

# Is There Danger Lurking in *The Shack*?

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### **About the author**

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Few works of fiction have caused the controversy among Christians that Wm. Paul Young's book *The Shack* has caused. It has perhaps caused more controversy than even Dan Brown's *The Davinci Code* because, while Brown tried to explain something that Christ did, Young has attempted to define God and to explain the Trinity to his readers. This is a controversial issue because the picture a believer has of God defines his theology. Young has taken on a big task that carries with it a lot of responsibility (Jam. 3:1).

C. S. Lewis was a theologian who wrote fiction that deals with spiritual issues. He never considered writing a piece from God's perspective because "Mere advice would be no good; every sentence would have to smell of Heaven" (184). This is what Young has attempted. So, the question then is, did he accomplish it? The only way for a Christian to evaluate the novel's effectiveness is for him to hold it up to the light of Scripture (Ps. 119:105).

Young's fundamental theme in *The Shack* is that, in order for any human being to live a fulfilled life, he must develop a personal relationship with God in all of His persons. It is very clear throughout the novel that, no matter what background an individual has, this relationship with God is free for the taking (or partaking). He makes no exceptions based on ethnicity, age, religion, or past behavior.

Young creates a situation in which Mack, the main character, gets to experience this relationship

in a physical way as God (fondly called Papa), Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (who goes by the name of Sarayu) appear to him in physical bodies (though Sarayu's description is a bit vague and mystical). He spends a weekend with them at the shack where Mack's daughter was presumably tortured and murdered three and a half years earlier. God, in all his persons, is described as a very loving God whose desire is to explain that true fellowship with Him is not possible until man gives up his independence and learns to depend wholeheartedly on God. So what is the controversy? There are actually many controversial issues in the novel, from God appearing as a large African-American woman to Young's imprecise presentation of the Gospel. Perhaps it is best to discuss one item at a time.

### **Could God be a woman?**

Scripture tells of Satan's temptation of Eve. Satan chose to take the form of a serpent as part of his deceit tactic. Surely, if Satan can choose to appear in any form, so can God. However, one of the fundamentals of Christian belief is that Scripture is inspired and inerrant (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21), and for whatever reason, God revealed Himself throughout Scripture in a male form—He is referred to by Christ as "Father," and all throughout Scripture He is referred to by masculine pronouns. So, could He appear as a woman? Absolutely, if He chose to, He could. However, it is His choice.

It is presumptuous to depict Him in a way He has not chosen to depict Himself. This is one of the minor issues in the book. However, some have gone so far as to call this goddess worship, and others have brought up the issue of graven images, both of which are worthy considerations.

### **Does the Trinity practice any form of hierarchy or “chain of command”?**

One of Young’s fundamental arguments throughout the novel is that hierarchy is a man-made practice. He credits the fall with the human need for a “chain of command.” Young’s character Sarayu tells Mack, “Humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge.” Jesus adds, “It is one reason why experiencing true relationship is so difficult for you...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...Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you” (122-23). The truth is that the only example the Christian has to follow is the example set by Christ incarnate. Christ, in His own words, makes it clear that, though He is equal to the Father, He also submits or defers to the Father (John 8:29,

6:38). Even when it came to Christ’s death on the cross, He submitted to the Father’s will (Matt. 26:39). Scripture also demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is submissive to the will of the Father and the Son (John 15:26).

Young goes so far as to insinuate that submission is evil, and it can only take place when there is sin. Yet 1 Corinthians 11:3 says, “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” Scripture also sets up parameters for “hierarchy” within the government and the church. And, ultimately, Christians are commanded to submit to one another (John 13:14). Though humanity’s inability to develop and maintain submissive, unselfish relationships is, as Young states, a result of the fall, perhaps humanity’s view of hierarchy is a God-given remedy to that particular deficiency.

### **How should a Christian develop his or her relationship with God?**

Any relationship is developed by spending time together. The same is true for the Christian’s relationship with God. But how does one do that? The scenes depicted in Young’s novel are not the ordinary man’s journey. How many people in history have received a tangible note in their mailbox that invited them to a specific place to spend time with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in physical forms? Young takes this issue a step further because he undermines every means by which Christians can spend time

with God and develop that relationship. Young says, through his character Mack:

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. It seemed that

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direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners' access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges? (66)

This statement serves only one purpose: to cast doubt on Scripture. As stated earlier, a fundamental to Christian belief is that the Bible is inspired and inerrant. This means that the Bible is "God-breathed" and is absolute truth (2 Pet. 1:21, 2 Tim. 3:16). God chose the means by which He communicates with the world. He chose the men who penned the words. He chose the words that were penned. Young implies (though not very subtly) that man reduced God's words to a book when, in fact, God chose this means of communication.

