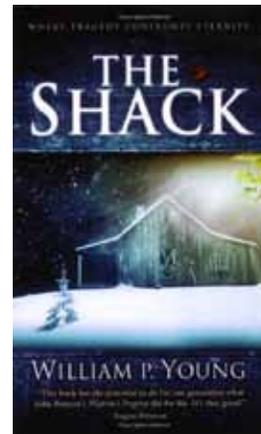


The Shack Book Review

by Jeremy Cagle



One of the saddest stories ever written is William Shakespeare's *Titus Adronicus*. In this poetic saga, the Roman General Titus Adronicus returns from war to find that his sons are being executed on murder charges and his daughter has been sexually assaulted. To prevent his sons' death, Titus cuts off his own hand and sends it to the emperor, all to no avail. At this point in the story, the General gives the following testimony to his emotional state:

Let my tears stanch the earth's dry
appetite;
My sons' sweet blood will make it shame
and blush.
O earth, I will befriend thee more with
rain,
That shall distill from these two ancient
turns,
Than youthful April shall with all his
showers:
In summer's drought I'll drop upon thee
still;
In winter with warm tears I'll melt the
snow,
And keep eternal spring-time on they face.¹

At another time in the poem, he says
this:

Therefore I tell my sorrows to the stones;
Who, though they cannot answer my
distress,
Yet in some sort they are better than the
tribunes,
For that they will not intercept my tale:
When I do weep, they humbly at my feet
Receive my tears and seem to weep with
me.²

Tragedy can bring us to our knees.
The death of a loved one, the loss of
a job, and the deterioration of health

can paralyze us with despair. To put this on a larger scale, the starvation of innocent children, the horrendous poverty in third world countries, and the violence that is so prevalent in much of the world today, can all leave us asking the question, “Why?” “Why did this have to happen to me?” “Why did God let this occur?” “How could a good God allow so much evil to exist in His world?”

While William Shakespeare was not trying to deal with the problem of evil in his poem *Titus Adronicus*, many books have been written to deal with it since. One of them is William Paul Young’s recent novel, *The Shack*.

Published in 2007 by Windblown Media, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*³ has spent some time as #1 on The New York Times Bestseller list and currently has more than two million copies in print. The book has its own website: www.theshackbook.com and the book has the following promotional crusade on one of its back pages:

A team of us who have read and been touched by *The Shack* are convinced this book deserves a reading across the broadest reaches of our culture. Not only is this a compelling and provocative

story, but it has a literary quality to it that distinguishes it as a special gift. It offers one of the most poignant views of God and how he relates to humanity that has been written in our time. It will not only encourage those who already know him but also engage those who have not yet recognized his work in their lives . . .⁴

Here are some ideas to help you share this book with others. Give the book to friends, even strangers, as a gift . . . Write a book review for your local paper . . . If you own a shop or business, consider putting a display of these books on your counter to resell to customers . . . If you know of people (authors, speakers, etc.) who have a voice to the wider culture, ask them if they would review a copy and make some comments in their website, newsletters, etc . . . Talk about the book on email lists you’re on, forums you frequent and other places you engage other people on the Internet.⁵

Not only is the book promoted by its publishing company, but it is endorsed by several well-known people. Here is what some of them said.

Eugene Peterson, Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology, Regent College and author of *The Message*:

When the imagination of a writer and the

passion of a theologian cross-fertilize the result is a novel on the order of *The Shack*. This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!⁶

Patrick M. Roddy, Emmy Award winning producer for ABC News:

The Shack is a one of a kind invitation to journey to the very heart of God. Through my tears and cheers, I have been transformed by the tender mercy with which William Paul Young opened the veil that too often separated me from God and from myself. With every page, the complicated do’s and don’ts that distort a relationship into a religion were washed away as I understood Father, Son, and Spirit for the first time in my life.

Kathie Lee Gifford, Co-host, NBC’s *Today Show*:

The Shack will change the way you think about God forever.

