movement there are people who hold to orthodox Christian theology, whilst others appear to be heretical in some aspects of their belief, and only time will tell which of these will predominate. Much of the concerns about *The Shack* voiced in this response centre on the issue of whether genuine Christian faith is based on objective truth or subjective experience. For a detailed discussion of the relative importance of both truth and experience in the Christian life the final chapter of Carson's book is to be highly recommended. As with the emergent church movement as a whole, *The Shack* has the potential to refresh church practice and the devotion of individual believers by exposing some wrong ideas, but if the theology continues to be distorted and weak, the longer term consequences could bring great harm to the church.

A COMPARATIVE ARCHITECTURE LESSON

How does it compare to The Pilgrim's Progress?

Before concluding our survey of *The Shack* it may be worthwhile to respond briefly to Eugene Peterson's comment, highlighted on the book's front cover, that:

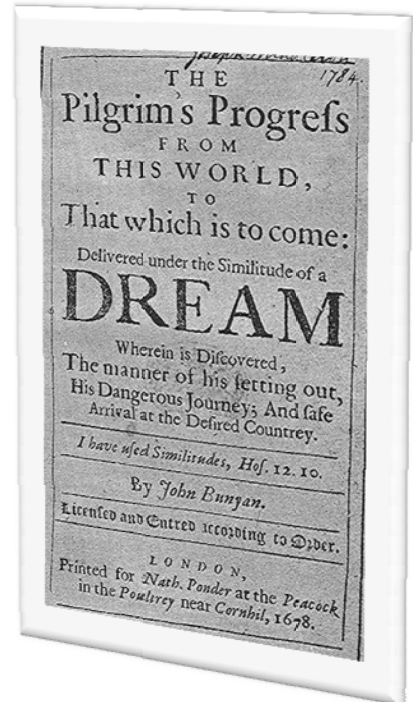
This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress did for his

Although Peterson has made significant contributions to the church through his scholarship and writing, this comment would appear to be premature and potentially unwise.



The Pilgrim's Progress, written by non-conformist English preacher and pastor, John Bunyan, was first published in 1678, and has lasted the test of nearly one third of a millennium, being translated into over 200 languages and remaining continuously in print. It was described by Alexander M. Witherspoon, an expert in 17th Century literature, as "without doubt, the most influential religious book ever written in the English language."

John Bunyan, 1628-1688



The Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of the Christian life told through the story of Christian, who is on a journey to the Celestial City. On his journey he meets many characters, some of whom help him on his way, while others seek to discourage or destroy him. This highlights a major difference between *The Shack* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a true allegory from beginning to end (albeit told as if seen by Bunyan in a dream), whereas *The Shack* mixes genres in a way that carries a greater likelihood of creating confusion. In Bunyan's book there are characters who represent attributes of God, human emotions, spiritual beings and theological concepts, but Christian does not enter into direct dialogue with God. In Young's book the encounter at the shack consists almost entirely of Mack's dialogue with the three persons of the trinity, the sole exception being Chapter 11 where the dialogue is between Mack and Sophia, the personification of God's wisdom. Young's choice to have Mack interacting directly with the persons of the trinity leaves him open to greater potential criticism and the reader open to a greater tendency to conceive of God in the terms in which the three persons speak to Mack.

Based on longevity of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and its influence it seems incredulous to compare it to a book that has been written within the past couple of years and the long-term results of which have yet to be seen. Peterson's comment is, however, primarily about the potential of *The Shack's* message to have a positive impact on this generation's faith. There are, however, several important differences in the messages of the two books that raise questions about whether they could really have the same impact:

- **The cross is central to Bunyan's story** as the basis on which Christian receives forgiveness for his sins, whereas in *The Shack* it is not clearly presented in these terms. Although both books are clearly opposed to the idea of a religious, works righteousness (Mr Worldly Wiseman in *The Pilgrim's Progress* attempts to lead Christian astray into a religion based on the Law before he reaches the cross), Bunyan's contrasting truth is salvation through the cross of Christ, whereas Young's focus is on the character of God who loves us and accepts us.

- **Bunyan often uses Biblical imagery to describe Christian's journey** (for example he needs the "armour of salvation" to defeat his enemy Appolyon), whereas Young uses images that are derived from his own imagination or, perhaps, from other philosophies (for example the concept of flying in Chapter 6 and the appearance of auras in Chapter 15). In addition, Bunyan uses direct quotations of Scripture verses in the text of his book, but Young does not. In the few cases where Scripture is paraphrased in *The Shack* there are some significant changes to the wording, as exemplified by the reference to Philippians 2 mentioned in the section of this response entitled *The Shack on ... the Cross and Salvation*.
- **Bunyan has a positive view of the local church.** He describes it as "the House Beautiful", a place of refreshment and rest for Christian. As we have seen, *The Shack* says little about the church, but what it does say is not positive, reflecting the experiences of the authors.
- **Bunyan's book makes clear references to Satan and his demons.** Two of Satan's leading demons, Appolyon and Beelzebub, are encountered by Christian on his journey, and he engages in battle with them (a picture of our spiritual warfare). This is only one of a number of senses in which the *Pilgrim's Progress* gives a much more complete picture of the Christian life than *The Shack*, which does not refer to Satan or other evil spiritual beings.
- **Bunyan writes about Hell.** As we have seen, *The Shack's* greatest weakness is its lack of clarity about the wrath of God, His righteous judgement against sin and the possibility of Hell. The same cannot be said of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

So, then, *The Shack* is quite different from *The Pilgrim's Progress* in terms both of its style and message. Most importantly, though, we must be careful not to give it a position to rival Bunyan's book until it too has stood the test of time. John Bunyan finished his race and left a great legacy. We have yet to see what the final legacy of William Paul Young and his friends at *Windblown Media* will be.