Young carries the subversive tone of the previous statement throughout the novel, attacking not only Scripture, but also the church, prayer, Christianity, seminary, and even the Gospel. At one point in the novel, Jesus is speaking to Mack when He says, "I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu" (emphasis added) (110). Later on, he adds:

Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptist or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. 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 response to Mack's obvious question "Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?" Jesus answers, "Not at all...Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you" (182). How true it is that God's family will be filled with people from every tribe, tongue, and nation! Young's statements are confusing, though, because Jesus says He is the *best* way, not the *only* way. According to Scripture, Christ did not say "I am a way"; He said "I am *the* way" (John 14:6).

Young confuses the issue further when the reader encounters another conversation: Papa tells Mack that she and Sarayu were on the cross with Jesus. Mack's surprised response is, "At the cross? Now wait, I thought you *left* him—you know—'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" Papa's response is simply, "Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him" (96). Many have focused on the implication that Young teaches modalism (a belief that there is one God who takes on different personas at different times, not three persons in one God). The bigger issue here is that Young is denying Christ's deity! Christ was fully man, but He was and is fully God. Therefore, He did not cry out that His Father had forsaken Him out of some mistaken perception of reality. Scripture says that God cannot look on the sins of this world which Christ had taken on Himself to provide the way of reconciliation (Hab. 1:13; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22).

Because Young does not point his readers to the revelation in God's

Word, he is advocating following new revelation. Young's character of the Holy Spirit, Sarayu, says, "Mackenzie, you can always talk to me and I will always be with you, whether you sense my presence or not." Mack responds, "...how will I hear you?" Her answer is, "You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours, Mackenzie." She goes on to say that he "will begin to better recognize [her] voice as [they] continue to grow [their] relationship" (195-96). In another scene, Sarayu tells Mack to touch a poisonous twig. Mack asks, "If you had not told me this was safe to touch, would it have poisoned

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me?" Sarayu responds, "Of course! But if I direct you to touch, that is different...if you are not hearing my voice, it would be wise to take the time to understand the nature of the plant" (132-33). Sarayu emphasizes her relationship with Mack, but at no point does she point Mack towards the Bible. In fact, she leaves the impression that the Bible is simply a picture of Jesus that does not really have anything to teach its reader. The character Jesus even tells Mack that his life was never intended to be an example (149).

### **Can God really redeem anyone?**

Based on the above statements that Young makes through his character Jesus, it would seem that God can forgive and redeem anyone. However, Young's character Papa (God the Father) has a conversation with Mack that states quite the opposite. Mack's daughter's killer has not been caught, and Papa discusses the topic of forgiveness with Mack. Papa says, "Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him" (224). The logical conclusion to this statement is that if Mack does not forgive Missy's killer, then God cannot redeem Missy's killer. Mack seems to have all of the power in this situation. The idea is somewhat reinforced in a previous scene when Mack encounters his earthly father who was a closet drunk that tied Mack to a tree and beat him. Mack is finally able to forgive his earthly father, so then Papa is able to appear to Mack the following morning in the form of a man rather than a woman (221). The implication here is that Mack's choice to forgive or not forgive somehow limits God. The Bible is clear that God can forgive and redeem anyone who comes to Him because Christ has become the propitiation (or wrath-bearing sacrifice) for sin (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2).

### **This book is a work of fiction, right?**

Some have been tempted to excuse these errors because Young's novel is fiction. A word of caution is in order here. Throughout history, fiction has been used as a teaching

tool. Even Christ used fiction to teach a lesson when he used parables for moral instruction. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., the author of *Reading between the Lines* says, "The truth of a novel is in its meaning, not its facts" (60). Fiction is a very powerful tool that can be used in positive and negative ways. Young, cleverly disguised as Mack's friend Willie, says in the foreword of the book, "I will tell you honestly that being a part of this story has affected me deep inside, in places I had never been before and didn't even know existed" (12). This shows that Young wishes for his book to change the reader. If the Christian reads the foreword first, then he is prepared and even anticipates being changed by the content of the novel.

Others have excused the content of the dialogue Mack has with the members of the trinity because it appears to be all in a dream, and everyone knows that dreams are not real. Also, Young attempts to "cover himself" by including several circumstances that would discredit the novel. He includes the fact that Mack is telling the story from memory in the foreword and insinuates that memories are not reliable; he describes Mack's fall at the beginning of the story—Mack hits his head so hard on the ice that he leaves a trail of blood; and at the end of the story he creates a scene in which Mack has an accident that leaves him unconscious for several days. The response to this is simple: Mack received a tangible invitation before he went to the shack; he even showed it to his friend Willie, so it is clear that it is not imagined.