Michael W. Smith, Christian Recording Artist:

The Shack is the most absorbing work of fiction I’ve read in many years. My wife and I laughed, cried, and repented of our own lack of faith along the way.

The Shack will leave you craving for the presence of God.

Wynonna Judd, Recording Artist:

Reading *The Shack* during a very difficult transition in my life, this story has blown the door wide open to my soul.

William Paul Young may have intended his book to be a novel but as the above quotations have indicated; it has been received by readers as something much more than that.

Content.

The Shack is a fictional story about a man who encounters tremendous tragedy and later encounters God. The story is told through chapter titles with cute headings such as “A Piece of Pi (the Greek letter pi, not the desert pie);” “A Breakfast of Champions;” “A Long Time Ago, in a Garden Far, Far Away;” “Here Come Da Judge,” and “In the Belly of the Beasts.” The book contains 248 pages, so it would be impossible to cover everything in it but here is a general summary of its contents.

Mackenzie Allen Phillips, a.k.a. “Mack” is the lead character of the book and has a history of being familiar with tragedy.

Mack's father was a heavy drunk who beat him and his mother. His father was also a religious hypocrite. The author says this about him:

Although externally religious, his overtly strict church-elder father was a closet drinker, especially when the rain didn't come, or came too early, and most of the times in between . . . From the few stories Mack has told me, I know his daddy was not a fall-asleep-happy kind of alcoholic but a vicious mean beat-your-wife-and-then-ask-God-for-forgiveness drunk.⁷

After leaving home at a young age (and poisoning his father), Mack settles down in Oregon, works a desk job, and starts a family. In regard to his religious life:

Mack is not very religious. He seems to have a love/hate relationship with Religion, and maybe even with the God that he suspects is brooding, distant, and aloof. Little barbs of sarcasm occasionally spill through the cracks in his reserve like piercing darts dipped in poison from a well deep inside. Although we sometimes both show up on Sundays at the same local pew and pulpit Bible church (the 55th Independent Assembly of Saint John the Baptist, we like to call it), you can tell that he is not too comfortable there.⁸

But Mack's interest in God or in greater issues in life is going to be increased. On a camping trip to Wallowa Lake State Park with three of his children, his daughter Missy goes missing and never returns. It is later told to the reader that Missy was kidnapped by "the Ladybug Killer" and taken out to a shack deep in the forest and murdered. Upon his return home, as he begins to recover from a deep depression, Mack receives a letter in the mail that says,

Mackenzie,
It's been a while. I've missed you.
I'll be at the shack next weekend if you
want to get together.
- Papa⁹

Against his better judgment, Mack decides to travel back to the abandoned shack deep in the woods to find out what the note is all about. What interested him most about the note was that "Papa" was his wife's favorite name for God.¹⁰ Could *God* have written the note? Did *God* miss Mack? Did *God* want Mack to come to the shack to "get together?" Mack travels back to the shack to find out.

After visiting the place of his nightmares, Mack starts to leave for home. As he is returning to his car, Mack's surroundings begin to

miraculously change and he is forced, by curiosity, to stay and watch. The ice suddenly melts and is replaced by growing plants. The path to the shack becomes clear of its debris and even inviting . . . welcoming almost. The shack itself looks brand-new. Smoke comes out of its chimney. And as he comes to the door and opens it, he is given a tremendous hug by "a large beaming African-American woman." An Asian woman then approaches him and wipes the tears away from his face. A Middle Eastern man then appears, "Dressed like a laborer, complete with tool belt and gloves."¹¹ As he is trying to process what he is seeing, Mack asks the obvious question, "Which one of you is God?" To which they all reply, "I am."¹²

The rest of the book is the account of Mack's weekend with "God" and how it impacts his life. He eats the cooking of the black woman named "Papa" (God the Father),¹³ plants a garden with Sarayu (God the Spirit),¹⁴ and walks on water with Jesus (God the Son).¹⁵ He has serious talks with each of the three persons concerning doctrinal topics such as why Jesus came to the earth,¹⁶ the wrath of God,¹⁷ the judgment of God,¹⁸ the authority of God,¹⁹ the law of God,²⁰ and the nature of God.²¹ He even has an opportunity to meet his deceased father (who is in

Heaven)²² and to find the identity of his daughter's killer.²³ All helped, of course, by God.