THE SURVEYOR'S REPORT

In conclusion, how should we respond to the book?

What makes a great work of fiction? Is it, perhaps, the quality of the writing? On this score *The Shack* ranks averagely. Whilst it is generally well written, it is no literary masterpiece. Is the key to greatness the originality of the story's plot? Once again, *The Shack* fails to impress. The book is basically about an encounter of a man with the trinity in a shack. The story that surrounds this encounter lacks originality and depth. Can greatness be defined by the book's impact on the reader? It is on this score, which is probably the most important measure for the postmodern mindset, that *The Shack* hits the jackpot. This book has the power to influence many people profoundly because it appeals to the modern Christian reader, and other people with an interest in "spirituality".

The Shack is innovative, interesting and provocative in its approach to theological concepts, and it could serve as a helpful primer for discussion of issues such as the trinity, the character of God and the problem of human suffering. It is vital, however, that these issues should be discussed in light of Scripture. *The Shack* is firmly orthodox in a number of important respects:

- It portrays a personal God who is Creator of all things and who is actively involved in His creation and especially in the lives of people.
- It places Christ at the centre of God's historical purposes.
- It emphasises the need for a personal relationship with God based on His grace rather than a legalistic religion of works righteousness or a fearful belief in a God who must be appeased.

On the other hand, the book has several theological weaknesses:

- Its portrayal of the trinity is at best confused and at worst unbiblical.
- It undermines the concept of authority and belittles the importance of Scripture.
- It seems to belittle the importance of the local church in God's purposes.
- It calls into question the idea that belief in certain objective truths is important in Christian faith.
- It is imbalanced in its depiction of God's character, emphasising His love at the expense of His holiness.
- It is soft on human sin and seems to leave no room for the wrath of God or for judgement.
- It fails to present the cross as the sole basis for redemption or to explain how the cross could have achieved salvation.
- It is unclear about whether or not all people will ultimately be saved

These are not minor, peripheral issues in theology. They strike at the very heart of what the Christian faith is. As such, *The Shack* is a potentially dangerous book. It places ideas on the lips of God that are not consistent with what He has said in Scripture, and although it may be too strong to claim that it openly presents a different gospel from that revealed in Scripture, there are aspects of its message that certainly seem to lead in that direction. The book's power to move the reader at a deep emotional level makes it even harder for the reader to exercise discernment.

Undoubtedly there are a number of reasons why *The Shack* has proved so popular among Christians in the early 21st Century. It is very readable, and the length makes it accessible to those who don't have much time or inclination to read. The way in which the conversations unfold and the images the author uses to illustrate them increase the accessibility further, and the book succeeds in drawing the reader into deep theological waters without feeling out of their depth. The positive aspects of *The Shack*'s message are also highly pertinent for many Christians, particularly in the Western countries where sales have already been so high. The book paints a compelling picture of the warmth of God's love for the reader and the possibility of intimacy in relationship with Him, and it strongly emphasises grace rather than legalistic religious observance as the basis of our relationship with God through Christ. There are many believers today who, like the authors, have experienced hurt and disillusionment with local churches. Some have been hurt by breakdowns in relationships, abused by spiritual leaders, and disappointed with internal bickering and politics. Others have been left wondering how the management theory, organisational over-

kill and prolific programming of many 21st Century churches relates to the organic church life described in the New Testament. Furthermore, a large number of people have effectively lived under a wrong perception of God as a distant deity who they must work hard to please. Although they may claim to believe in God's grace, in practice they have made their actions the measure of their spiritual life, focusing on externals like attendance at church services and frequency of Bible reading rather than simply living by faith in God, filled with and led by the Spirit. *The Shack* must be praised for its clarion call back to a focus on relationship with God and trust in Him rather than in their own performance.

Despite this timeliness of the book's message, a note of warning must also be sounded. It is troubling to hear some Christians speaking effusively about this book as if it has revolutionised their understanding of God. One wonders how much of this response is based on an authentic discovery of truth and deepening of relationship with God and how much is simply based on an emotional response. One internet reviewer, Danny Bryant, describes the responses he has experienced when he has expressed concerns about the book as follows:

This book has struck a chord with so many people. The chord that has been struck is extremely personal. Almost everyone I have expressed concerns about the book with has taken my concerns personally. I think that points to one of the most significant characteristics of our generation. When post-modern people experience emotion, that emotion is usually given authority. There is a misconception that says, 'if it moved me, it must be true.'

If you have already read the book and been moved by it, it would be advisable for you to re-visit it and to evaluate what you have learned from it in light of the Bible. If the book has helped to rekindle your love for God and your desire for Him it is important that you seek to grow in your knowledge of God through reading His word and applying it into your life. If you have not already read *The Shack* and you plan to do so, do not read it as if it were purely a fictional novel. Be prepared to make notes, begin discussions and search the Bible where ideas strike you as fresh or unusual. If you do so, then this book could be a help to you. It will also enlighten you as to some of the more common contemporary trends in Christian thinking.

At every stage in the history of the Church, God's people have been confronted with messages that claim to be a fresh insight into God's truth or to revive lost insights. We must exercise discernment, and return to the word of God to enable us to hold on to what is good and helpful and to jettison whatever is contrary to the gospel so that we may be strong both in God's love and in the knowledge of His truth. My prayer for you, the reader, is based on Paul's prayer for the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

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