He was also able to lead authorities to the location of his daughter's body after he woke up from the "dream." These two elements in the story bookend the interaction Mack had with the trinity and add credibility to everything that took place at the shack.

### **Why are these issues hard to find?**

There are many reasons Christians do not pick up on these problems. First, Young's novel is very emotionally driven. The reader feels Mack's pain and wants him to find a loving God who will comfort him. Veith explains it well: "We too often stress feeling rather than truth. We tend to seek emotional religious experiences rather than the cross of Jesus Christ" (23-24). Young carries his reader on an emotional roller-coaster in which he leads the reader to believe that God's only attribute is love. Papa says, "My purposes are always and only an expression of love" (191). The problem with this is that God has many more attributes, not the least of which is holiness. Young dismisses God's holiness when Papa says to Mack, "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" (120). This would be news to Ananias and Sapphira and countless other people whose stories are told in Scripture. Taken to its logical conclusion, the reader is left a bit unsure about what Christ's sacrifice is supposed to save him from. Sarayu explains evil to Mack: "Evil is a word we use to describe the absence of Good, just

as we use the word darkness to describe the absence of Light or death to describe the absence of Life. Both evil and darkness can only be understood in relation to Light and Good; they do not have an actual existence" (136). The paragraph goes on to say that evil is a result of separating oneself from good (or God). So, does humanity need to be saved from itself, from its desire to be independent? That is what Young implies. The members of the trinity discuss the importance of humanity being reconciled to God and that is the reason for Jesus' sacrifice. There is no mention of hell or eternal punishment. If there is no evil and, therefore, no ultimate consequences for evil, then Jesus' sacrifice does not carry the same weight as presented in scripture.

Second, there is enough truth in Young's novel to make the whole thing believable. This only serves to confuse anyone who is truly looking for answers. Since the concept of the trinity—three persons in one God—is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand, Young can get away with saying things that do not really address any questions but can sound very convincing. Sarayu introduces a lengthy discussion about nouns and verbs and tries to explain how verbs are better than nouns. Unfortunately, Young tries to turn nouns into verbs and ends up using more nouns (204-07). In the midst of this discussion, however, Jesus says, "Mack, I don't want to be first among a list of values; I want to be at the center of everything. When I live in you, then together we can live through everything that hap-



pens to you. Rather than a pyramid, I want to be the center of a mobile, where everything in your life—your friends, family, occupation, thoughts, activities—is connected to me...” (207). There is truth in the novel, but Young confuses things by including unscriptural information.

Third, Young’s subversive attitude throughout the novel makes the reader feel as though he cannot disagree with Young because then he will be placed in the same category with all of those people who have disappointed Young throughout his life. While there are church leaders and members, seminary professors, and parents who fail the people that look to them for answers, it is important to remember that they are human beings, and as such will always fall short of divine. God’s divine answers are in the Bible, and everything that Christians allow into their minds must stand up to the light of Scripture. Veith says, “We are impatient with theology, and we dismiss history, thus disdaining the faith of our brothers and sisters who have gone before us and neglecting what they could teach us. We want entertaining worship services...rather than worship that focuses on the holiness of God and His Word. We want God to speak to us in visions and inner voices rather than in the pages of His Word” (24). Believers need to make everything revolve around who God is rather than trying to make God fit what they want Him to be. God is loving, and righteous, and just, and holy, and sovereign, and to focus on only one attribute is to limit every attribute.

In conclusion, the danger in

Young’s *The Shack* is that he disrupts the reader’s view of God, and thus the reader’s theology. As far as literature goes, the novel has merit. Though it will probably not go down in history as a classic, it has value as a well-written novel. The main character is believable and relatable. The reader is drawn into the story and, though the events are predictable, he wants Mack to find love and justice. Most novels would not merit the attention that *The Shack* has received because most novels do not claim to define such a difficult yet important concept as the doctrine of the Trinity. Because the doctrine of the trinity is a core component to Christianity, Young must expect to be held to a higher standard. The bottom line is, though there are glimpses of truth in Young’s novel, when viewed in the light of scripture, it is a mere shadow of the absolute truth that is God’s Word. Sarayu tells Mack, “Don’t confuse...seduction for reality” (123). This is an appropriate warning for the reader of *The Shack*.

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