After the weekend, Mack returns home a changed man. He has forgiven his daughter's killer and he has come out of his depression to be a thoughtful, caring individual who is full of life. As the author describes it,

I have to tell you that I've never been around another adult who lives life with such simplicity and joy. Somehow he has become a child again. Or maybe more accurately, he's become the child he never was allowed to be; abiding in simple trust and wonder. He embraces even the darker shades of life as part of some incredibly rich and profound tapestry; crafted masterfully by invisible hands of love.²⁴

To get something of the flavor of Young's writing, here is a quick synopsis of one of the chapters in *The Shack*. Chapter 11 is entitled "Here Come Da Judge" and, in this chapter, Mack meets Wisdom. After walking on water with Jesus, Mack and Jesus come to a cave where Jesus tells Mack to enter alone. As he does so, Mack comes to a chair and sits in it. Suddenly, a beautiful woman appears in front of Mack behind an elaborate desk. She is later

identified as Sophia, Papa’s wisdom.²⁵

Mack and Sophia begin to discuss why Mack’s daughter had to die and Mack admits to blaming God for Missy’s death. Sophia then tells Mack why he has come to meet her.

“I’m quite a mess, aren’t I?” [Mack asked].

“Yes, you are.” Mack looked up and she smiled back. “You are a glorious, destructive mess, Mackenzie, but you are not here to repent, at least not in the way that you understand. Mackenzie, you are not here to be judged.”

“But,” he again interrupted. “I thought you said that I was . . .”

“. . . here for judgment?” She remained cool and placid as a summer breeze as she finished his question. “I did. But *you* are not on trial here.”

Mack took a deep breath, relieved at her words.

“*You* will be the Judge!”²⁶

And who exactly is Mack to judge? “God and the human race.”²⁷ Mack has been so bitter and judgmental for so long, Sophia decides to let Mack judge everyone. Why only judge a few people? Why not judge everybody? Specifically, Sophia tells Mack to begin by judging his own children. Two of his children can go to Heaven and three

of them can go to Hell and Mack is to decide which ones go where.

Mack couldn’t believe what he was hearing and started to panic.

“Mackenzie.” Her voice now came as calm and wonderful as first he heard it. “I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does.”²⁸

Sophia then explains how Papa (God the Father) does not send anyone to Hell. But, instead, He sent Jesus to die for everybody.²⁹ Papa loves all of His children and He refuses to punish any of them so He punished Himself in their place. Just like Mack would not want any of his own children to go to Hell, neither does Papa. So Papa sent Jesus to die for every human being on the planet that they could all go to Heaven.³⁰

Not only that, but it wasn’t Papa’s fault that Missy died.

“But I still don’t understand why Missy had to die” [Mack said].

“She didn’t have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa’s. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa has responded with goodness.

What happened to Missy was the work of evil and no one in your world is immune from it.”³¹

After a few more words, Sophia lets Mack see a vision of Missy playing with Jesus and Mack leaves the cave.

Evaluation of Content.

On a positive note, the book is well-written and very creative. William Paul Young writes in a way that is very captivating to a contemporary audience. He makes God out to be someone that most people today would really like, which is probably why the book is so popular. For instance, on one of Mack’s first introductions to Papa (God the Father), he notices that she is wearing earphones. So Mack asks her,

“May I ask what you’re listening to?”

“You really wanna know?”

“Sure.” Now Mack was curious.

“West Coast Juice. Group called Diatribe and an album that isn’t even out yet called *Heart Trips*. Actually,” she winked at Mack, “these kids haven’t even been born yet.”

“Right,” Mack responded, more than a

little incredulous. “West Coast Juice, huh? It doesn’t sound very religious.”

