

Putting God in a Shack

*The Unshackled Heresy
of Wm. Paul Young*

by Gary E. Gilley

One of the most popular and controversial Christian books of recent years is the fictional work by first-time author William Paul Young. Evangelical recording artist Michael W. Smith states, "THE SHACK will leave you craving for the presence of God."¹ Author Eugene Peterson believes, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!"²

On the other hand, seminary president Albert Mohler says the book "includes undiluted heresy"³ and many other apologists concur. Given its popularity (more than 4 million copies sold and No. 1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list for paperback fiction), influence, and mixed reviews, Christians need to take a careful look.

Good Christian fiction can convey a message in an indirect, yet powerful, way. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most successful in the genre and has been mightily used of the Lord to teach spiritual truth. Christian fiction's value is determined by its adherence to Scripture. This is how we must evaluate *The Shack*.

While well-written, *The Shack's* storyline is not one that would attract many people. The plot is developed around the abduction and murder of 6-year-old Missy, beloved daughter of

Mackenzie Philips — Mack — who is a nominal Christian. This tragedy has shaped the lives of Mack and his family. Mack's life is simply described as living under "The Great Sadness."

Then one day God drops Mack a note in his mailbox and invites him to the shack where Missy was murdered. Mack takes a chance that God will show up and heads to the shack. There God, in the form of all three members of the Trinity, meets with him for the weekend. God gives Mack new insight about Himself, about life, pain, and tragedy. Mack goes home a new man.

The Trinity takes human form in the novel: the Father (called "Papa" throughout) appears as a large African-American woman who loves to cook; the Holy Spirit is called "Sarayu" (Sanskrit for "air" or "wind") and is a small Asian woman who is translucent; and Jesus is a middle-aged carpenter, presumably of Jewish descent. Much interesting dialogue takes place as the members of the Trinity explain to Mack what they want him to know.

The Shack decries theology on the one hand while offering its own brand on the other. A story has the advantage of putting forth doctrine in a livelier manner than a systematic work can do. This is one reason we find most of Scripture in narrative

form. However, the question is whether Young's theology agrees with God's as revealed in Scripture. The short answer is "sometimes," but it often totally misses the mark.

SCRIPTURE AND THE CHURCH

Young's message centers on the Trinity and salvation, but it is significant that he has a couple of axes to grind concerning the Bible and the Church. Young rejects the cessationist view of Scripture, which his character Mack was taught in seminary:

"In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. ... Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book."⁴

Young would prefer a God who communicates with us in our thoughts rather than on paper (i.e., the Bible).⁵ Realizing the subjectivity of such revelation, he assures us that we will "begin to better recognize [the Holy Spirit's] voice as we continue to grow our relationship."⁶ Scripture

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comes in second to inner voices in Young's theology. The Bible puts God in a box; inner voices make God alive and fresh. This is what Young wants to convey.

Young also has little good to say about the Church or other related institutions. While Mack had attended seminary, "none of his old seminary training was helping in the least" when it came to understanding God.⁷ He consistently depicts the activity of the Church in a negative light. Mack is pretty sure he hasn't met the Church Jesus loves,⁸ which is all about relationships, "Not a bunch of

an earlier occasion Jesus tells Mack that he can get out of his mess "By re-turning. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just come back to me."¹⁴ Yet nowhere in *The Shack* is the reader given a clear understanding of the Gospel. When Mack asks God what Jesus accomplished by dying, Mack is told, "through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." When pressed to explain, God says that He is reconciled to "The whole world," not just the believer.¹⁵ Young never goes so far as to say all will be saved, but he certainly gives that impression when Mack's father, an awful man who showed no signs of being saved, is found in heaven;¹⁶ when God says

question, "Is that what it means to be a Christian?" Jesus says:

"Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian. ... 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 Christians, 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."²⁰

The reader may find himself, like Mack, confused. "'Does that mean,' asks Mack, 'that all roads will lead to you?'" Jesus denies this, but then says, "What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."²¹

Jesus apparently means that He will travel any road to "join them in their transformation."²² The implication is that people are on many roads that lead to their self-transformation. Jesus will join people where they are on that road and apparently aid in that transformation. This is certainly not the teaching of Scripture, which tells us that we must come to the one road, the narrow way that leads to God through Jesus Christ.

THE GODHEAD

The main thrust of the novel concerns itself with an understanding of God and how we are to be in relationship to Him. As already noted, the method by which mankind comes into the right relationship with God is cloudy at best in *The Shack*. Young's Trinity is equally confusing. The author does not develop his understanding of God exclusively from Scripture and, in fact, often contradicts biblical teaching. The first issue is that of imagining and presenting human forms for the members of the Trinity. While some slack might be given for Young's portrait of Jesus, who came in human form (although we don't know what He looks like),

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exhausting work and long list of demands, and not the sitting in endless meetings staring at the backs of people's heads, people he really didn't even know."⁹ Sunday school¹⁰ and family devotions¹¹ both take hits as well. Systematic theology itself takes a postmodern broadside as the Holy Spirit says, "I have a great fondness for uncertainty."¹² While Scripture does not place such words in the mouth of the Holy Spirit, Young's love for uncertainty becomes frustratingly clear as he outlines his concept of salvation.

