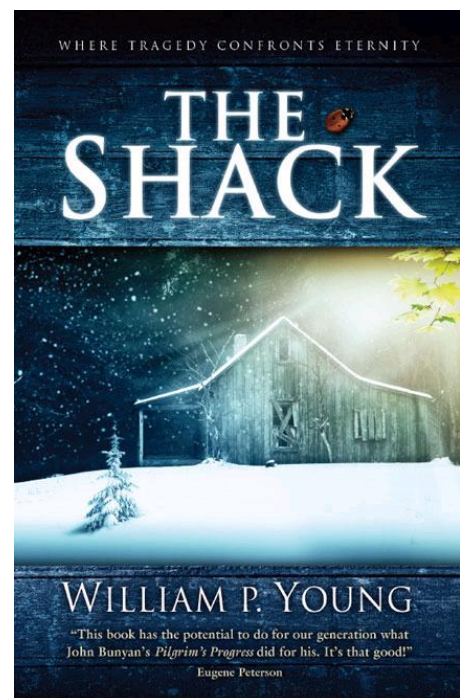


The Shack

Pop culture has always been a persuasive force of indoctrination. For example, in the 4th century, A.D., the citizens of Alexandria enjoyed the hit single, “There Was a Time” articulated preacher named Arius. Of course, Arius is quite possibly the most infamous heretic in all of Christian history. He taught that Jesus was created and not fully God. He was eventually excommunicated; however his influence has been a shadow over the church to this very day.

There is rarely art produced without some belief at its root—whether it is political, philosophical, religious, or anything else. Pop art is an insidious method of spreading doctrine in a seemingly benign way. If someone wants to gain an accurate understanding of the people in a certain culture, then they should look immediately to the art and media that the people in that culture consume. Songs, novels, television shows, movies, poems, plays, and marketing campaigns all resonate with people for a reason. Pop culture is a reflection of the collected lives of the people who constitute the culture it represents.

This brings me to a harrowing question concerning a supposedly “Christian” novel called *The Shack* by William P. Young. The book is being read prolifically and is even being touted as a modern *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It is a book that has resonated with many people within American culture, and



Book Cover

most surprisingly, among many people in the pews of evangelical churches. The surprise lies in the fact that the novel contains many theological heresies. Its fans and proponents that I have encountered have tried to convince me that this is merely a work of fiction, not a work of theology. The problem is that the actual plotline is present in very few chapters of the book. The rest of it consists of dialogue with the Father, “Papa”; the Son, “Jesus”; and the Holy Spirit, “Sarayu,” relating to the antagonist Mack Phillips. For the majority of the book God is teaching a human being about himself. That is revelation, the basis of Christian theology!

The primary problems with this novel center on this portrayal of the Godhead. The heresy is found in God revealing Himself as a woman, not to mention some serious Trinitarian issues. Some secondary issues are found in the fact that the book portrays God speaking a subversive redaction of the entirety of Scripture and 2000 years of Christianity. Furthermore, God teaches Mack from a very post-modern perspective—undermining authority, the proper practice of Christianity, and focusing everything on “relationships.” This leads to the aforementioned question: “Why is heretical teaching about God resonating with Christian people?” If, indeed, art is a reflection of a culture, and this is the art that is most widely consumed in Christian circles, then *what does this say about the church?* Keep that question in mind as we look at the actual issues that are raised by this book.

The Shack as a Novel

I will begin the substance of this review by giving a very brief synopsis of the plot of the book. Mackenzie Phillips (“Mack”), the main character of this novel, is experiencing a sort of depression which Young calls “The Great Sadness.” He is unable to relate to God in the way his wife Nan does because of the grief he is experiencing. Nan calls God “Papa” because of the

excellent relationship they have. Mack is unable to share in this concept of God because A) his own father, who was a self-proclaimed Christian, was a drunk who beat Mack's family and B) Mack's youngest daughter, Missy, had been abducted and murdered by a serial rapist and killer who preyed upon little girls. This is the focus of the primary events of the novel. The murder happened on a family vacation where Missy was abducted, carried off to a remote shack in the mountains, and brutally murdered there. The action of the book picks up when Mack receives a letter beckoning him back to the shack. The letter is signed "Papa." After much contemplation, Mack decides to go meet God. Mack encounters the entire godhead at the shack. God is depicted as a large African American grandmother-type woman who cooks and is quick-witted (She is a mix between Mrs. Doubtfire, Aunt Bea, and Wesley Snipes). Jesus is, of course, an average-looking, middle-Eastern, outdoorsy carpenter. The Holy Spirit is portrayed by a semi-translucent, light-filled Asian woman. The rest of the book consists of God's attempt to heal Mack's soul, but reads about like an episode of *Three's Company* filmed at a summer camp.