“Oh, trust me, it’s not. More like Eurasian funk and blues with a message, and a great beat.” She sidestepped toward Mack as if she were doing a dance move and clapped. Mack stepped back. “So God listens to funk?” Mack had never heard “funk” talked about in any properly righteous terms. “I thought you would be listening to George Beverly Shea or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir - you know, something churchier.”

“Now see here, Mackenzie. You don’t have to be lookin’ out for me. I listen to everything - and not just to the music itself, but the hearts behind it. Don’t you remember your seminary classes? These kids ain’t saying anything I haven’t heard before; they’re just full of vinegar and fizz. Lots of anger and, I must say, with some good reason too. They’re just some of my kids, showin’ and spoutin’ off. I am especially found of those boys, you know. Yup, I’ll be keeping my eye on ‘em.”³²

What modern audience wouldn’t like the idea of God listening and dancing to funk music? What person off the street wouldn’t like to hear that God approves of their anger?

God is also portrayed in the book as a

female, which would be very acceptable to those of the feminist persuasion. God the Father and God the Spirit are both portrayed as ladies and ethnic ladies at that. Papa tells Mack why she did this.

“Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to *appear* to you as a man or a woman, it’s because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.”

She leaned forward as if to share a secret. “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is *not* about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.”³³

But this appeal to a contemporary audience is the downfall of the book. In fact, the book is not written to portray God from any angle but that of a contemporary/secular audience. In this book, the culture defines God, not the other way around. The Bible was not Young’s authority when he wrote this novel (see Biblical Accuracy below), nor was any Christian creed or

doctrinal statement.³⁴ The author’s authority was the world around him.

For instance, when discussing the authority of God, he writes,

“It’s one reason why experiencing true relationship is so difficult for you,” Jesus added. “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. You rarely see or experience relationship apart from power. Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you . . .”³⁵

[Papa said], “For now I just want you to be with me and discover that our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me. I’m not a bully, not some self-centered demanding little deity insisting on my own way.”³⁶

Young even makes the comment that there is no authority within the Trinity.

“Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command or “great chain of being” as your ancestors termed it. What you’re seeing

here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours.”

“Really? How so?”

“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.”³⁷

At one point, Jesus even says that God submits to men.³⁸

How is that opinion of authority different from the way the post-modern³⁹ world views authority? It isn’t. In fact, that *is* the way the post-modern world views authority: as a sinful thing. The worst thing in the world for a postmodernist is for someone else to tell him what to do. And the worst thing in the world for many Americans today is for someone else to tell them what to do. Consider some of the following quotes about Americans and religion.

Americans are making up their own rules, their own laws. In effect, we’re making up our own moral codes. Only 13 percent of us believe in all of the Ten

Commandments. Forty percent of us believe in five of the Ten Commandments. We choose which laws of God we believe in. There is absolutely no moral consensus in this country as there was in the 1950’s, when all our institutions commanded more respect. Today, there is very little respect for the law - any kind of law.⁴⁰

The early pioneers were Nike’s “Just Do It!” (in other words, don’t think about it and don’t let anything stand in the way to your doing it) and Burger King’s “Sometimes, you gotta break the rules.” And the imitator’s have been numerous. Bacardi Black Rum, which advertises itself as “the taste of the night,” goes on to say, “Some people embrace the night because rules of the day do not apply.” Easy Spirit shoes even latched onto this theme promising a shoe that “conforms to your food so you don’t have to conform to anything.” Ralph Lauren’s Safari celebrates “living without boundaries.” Even stayed and reliable Merrill Lynch declares that “Your world should know no boundaries.” And Nieman Marcus encourages its customers to relax because, it says, there are “No rules here.”⁴¹

That is exactly the way God views authority in *The Shack*. Authority hinders human beings from relationship. Authority is wrong. So God is not an authority. At best, in

The Shack, God is a life coach. God is your friend, not your ruler. God is your counselor, not your sovereign. And, because of that, this book is not about God teaching the world about God. This book is about the world teaching God about God. Young takes secular ideas about Who God should be and tries to redefine God with them (see some of the other categories below for more examples of this).

