

# “THE SHACK”

Greg Deuble: [greg.thebiblejesus.com](http://greg.thebiblejesus.com)

William P. Young’s novel *The Shack* has gone gang-busters. Published in May 2007 this 256 page fiction has become the best selling “Christian” novel of all time, and has been translated into many languages. It is proclaimed a New York Bestseller and USA Today’s top seller. So appealing to the modern mind has the novel become, that it’s now sold over 22 millions of copies, and in March this year it was released as a movie.

Not bad for a self-published book which the author initially wrote as a Christmas present for his children on a budget of \$200. And once word got out what a great read it was, Paul (as he prefers to be called) Young began distributing *The Shack* from the back of his car! Such lofty heights from so humble a beginning!

Many folks I know have read *The Shack*, given it as a present to others, and proclaim it to be a great read. Just this very week I was browsing through the ‘Religion’ section of a large book exchange, and couldn’t help but notice all the copies of *The Shack* available for re-sale ... more by far than any other book there. I was arrested by the endorsement on the front cover by Eugene Peterson (the translator of the also popular *The Message Bible*). Peterson makes the astonishing claim that *The Shack* has the potential to do for our generation what *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for previous generations. Some endorsement!



## THE THESIS

*The Shack* is a metaphor for “the house you build out of your own pain” and “for the places you get stuck, you get hurt, you get damaged”. <sup>1</sup> It thus addresses the age-old problem of how God’s sovereignty and love can be reconciled in the midst of human suffering and tragedy, as experienced by the novel’s main character ‘Mack’, a father of five, whose young daughter is murdered by a serial killer.

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<sup>1</sup> The reported statements of the author by *Wikipedia*, *The Shack*.

The bulk of the book narrates Mack's conversations with 'God' who meets him in a shack in the American wilderness. 'God' appears to Mack in three persons --- Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu. But in the process William Young argues that modern Christianity has got it all wrong. In particular, we need to scrap our traditional notions of the Trinity, because God can come to us in whatever form we imagine.

For Young, God the Father --- i.e. Papa of the Trinity --- is a large African-American woman. Jesus is a Middle Eastern labourer, dressed with tool belt and 'tradie' gloves. And the Holy Spirit (whose personal name is Sarayu) is a diminutive looking Asian woman.

## THE REACTION

Needless to say, *The Shack* has evoked a wide spectrum of opinions within the Christian church. Some commentators see it as a beautiful story of healing, in spite of the dubious theological underpinnings.

However, it would be fair to say the overwhelming response has been one of strident criticism. Typical would be the stance taken by the well-known Mars Hill pastor Mark Driscoll, who says the book "misrepresents God" and that the author is "a heretic."<sup>2</sup> (Note the 'h' word!)

Well known Evangelical leader Chuck Colson in his review "Stay Out of The Shack" criticised the "silly lines" Young puts in the mouths of the three persons in his trinity, adding that Young has a very low view of the authority of the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

Even the committed trinitarian apologist Dr Ron Rhodes is aghast at Young's sweeping revision of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Rhodes states that *The Shack* may be an inspirational read, but is full of problems, not least of them being its revision of the Trinity as historically endorsed by 'orthodox' Christianity. Putting the Trinity into three persons is tritheism, and just plain wrong, says Rhodes. He even goes so far as to say this is "heresy"! (There's that 'h' word again!)

Nor is Rhodes content to leave it at that. He says *The Shack* does not even get the doctrine of the incarnation right, for here we have all three persons in the Trinity coming in the flesh ... "When we three spoke ourselves into human 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 universe. We now become flesh and blood." So, instead of Jesus coming in the flesh, we've got the entire Trinity coming.

Rhodes is aghast ... "How dare any human being say that Christianity which is based upon revelation from God Almighty say that Christianity must be revised! I hesitate to think about William Young at the judgment when God says, 'What's this about a revision?'"

