

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Thinking Biblically about The Shack: The Movie (and the Book)

The movie, *The Shack*, has just been released in American theaters and is generating a similar level of discussion among Christians as did the book by the same title, which was published in 2010. William Young is a compelling, imaginative writer and the movie seeks to capture on film the same imaginative presentation of tragedy and God's involvement and answer to such tragedy.

First, a brief summary of *The Shack's* contents: It is important to remember that the book and the movie are fiction. The story is told by a man named Willie. Willie's friend, Mackenzie Phillips (Mack, played by Sam Worthington in the movie), has had a difficult life in many ways. He had an alcoholic, brutally abusive father. This left him bitter and angry. The experience with his father caused him also to be bitter toward God, toward ministry in general, and toward the Bible in particular. To heighten his personal tragedy, while spending time with his children in the woods of the US northwest, his daughter, Missy, was kidnapped and brutally murdered in a mountain shack. Mack sinks into despair and a degree of hopelessness. Although his life does go on and although he has a loving, Christ-centered wife named Nan, Mack is not really interested in spiritual things and certainly not in any kind of personal relationship with the living God. Then one day he gets a letter in his mailbox from "Papa," a name Nan had used for God. At first he ignores the note, but he cannot let go of it. It is an invitation to come to the shack where Missy was killed. Reluctantly, yet with insatiable curiosity, Mack goes to the shack. He sees the blood-stained floor of the cabin where Missy was killed. And then he meets God, but it is a bizarre depiction of God as Trinity: A large African woman ("Papa"=the Father), a Jewish carpenter (=the Son, Jesus Christ) and a small Asian woman called Sarayu (=the Holy Spirit). [Sarayu is a vital river in the *Rig-Veda*, an important text of ancient Hinduism.] Mack also meets and talks with Sophia, not another member of the godhead, but the personification of wisdom, as apparently one finds in the book of Proverbs. Throughout the story, Mack is led by the members of the Trinity (and Sophia) through a mystical and mythical journey. Mack confronts his anger, his bitterness, his lack of trust, his need to forgive (his father and Missy's killer), and his own inadequacies—only to discover and understand the true meaning of love, forgiveness, trust, and especially freedom. Mack seems now to understand and returns to Nan and his other children, even comforting one of his daughters, Katie, who blames herself for Missy being kidnapped and killed. Mack makes certain she feels no guilt or responsibility. He goes on with his life now, renewed, refreshed and with great joy. He has seen God and understands!

How do we think through this presentation of God, which I believe is the most important aspect of both the book and the movie? Both the book and the movie draw you in. They are

incredibly imaginative. I must admit, though, that I was at first aghast at the images of the Trinity. Why would you make God the Father a woman, I remember asking myself when Mack first meets “Papa”? I was shocked at how he has the Trinity laughing, playing practical jokes and roaring with laughter when Jesus drops a plate filled with food. In conversation after conversation, Mack hears explanations of why things are the way they are on earth. Yet, some of it is quite believable, especially when one remembers how difficult it is to imagine and understand the infinite and the omnipotent, let alone how God can be three-in-one. There is the clarity of a basic biblical truth in *The Shack*—that the members of the Trinity have enjoyed love and communication for eternity. Yet, the manner in which Young depicts all this stretches my own personal credulity. For me, it is not really believable. I kept wanting to give Young and the movie producers the benefit of the doubt about the depictions of the godhead. I kept saying to myself, remember the significant liberties that C.S. Lewis took in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series when it came to Aslan as a Christ figure. But, Lewis intentionally created an entire fantasy world in Narnia. Young’s world is not a fantasy world, for he has God revealing Himself to Mack, a 21st century man, not a person locked in a fantasy world like Narnia. I did conclude that Young is no C.S. Lewis. He does not claim to be Lewis, but it was helpful for me to make that distinction. I was offended several times at how condescending God seems to be of the local church. I did not find that believable at all. Yes, the church is people, the living body of Christ, but the local church is still precious and critical to God’s plan. Finally, I kept coming back to Scripture where the Godhead *is* revealed. I thought of the Transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17, where the preincarnate glory of Jesus is revealed. I thought of Isaiah 6, where the prophet sees the glorified God on His throne in all His majesty and power. I thought of Revelation 1:12-18 and Revelation 4 and 5, where we are ushered into the very throne room of the Trinitarian God. The other aspect of each of these parts of Scripture is the response of individual humanity—each one bows in adoration, awe, worship and utter abandonment. It seems to me that Young’s attempt (in the book and then in the movie) to bring God down to Mack, ends up diminishing and demeaning the power, majesty, glory and utter transcendence of God. For that reason, I could not find *The Shack’s* portrayal of God authentic, believable or correct. In diminishing all the glorious attributes of God, it is almost as if Young, in a Postmodern, post-Christian manner, seeks to defend God’s sovereignty and how He runs His world. Job 42:2-6 declares rather clearly, we do not need to do that.