The Bible has a word for that. It is called idolatry.

Idolatry is “the paying of divine honors to any created thing.”⁴² It is worshipping something that is not God. Or, to say it another way, it is worshipping something that has been created. It could be a statue or it could be an idea. The God that is written about in *The Shack* is a created idea. This God is not a reality and he/she/whatever does not correspond with reality. This God is a created thing. That is why the book is called a novel. Its representation of God is novel. Its teachings about God are novel. They are made up to reflect the modern world’s view of God.

Biblical Accuracy.

As mentioned earlier, *The Shack* is not concerned with Biblical accuracy. In fact, the entire book is about God

revealing more of Himself than what He has already revealed in the Bible. The novel is concerned with ongoing revelation. But, with that in mind, it would be helpful to look at how some of the main subjects in *The Shack* hold up against Biblical scrutiny.

First, the gender of God. For years, feminists have tried to picture God as a mother and Jesus as a woman.⁴³ *The Shack* just picks up where they have left off. It has already been pointed out that the book refers to God the Father as an African-American woman and God the Spirit as an Asian woman. The question we now have to answer is: so what? What does it matter what gender God has? What’s wrong with portraying Him as a male/female/whatever?

John 4:24 says that “God is spirit.” And Numbers 23:19 and Hosea 11:9 both refer to God as not being a man. Deuteronomy 4:15-16 also warns Israel,

So watch yourselves carefully . . . so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

In other words, God does not have a specific gender.

It also needs to be mentioned that God is said to have some feminine characteristics in the Bible. He is never given a feminine title but He does have feminine characteristics. In Isaiah 66:13, the Lord says, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you will be comforted in Jerusalem.” Psalm 123:2 says,

Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,
Until he is gracious to us.

Matthew 23:37 records Jesus as saying,

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

But with all of that said, the pronoun that is used to refer to God in the Bible is always a “He.” And God is always referred to as our Heavenly “Father,” not our Heavenly “Mother.” In fact, every member of the Trinity always has a masculine reference in Scripture.

Why is that? One reason is that God

is a person and He must be referred to in a personal way. God is not an “it.” God is a “He.” God is not a thing. God is a person and, as such, He must be referred to with a personal pronoun. And in His sovereign wisdom, the Lord chose to inspire the Biblical writers to use the personal pronoun “He.” As one author put it,

No matter one’s reasonable concerns or social convictions, Scripture must be normative for providing and defining the appropriate Christian language for God . . . It has been established that God is genderless, but it is the pattern of Scripture to speak of God *as though* He is masculine.⁴⁴

To write a book, fiction or non-fiction, portraying God as a female is horrendously unBiblical. Not only do the Father and the Spirit not have bodies (only the Son has a body in Scripture), but God is always referred to with a masculine pronoun. To write about a God Who is not a “He” is not to write about the God of Scripture.

Second, the Trinity. The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* provides the following definition for the word “Trinity:”

Trinity means that the one divine nature

is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

The Trinity is the teaching that God is three-in-one. God is a tri-unity. He is three persons and He is one God.

The Bible is very clear about this doctrine. For example, all three members of the Trinity were involved in creation⁴⁶ and all three members are involved in upholding creation.⁴⁷ All three members were involved at the cross.⁴⁸ And the cross is one of the places where *The Shack* contradicts Scripture in its portrayal of the Trinity.

During his first day at the shack, Papa tells Mack about who he/she/whatever is. Papa says,

When we three spoke ourself 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 created universe, we now became flesh and blood. It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn't stop being the bird, but it does alter his experience of life significantly.⁴⁹

In case the reader misunderstands this,

not only did Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the human existence of the Son, but they were also all crucified with God the Son.

"How can you really know how I feel?" Mack asked, looking back into her eyes.

Papa didn't answer, only looked down at their hands. His gaze followed hers and for the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his. She allowed him to tenderly touch the scars, outlines of a deep piercing, and he finally looked up again into her eyes. Tears slowly making their way down her face, little pathways through the flour that dusted her cheeks.

"Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark," she stated softly and gently. "We were there *together*."⁵⁰

Nowhere does the Bible teach that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all crucified at the cross. In fact, to believe such a thing would make the Trinity and the crucifixion meaningless. How could God the Father pour out His wrath on God the Son if the Father was being crucified with the Son? How could we make sense of passages like Isaiah 53:5, which says, "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting

Him to grief" if *The Shack* is right? Why would Jesus cry out "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me" (Mk 15:34) if God the Father were being crucified with Him? What sense would it be for Him to pray "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Lk 23:46), if the Father were dying with Him? And, if the Father was not punishing the Son for the sins of the elect, why was Jesus being punished at all? And who or what was punishing Him?

None of these questions are answerable because *The Shack's* portrayal of the Trinity is unBiblical.

Third, the problem of evil. *The Shack* was written to address the problem of evil. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God let tragedy happen? As the Content section above shows, the entire story-line of this novel was written to answer these kinds of questions.

While Young is never clear exactly what he is saying regarding the solution to this problem, he does discuss it. Here are some of the things his characters say.

Mack continued on, "Did God use her to punish me for what I did to my father? That isn't fair. She didn't deserve this. Nan didn't deserve this." Tears streamed down

his face. "I might have, but they didn't."

"Is that who your God is, Mackenzie? It is no wonder you are drowning in your sorrow. Papa isn't like that, Mackenzie. She's not punishing you, or Missy, or Nan. This was not his doing . . ."⁵¹

"But I still don't understand why Missy had to die."

"She didn't have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa's. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa has responded with goodness. What happened to Missy was the work of evil and no one in your world is immune from it . . ."⁵²

"But if she hadn't died, I wouldn't be here now."

"Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me."⁵³

In other words, God is not responsible for evil because God is not ultimately in control of everything. God doesn't like evil any more than human beings do,

but God can't help it. He is powerless to prevent what happens. What happens in life just happens. Fate controls all things, not God. Man sinned and evil entered the world and now God is doing the best He can to just contain it. He doesn't plan the evil that happens, He just reacts to it.

This view of the problem of evil is really no different from Harold Kushner's 1981 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.⁵⁴ It is also the teaching of a heretical branch of Christian theology called open theism.⁵⁵ But whatever you call it and whoever propagates it, this answer to the problem of evil is directly opposed to what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign over all things and, not only does He *know* the future, but He *plans* the future. He *orchestrates* it. He orchestrates it so perfectly that nothing ever happens that is not perfectly under His control. Psalm 139:16 says,

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.

Isaiah 46:9-10 says,

Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which
have not been done,
Saying, "My purpose will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good
pleasure."

Philippians 2:13 says, "For it is God Who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

God is in control of everything. His purpose is accomplished and it will stand. He has ordained every event that will happen before it happens. To say that something happened that is not God's plan is to go against His Word. To claim that something happened that was not *God's doing* is to fly in the face of the Bible.

So if God is responsible for everything that happens, that still leaves us with the question: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God let tragedy happen? Why did Missy have to die? While we do not have the space in this article to answer this question in tremendous detail, here are some bullet-point explanations for the problem of evil. If you would like more information about each point,

please see the attached footnotes.

- 1). No one is good.⁵⁶ Bad things do not happen to good people because no one is good. Bad things only happen to bad people because, in God's eyes, everyone is bad.⁵⁷
- 2). The Bible does not say where evil comes from.⁵⁸
- 3). God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. There is nothing evil in the person of God. God is perfectly good.⁵⁹
- 4). If it were not for evil, we would know nothing of God's grace and mercy and compassion. If it were not for evil, Jesus Christ would have never lived among us and died for us.⁶⁰
- 5). God has a plan for evil.⁶¹

Consistency

The Shack is inconsistent in several areas⁶² but the most obvious is its claim to be a novel. The title page of the book says "The Shack: A Novel by Wm. Paul Young in collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings."⁶³ By definition, a novel is "a relatively long

fictional prose narrative."⁶⁴ In other words, a novel is a story or tale. It is when an author tells a made-up account of some story or event.