Continuing his savage critique, Rhodes points out that personal experience is supreme in *The Shack*. It communicates that personal experience trumps revelation. If you've got problems, you don't go to the Bible, you go instead to your experience. Experience is used to interpret the Bible instead of the Bible being used to interpret Scripture.

As for sin, Papa (the Father), says this, "I am not who you think I am. I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment devouring you from the inside. It is not my purpose to punish it; it is my joy to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, *Wikipedia*, The Shack.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, *Wikipedia*, The Shack.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Ron Rhodes, President of Reasoning From the Scriptures Ministries and prolific writer of over 70 books, with Systematic Theology Degree from Dallas Theological Seminary as quoted at the blog site of the Lion & Lamb Ministries, Christ in Prophecy Journal.

cure it.” I agree that God cures, but God does punish sin. In fact, unbelievers will be punished for all eternity in a politically incorrect place that we call Hell, admonishes Rhodes.

*The Shack*’s heresy in terms of salvation teaches that Christ is just the best way to relate to the Father, not the only way. Ultimately, everybody is going to be “saved”, finally reconciled, regardless of their choices in this life.

Rounding off his blitz, Rhodes says the fact is that Christian bookstores should not be selling *The Shack*. That they do leads me to believe that there are landmines in Christian bookstores today, and innocent people walk in there thinking they are safe, but they step on a landmine and their whole faith blows up. It’s dangerous! That’s why we need spiritual discernment.

In the same Lamb & Lion critique, another “orthodox” commentator by the name of Eric Barger, is equally scathing of *The Shack*. He says that “Papa” is modelled after the style of an African god or more than likely, a black Polynesian god straight out of occultism.

Furthermore, Barger states that Jesus is not once called Christ, and that “this is another Jesus” that the NT warns us against. The apostle Paul’s warning in 2 Corinthians 11: 3-4 about “another Jesus” and “another spirit” and “another gospel” fits the message of *The Shack* perfectly.

Barger continues, that the author crafts God into the image of a man. It says in Romans 1:21-23 that is forbidden for us to do, to craft God into the image of a man. I know that it is a novel and I realize you can take liberties in a novel that you can’t in some other type of book, but in this case Young is playing with something that the Scriptures speak so clearly about.

The third commentator in the Lamb & Lion Ministries critique of *The Shack* is Warren Smith who claims to have been rescued out of New Age spiritism. Smith is in total agreement with the first two, but adds that this is a dangerous book because it sugarcoats Satan’s New Age lies with a little truth.

There must be a great deal of truth in Smith’s assessment, because *The Shack* has also been at the top of the New Age best sellers list as well!

Smith says he is reminded of the verse that warns that “a little leaven leavens the whole lump”. He opines that there are a lot of deceptive voices out there, and that they are coming into the churches through books like *The Shack*.

#### BUT IT’S ONLY A NOVEL

OK. So this sounds pretty dire, but supporters of the book will be asking whether a Christian novel must be doctrinally pure? Why not simply enjoy the book like you would any other fictional work? And don’t the good points of the novel, such as the intense emotional ride, and the message that God is love, outweigh the negatives? And if I gave this book to a God-seeker, wouldn’t it open up fruitful discussions on the questions of salvation where I might have more of a chance at helping others to “find God”? That surely must be positive?

Well, as to the question of whether a Christian novel must be doctrinally correct, in this case it seems obvious that Young’s fiction forms the basis for the theology, and not the other way round. This means

*The Shack* is fictional theology, not theological fiction. Remember, this novel attempts to answer the question, “What is God like?” and it’s hard not to communicate theology from the mouths of characters who actually represent God!

And here is something we Christians need to remember, and remember well: It is an axiom that what we win people with, is what we win them to! Can you imagine Jesus reasoning, “Well, this message of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is way too politically incorrect for my audience. I’ll sugar coat it, water it down, make it more acceptable”? No way. He taught that we are “born again” by intelligently understanding and receiving “the seed-word” of His gospel message. The nature and quality of the “seed” determines the quality of the “believer.”