Finally, can we draw any theological conclusions from *The Shack*? James B. DeYoung is a Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Western Seminary and his theological analysis of *The Shack* has been most helpful to me. In a review of the book, DeYoung claims that he has known Young for over a dozen years and offers compelling proof that Young has embraced “Christian universalism” and has defended this view on several occasions. While he frequently disavows “general universalism” (the idea that many roads lead to God), he has affirmed his hope “that all will be reconciled to God either this side of death or after death.” Christian universalism (sometimes called universal reconciliation) argues that love is the supreme attribute of God that trumps all others. Even after the death of the human, God’s love reaches beyond the grave. Nothing in the universe is outside the ultimate reconciling power of God’s love—even fallen angels. According to the editors of the book, they worked through the book for over a year, making certain that all aspects of universal reconciliation were removed.

However, I believe that remnants of Christian universalism resonate throughout the book. Following DeYoung and others, permit to me offer several thoughts about *The Shack*:

1. The book makes the claim that God “cannot act apart from love” (p. 102) and that He “purposes what He does always as an expression of love” (p. 191). Is this theologically correct? Is not God also a God of justice and righteousness?
2. In the novel, Papa denies that he never “pours out wrath and throws people into hell.” Papa asserts, “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” (p. 120). God will not condemn “most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love” (p. 162). That sin is its own punishment is the Eastern mystical concept of *karma*, not the Christian Gospel. Furthermore, as a vital aspect of a personal relationship with the living God, neither the book nor the movie develop or even emphasize to Mack the necessity of the biblical doctrine of repentance.
3. When the "godhead" in the novel discusses the “fall,” there is no mention of Satan (see pp. 134-37). In fact, one searches in vain for any significant recognition of Satan at all in *The Shack*.
4. One also searches in vain for any significant mention of God’s justice. The Bible resonates with the truth that God is a just God. God is a God of love, but He is also a God of justice!
5. Albert Mohler astutely observes that *The Shack* embraces some form of universalism, universal redemption, and ultimate reconciliation: Jesus tells Mack: “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.” Jesus adds, “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, my Beloved.” Mack then asks the obvious question — do all roads lead to Christ? Jesus responds, “Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.” Given the context, it is impossible not to draw essentially universalistic or inclusivistic conclusions about Young’s meaning. “Papa” chides Mack that he is now reconciled to the whole world. Mack retorts, “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?” “Papa” responds, “The whole world, Mack.”
6. On p. 99, Young writes something that is manifestly heretical: “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we become 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 become flesh and blood.” It is Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, who added to His deity humanity. That is not true of the Spirit or of the Father. Further, Young, in the novel, has both Papa and Sarayu bearing the marks of the crucifixion in their hands. That is blatantly false! There is absolutely no biblical evidence for such a claim. It is Jesus who bears the marks, not the Spirit or the Father. Young’s depiction of the

Trinity is also dangerously close to modalism, something the early church condemned as heresy.

7. One searches in vain to find any embracing of the biblical teaching that there is indeed a future judgment. God reconciles Himself to the physical world through the finished work of Jesus, but He insists that faith on the part of the human is the means by which humans are reconciled to Him. That is absent in the novel.
8. *The Shack* bears a clear prejudice against the institution of the local church. In the novel, Jesus argues vehemently that God “never has, never will” create institutions (p. 178).
9. It is difficult as one reads this novel to see any regard for the Bible. It is discredited, treated glibly and basically ignored.
10. Finally, as Ben Kayser observes, “*The Shack* never explicitly seems to state that Jesus is ‘the way.’ Also, there’s a running plot line throughout the movie of Mack telling his children a Native American legend of Multnomah Falls in which a young woman sacrifices herself for her people, and the Great Spirit honors her death by blessing the tribe with a stream that results in the beautiful Multnomah Falls. The Asian woman who portrays the Holy Spirit is given the name Sarayu, which is Hindi for ‘wind’ or ‘holy river.’ When you consider that this movie is made by the producers of *THE LIFE OF PI*, which argues that we should simply believe the truth we want to believe, it’s not surprising that *THE SHACK* is made acceptable for all religions. Thus, nearly every major religion may find something they like in *THE SHACK* that will reinforce their worldview. As Jesus says in John 4:24, God is indeed Spirit (John 4:24), but He wants us to worship Him, through His truth, not our own.”

Albert Mohler makes a perceptive observation about *The Shack*: “All this reveals a disastrous failure of evangelical discernment. It is hard not to conclude that theological discernment is now a lost art among American evangelicals — and this loss can only lead to theological catastrophe . . . *The Shack* is a wake-up call for evangelical Christianity . . . The popularity of this book [and movie] among evangelicals can only be explained by a lack of basic theological knowledge among us — a failure even to understand the Gospel of Christ. The tragedy that evangelicals have lost the art of biblical discernment must be traced to a disastrous loss of biblical knowledge. Discernment cannot survive without doctrine.” If you are going to read the book or see the movie, do so with caution and with your mind engaged. Be certain that you critically think through its intentional distortions of truth. In Colossians 2:8, the Apostle Paul warns, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world, rather than Christ.” That warning aptly applies to *The Shack*.

See Ben Kayser, “*The Shack* Probably Won’t Lead You Astray. . . But It Could Lead Some People,” in www.movieguide.org; James B. De Young, “At the Back of *The Shack*: A Torrent of Universalism” (Unpublished paper); and Albert Mohler, “The Shack—The Missing Art of Evangelical Discernment,” www.albertmohler.com (6 March 2017).