But *The Shack* makes claims about itself that are far beyond the claims of any fictional story. Fictional stories can inspire or teach some truth but *The Shack* seems to put itself on the same level as truth. Consider the following quotation from the backpage:

A team of us who have read and been touched by *The Shack* are convinced this book deserves a reading across the broadest reaches of our culture. Not only is this a compelling and provocative story, but it has a literary quality to it that distinguishes it as a special gift. It offers one of the most poignant views of God and how he relates to humanity that has ever been written in our time. It will not only encourage those who already know him but also engage those who have not yet recognized his work in their lives.⁶⁵

In other words, *The Shack* will teach you truth about God and it will change your life. You can also see this in the recommendations for the book on the inside flap. "*The Shack* will change the way you think about God forever."⁶⁶ "*The Shack* is a one of a kind invitation to journey to the very heart of God."⁶⁷

People don't say those kind of things about something they consider to be fantasy.

The Shack was written as an allegory. An allegory is "a story in which people, things, and events have a symbolic meaning."⁶⁸ *The Shack* was written to symbolize a deeper truth. It was written with a symbolic meaning. As Eugene Peterson put it, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his."⁶⁹ John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* as a symbolic representation of the Christian life and Peterson was right in comparing it to *The Shack* (not right in doctrine but right in intent - *The Shack* is not doctrinally compatible with *Pilgrim's Progress* but they were both written with the same intention: to teach others about Christianity).

The Shack is not a novel but an allegorical story. The symbolic meaning behind Young's "novel" is that God is feminine and not really in control of everything. . . God is not an authoritative figure and God does not punish sinners in Hell.⁷⁰ To be consistent and avoid confusion, Young should claim that his work is an allegory, not a novel.

Scholarship.

The scholarship of this work is fair, even though it is not Biblical and the direction of the book is not consistent with its intention. Young is a very clever writer and story-teller. Consider the literary quality of the opening paragraph of the book:

Who wouldn't be skeptical when a man claims to have spent an entire weekend with God, in a shack no less? And this was *the shack*.

I have known Mack for a bit more than twenty years, since the day we both showed up at a neighbor's house to help him bale a field of hay to put up for his couple of cows. Since then he and I have been, as the kids say these days, hangin' out, sharing a coffee - or for me a chai tea, extra hot with soy. Our conversations bring a deep sort of pleasure, always sprinkled with lots of laughs and once in a while a tear or two. Frankly, the older we get, the more we hang out, if you know what I mean.⁷¹

And the rest of the book is written with this kind of draw-you-in conversational tone. And that is where the danger of the book lies.

The Shack is a horrendously unBiblical book (see Biblical Accuracy above). It pokes fun at some of the most core doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity or the Biblical view of God's authority or even whether sinners are going to Heaven or Hell. And it pokes fun at these core doctrines with a conversational tone. Young writes as if his heretical views had been held by Christians for centuries.

And this kind of slap-stick approach to theology is often averted by people saying, "Well, it's just a novel" (see refutation of that above) or "You don't have to be so doctrinal about a book like this." But the problem is that Young is teaching doctrine in this book. Blatantly unBiblical doctrine.

As J. Gresham Machen wrote in his book, *Christianity & Liberalism*:

There are doctrines of modern liberalism, just as tenaciously and intolerably upheld as any doctrines that find a place in the historic creeds. Such for example are the liberal doctrines of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. These doctrines are, as we shall see, contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion. But doctrines they are all the same, and as such they require intellectual defence. In seeming to object

to all theology, the liberal preacher is often merely objecting to one system of theology in the interests of another.⁷²

We could say the same thing for *The Shack*. There are doctrines in this book "as tenaciously and intolerably upheld as any doctrines that find a place in the historic creeds." And, because of that, this book is not recommended to any reader.