## THE BEING WHO IS A TRINITY OF PERSONS

Clearly, the strongest criticism of *The Shack* is aimed at Young’s doctrine of the Trinity --- Papa the Father being an African-American woman (who somehow towards the end of the novel mutates into being male!), Jesus a Middle Eastern labourer, and the Holy Spirit named Sarayu being an Asian woman --- rings huge alarm warning bells in the ears of our “orthodox” trinitarian friends. (Recall Ron Rhodes’ criticism that this is tri-theism not trinitarianism.)

As one who is a Biblical unitarian believer that God is a Single Identity (Person) it would be trite for me to say something like, “Well, you trinitarians have created your own philosophical bed, so you better get used to lying in it!”

But the point still stands: Whenever men invent their own deity, confusion must reign supreme. Far better to stick to the straight-forward, wonderfully pure language that the God of the Bible is one Self. No need to amplify the obvious meaning of statements such as God is “only one” (Gal. 3:20), or “one LORD” [*Adonai*] (Mark 12:29 cf Ps.110:1), or “the Father who is the only true God” (John 17:3).

Thus the Bible conveys the beautifully unifying and intelligible revelation that the God of that Bible is a solitary (as in single) identity called the Father. In Scripture, as in real life, single persons are described as single souls.

When the Psalmist says, “my soul” (e.g. Ps. 35:9) he is talking about his own person, a single self (see also for example Matt. 16:26). And when God says of Himself, “My soul” (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:35; Is.42:1; Matt. 12:18) and the Psalmist says of God, “His soul” (e.g. Ps. 11:5), what reasons do we have to assume this means God is really Three souls or three individual persons?

Some fancy footwork is needed by our trinitarian friends here, and they do not disappoint! For they assert that God is one Being eternally existing in three persons. The definition of who constitutes a being suddenly becomes very fluid, as if a being can be described as an impersonal substance or essence.

But a moment’s reflection will debunk this trinitarian ruse. Just ask yourself this; are there any Biblical texts which make a distinction between Being and personhood? No. For the simple reason that in the Bible, a Being is a person! As Kegan Chandler well expresses it,

... if the Bible intended to identify single beings as unipersonal, or as single selves, how would it do so? The biblical language describing single human beings (singular personal pronouns) is the same

language used to describe God. But when it comes to God, Trinitarianism cannot afford to make the natural inference, that single beings are single persons. Instead, Trinitarianism suddenly exchanges the normative use of language for a metaphysical and often ambiguous usage. But this is an unnecessary switch; the Bible does not support any such distinctions. Humans and God are presented in the same terms without qualification: they are described in the way that we ordinarily speak about single persons.<sup>5</sup>

Chandler goes on to cite the great lecturer George Burnap who exposes this metaphysical problem beautifully,

A man demands my assent to the proposition, “there are three Persons in one God”; I ask him what he means by “person”? I ask him if he means a separate independent intelligent Being? He answers he does not. He says he does not use the word in the common sense, but in a sense peculiar to this case. I ask him what that sense is? He cannot tell. You demand of me then, I answer, to assent to a proposition which conveys to my mind no intelligible idea, and, it appears to be equally unintelligible to you. We both ... assent to nothing but words, and if they convey to us no intelligible meaning, to us they are nothing, and we assent to nothing. Were these words in the Bible, then I might say that I believed they expressed truth, though I could not understand it. But not being in the Bible ... I consider them the mere invention of fallible men. I cannot believe on their authority. As I cannot understand them myself, and no one can explain them to me, I think it fair to conclude that those who framed them had no clear ideas.<sup>6</sup>

So, according to both the Bible and our human experience, a being is a person. Thus, the trinitarian formula, that God is one Being existing in three Persons, is shown to be a non-sense. It’s an oxymoron to say God is one Being existing in three Persons, since to be a being is to be a person.