This book, merely from the perspective of a novel, is not that great. I must put it bluntly—the characters are cliché and predictable, the story itself is predictable, and the great majority of the book is dialogue and banter interspersed with saccharine-sweet, kitschy, Hallmark card type relations among the members of the Trinity and Mack himself. The fact that Aunt Jemima plays God was enough to make me roll my eyes, but add to that Jet Li in drag playing the Holy Spirit, and Bob Vela meets Adam Sandler playing Jesus, and the book becomes irreparable as a novel. I am still confused how Young has managed to stay above the fray in American race relations because the stereotypes present in Papa and Sarayu are quite blatant. That being said, the novel was enjoyable at times, and it certainly appealed to the emotions, which I would imagine has contributed to its large audience.

Theological Issues in *The Shack*

The book itself is not necessarily the primary issue at hand here. It has, instead, reiterated and made plain a serious issue within American Christianity. That is, that the practical, “spiritual,” and relationship issues—the “living” of the Christian faith is emphasized over the doctrine and theology, or “belief” of the Christian faith. This leads parishioners to ignore the blatant theological issues in favor of empty talk about “relationships” and “conversations” that scratches them where they itch. That being said, much of what Young has to say about the living of the Christian life is relatively accurate. He encourages a genuine relationship with God that results in righteousness out of a life lived with Him rather than the following of rules and regulations. The problem is that Young offers this life without the Gospel, which is the biggest theological issue in the book. The absence of any mention of God’s wrath, propitiation, salvation, genuine sin, etc. effectively defangs the Christian faith. Without bad news, there can be no good news! Without the cross, without an appeasement of God’s wrath, without sinners *believing*, there can be no salvation. Without salvation, no relationship with God is possible!

Next along the line are issues concerning an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. As appealing as a depiction of the Trinity that looks like a box of Kashi Good Friends cereal may be, it simply is not enough to overhaul the massive errors contained therein. For example, Young resurrects a strange cacophony of heresies that seem a lot like Modalism (the view that God has revealed Himself in three modes) mixed with Patripassianism (the view that the Father suffered and died). Those names are certainly mouthfuls; however I mention them to notify the reader that Young has incorporated—perhaps unknowingly—historic, condemned heresies into his work. For example, on page 99 Papa tells Mack, “When we spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human.” In actuality, only the Son of God became fully human—our Lord

Jesus Christ. Young seems to be saying that God the Son did not exist until the incarnation, which is a song that has been sung before. Papa goes on to say that they *all* died on the cross, plus the book depicts Papa with scars on her wrists along with Jesus. This is simply impossible to reconcile with orthodox Christian theology.

Young has obviously succumbed to the modern seduction that what God has said about Himself is simply not good enough.

One of the watershed issues the church today must face is that of gender roles. The popularity of *The Shack* shows how lacking the church's treatment of this issue has been thus far. There are sundry reasons God should not be understood as a woman, however I will only treat one for the sake of time. God has *revealed* Himself in masculine terms. William P. Young has absolutely no right or authority to display God in any way that *God himself* has not ordained or authorized. Papa tells Mack that being revealed as a woman is simply a way for her to keep him from falling back into his "religious conditioning." Young has obviously succumbed to the modern seduction that says that what God has said about Himself is simply not good enough. Therefore he has deemed it necessary to rewrite who God is. I cannot emphasize enough how much this line of thinking can debilitate the Christian faith. This point alone is sufficient to completely capsize this novel. On top of that, Young mixes in an egalitarian understanding of gender roles. God, as a woman, even tells Mack that "the world would be a much calmer and gentler place if women ruled." (p. 147) Young is doing his best to undermine the Biblical teaching about men's and women's roles. I am not sure why God's own revelation is not good enough for Young, but apparently it is not.

The last of the issues I will mention is the radically postmodern perspective from which *God* is speaking. I need to make it very clear that Young is effectively speaking on behalf of God in this

novel, and people are accepting it as such. Go read reviews of this book on the internet. People claim to have had their lives changed by this book. Young, through the mouth of God, says authority is useless, that all institutions are man-made, and is soft on sin. Religion, government, marriage—the entire lot—are dubbed as corrupt because they emphasize hierarchy over relationship. Christians should actually be thankful for the sword their government wields, to submit to the authority of their pastor as the leader of their church, and thankful that God has provided us with a hierarchy that reminds us of the fact that He is Lord! We live in an anti-authoritarian age and Papa gives validity to this sinful attitude.

In conclusion, I must say that there were many more issues present within the book, both good and bad. I think that, ultimately, the story was compelling and interesting, that it provided some interesting perspectives on the practice of Christianity, yet the positives emphatically do not outweigh the negatives found in this book. I believe the church should listen to Young's critiques, emphasize the love and grace of God, yet refuse to forfeit the things that *The Shack* left out. I also want to encourage Christian readers to sharpen their theological discernment. The things that are present in *The Shack* show with clarity that Papa is *not* the God of the Bible.



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