SALVATION

When Mack asks how he can be part of the Church, Jesus replies, "It's simple, Mack. It's all about relationships and simply sharing life."¹³ On

repeatedly He is particularly fond of all people; when God claims that He has forgiven all sins against Him;¹⁷ that He does not "do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation;"¹⁸ and contrary to many sections of Scripture, God is not a God of judgment:

"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."¹⁹

While Young's comment has some validity, it does not faithfully reflect the teaching of Scripture, which portrays God as actively involved in the punishment of sin.

Young further muddies the waters as he has Jesus reply to Mack's

the first two of the Ten Commandments forbid depicting the Father or the Holy Spirit in physical form. When we create an image of God in our imagination, we then attempt to relate to that image, which is inevitably a false one. This is the essence of idolatry and is forbidden in the Word.

Further, the portrayal of God throughout the novel is one that humanizes Him rather than exalts Him. Young quotes Jacques Ellul: “No matter what God’s power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts himself on our human level and limits himself.”²³ This contradicts the entirety of biblical revelation, which first and often declares God to be absolute Master, yet in no way mitigates the incarnation, as Young and Ellul are trying to claim.

Young further humanizes God and contradicts Scripture by teaching that all the members of the Trinity took human form at the incarnation: “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human.”²⁴ This sounds like modalism, an ancient heresy which teaches that the Trinity is not composed of three distinct members, but three distinct modes in which God appears throughout human history. Even if he doesn’t believe in modalism, it is clear that Young believes that the Father died on the cross with the Son and bears the marks of the cross to this day.²⁵

He also does not believe that the Father abandoned Jesus on the cross, as Scripture declares.²⁶ And any concept of authority and submission in the Godhead is denied,²⁷ although 1 Corinthians 11:1-3 is clear that such authority and submission exists. More than that, Young teaches that God submits to *us* as well.²⁸ By the end of the book, God is reduced to being our servant as we are His (it’s all about relationships, not authority).²⁹

The very essence of God is challenged when Young, quoting from Unitarian-Universalist R. Buckminster Fuller, declares God to be a verb, not

a noun.³⁰ In a related statement, Young has Jesus say of the Holy Spirit, “She is Creativity; she is Action; she is Breathing of Life.”³¹ Yet the Bible presents God as a person (noun) not an action (verb). When this truth is denied, we are moving from the biblical understanding of a personal God to an Eastern understanding of God in everything.³²

Thus, we are not surprised that when Mack asks the Holy Spirit if he will see her again, he is told, “Of course. You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow.”³³ This is not biblical teaching. This idea seems repeated in a line from a song Missy creates, “Come kiss me wind and take my breath Till you and I are one.”³⁴ At what point do we become one with creation? Again, this is an Eastern concept, not a biblical one. Young reinforces his Eastern leanings with a statement right out of New Age teachings: Papa tells Mack, “Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare.”³⁵ Rhonda Byrne would echo this idea in her book, *The Secret*, but you will not find it in the Bible.³⁶

Further, we are told that, “Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.”³⁷ So how did He do so? By trusting in the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Spirit says, “is just the first to do it to the uttermost — the first to absolutely trust my life within him.”³⁸ There is enough truth here to be confusing but not accurate. Jesus, never ceasing to be fully God, had all divine power dwelling within Him. That He chose to limit His use of that power and rely on the Holy Spirit while on earth in no way diminishes His essence.

While Jesus is our example, He is not a guru, blazing a trail in which in this life we too can be like God. This idea smacks of New Age teaching, not Scripture. Jesus even tells Mack that “God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things — ultimately emerging as the real.”³⁹ This is pure New Age spirituality.

The Shack, while occasionally getting things right, is, in the end, a dangerous piece of fiction. It undermines Scripture and the Church, presents, at best, a mutilated Gospel, misrepresents the biblical teachings concerning the Godhead, and offers a New Age understanding of God and the universe. This is not a great novel to explain tragedy and pain. It is a misleading work which will confuse many and lead others astray.

Endnotes:

1. Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007, back cover.
2. *Ibid.*, front cover.
3. Albert Mohler, “A Look at ‘The Shack,’” The Albert Mohler Radio Program, April 11, 2008.
4. *The Shack*, op. cit., pp. 65-66.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 195.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 196.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 177.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 98.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 107.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 203.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 178.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 147, italic in original.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 192.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.
17. *Ibid.*, e.g., pp. 118-119.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 223.
19. *Ibid.*, pg. 120.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 182.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 88, italics in original.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 99.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96, 164.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 96.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 145.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 145.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 194, 204.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 110.
32. God “in” everything is known as pantheism — an Eastern belief akin to pantheism which teaches that God “is” everything. In reality there is very little difference between the two.
33. *The Shack*, op. cit., pg. 198.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 233, italics in original.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 227.
36. For more information on Rhonda Byrne and *The Secret*, see J. Greg Sheryl, “Do You Want to Know ... The Secret?,” *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2007, pp. 1, 11-21.
37. *The Shack*, op. cit., pg. 100.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 112.