I find it rather ironical that Ron Rhodes who waxes so lyrical about Young’s “revision” of the trinity is himself so blind to his own revision of the God of the Bible! Remember his own words --- “How dare any human being say that Christianity which is based upon revelation from God Almighty say that Christianity must be revised! I hesitate to think about William Young at the judgment when God says, “What’s this about a revision?”

And remember Barger’s criticism of *The Shack*? Barger said that Young “crafts God into the image of a man. It says in Romans 1:21-23 that is forbidden for us to do, to craft God into the image of a man. I know that it is a novel and I realize you can take liberties in a novel that you can’t in some other type of book, but in this case Young is playing with something that the Scriptures speak so clearly about.”

Hang on a minute. Does Barger realise what he just said? If I am not mistaken, don’t trinitarians “craft God into the image of a man”? Doesn’t the doctrine of the trinity teach that Jesus is the God-man, that God became the incarnated Jesus? If the warning of Romans 1:21-23 applies to anybody, surely it applies to trinitarians who say God Himself became man in Jesus?<sup>7</sup>

## CONFUSION REIGNS

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<sup>5</sup> Chandler, Kegan, A. *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma: The Recovery of New Testament Theology*. Restoration Fellowship, McDonough, Georgia. 2016. pp 283-284. (My emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p 284

<sup>7</sup> To follow this theme more fully see my article *Fairy Tales, Tragic Magic*, etc.

On a personal note, I have often sat in the pew and listened to trinitarians in their public praying. I am not exaggerating when I say that I *often* hear prayers like the one I heard last week: "Father, thank you for Your great love for us, for You gave your body for us on the tree of Calvary." Or, "Father, we thank You that You died for us!"

I approached one elder (in a gracious way I hope!) to see if they were aware of their own confusing prayers. I gave the elder the benefit of the doubt, suggesting it may have been a slip of the tongue. I mentioned that I had heard this person so pray a couple of times, but was still prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt. They promised it was just a mental slip, and would attend to it. But that same elder prayed with the same confusion the next time.

You see, it's impossible to believe one thing in your heart (that God is Three Persons in one Being) and for it not to be expressed in your words and prayers sooner or later. Confusion of heart and mind will inevitably lead to confusion of expression.

#### BOTTOM LINE

*The Shack* has certainly opened up a lot of discussion. It certainly has engaged the commentators. It has definitely raised strong emotions to the point where its author has been called a "heretic."

The fact that *The Shack* is such a big hit amongst Christian readers shows how open today's trinitarian Christians are to being taken in by any wind of doctrine that happens to blow at the time. How quickly today's trinitarians seem ready to worship many gods. At the very least they seem to be in a metaphysical muddle and tragic theological fog.

Indeed, it's been well said that if you can believe the mysterious trinity, you can believe anything ... even that 'God' is an African-American woman, Jesus a Middle Eastern labourer, and the Holy Spirit is named Sarayu being a diminutive Asian lady!

#### POSTSCRIPT

A few weeks after posting my article, a reader alerted me to the following:-

Dave Aldrich, the graphic artist behind the controversial best-selling novel "The Shack," recently said he has "deep regrets" for promoting a book that leads to apostasy.

"Over 10 years ago, I was captivated by the story and felt honored to be part of the graphic creation of the book. I was so drawn into it, wanting to know the God it portrayed," the Aldrich Design artist [posted to social media](#) on April 4. "The Shack's story wonderfully painted this picture to me of an incredibly knowable and loving God, one full of forgiveness, but without being judgmental."

Aldrich's sentiments, however, were short lived and with the release of the film he felt he had to say something.

"I have deep regrets now of not just being involved with it but also in promoting it. The movie release of 'The Shack' has brought all this back to my mind and I felt the need to apologize to all who I may have led astray by my promoting the book," he added.

Read more at

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/the-shack-cover-artist-praised-renouncing-book-i-have-deep-regrets-180895/#T3LbcxFyG3bmHGr5.99>