Doctrinal Scale. 1

End Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, Volume 26 in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 182.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles, Cal.: Windblown Media, 2007).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 253.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 253-254.
- 6 The following quotations in this section are taken from the inside cover of *The Shack*.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 7-8.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 82-84.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 105. Papa is the cook throughout Mack's time at the shack.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 128-138.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 139-150.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 99, 144-150.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 151-169.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 122-124.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 218-230.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 247-248.
- 25 The woman is not identified in the chapter but is identified later in the book (*Ibid.*, 171).
- 26 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 163, 182.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 90-91.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 34 Young does not speak very positively about organized religion in this book, whether in the form of creeds or local churches or adherence to the Bible. See *Ibid.*, 10.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 122-123.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 37 Young, 122.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 39 Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001) 157. Postmodernism "represents a reaction against the correspondence understanding of truth and universal explanatory schemes, as well as the Enlightenment view of objectivity, rationality, and progress. It tends toward pluralism and relativism."
- 40 D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 27. Carson writes that postmodernism "recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right."
- 41 James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentiss Hall, 1991) 6.
- 42 David Wells, "Our Dying Culture," in *The Formal Papers of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals Summit* (April 17-20, 1996) 13.
- 43 Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966) 512.
- 44 This is common knowledge, so it does not need any citation. But for those interested, one of the most popular books to propose feminist doctrine is Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1983).
- 45 Emily McGowin in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, ed. by Ed Hindson & Ergun Caner (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008) 245-246.
- 46 Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 116.
- 47 God the Father created by His words (Gen 1:1). God the Son created vicariously (Jn 1:10). And God the Holy Spirit created as He moved over the surface of the waters (Gen 1:2).
- 48 God the Father sustains human beings as they cast their burdens upon Him (Ps 55:22). God the Son upholds all things by His powerful Word (Heb 1:3). And God the Holy Spirit sustains human beings by renewing their spirits (Ps 51:10-12).
- 49 God the Father put His Son to death on the cross (Is 53:10). God the Son was put to death as a sin offering on the cross (2 Cor 5:21). And God the Spirit was with the Son throughout the entire process, although the Spirit Himself was not crucified with the Son (Matt 3:16-17; Jn 1:31-33).
- 50 Young, 99.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 95-96.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 55 When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Anchor Books, 1981).
- 56 Erickson, 143. Open theism teaches that "God grows, discovers things he did not know, and changes his mind. God has taken the risk of creating humans, whose actions he cannot necessarily foreknow." For an excellent treatment of the subject of open theism, see Bruce Ware's book, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000).
- 57 Ps 51:5; Isa 64:6; Rom 3:9-18, 23.
- 58 This does not mean that people who are

experiencing tragedy are being punished personally by God. In other words, God does not specifically cause bad things to happen to people in this life because of their sins. Jesus says that in Luke 13:1-3 and in John 9:1-3. But rather, God is punishing all of creation for sin and that general punishment falls on the righteous and on the wicked. Romans 8:19-22 describes that general punishment this way:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

58 Genesis 1:31 says that after He was finished creating, “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.” Everything God created was initially very good. There was nothing wicked or lacking in any part of His creation. In Genesis 3, however, the serpent (who was indwelt by Satan) tempted Eve to sin. That is the first mention of evil in the Bible. But we are never told where that evil comes from. Satan was responsible for the temptation but Satan did not create evil because he does not have creative powers. He cannot create anything. And, whether God created evil or not, is never told to us in Scripture. So the conclusion to the matter must be that the origin of evil is a mystery.

59 1 Jn 1:5. James 1:13-15 also says,

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God;” for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does

not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

Not only is there no darkness in God, but there is no evil inclination in God. He is perfectly good (Matt 7:11; Lk 18:19). He cannot be tempted by anyone to do evil and He does not tempt anyone to do evil.

60 Grace and mercy imply that forgiveness is needed. Forgiveness is not needed if there is nothing to forgive. In other words, if sin had never entered the world, neither would Jesus because He would have had no reason to. Or, to say it more precisely, Jesus would have never entered the world for the same reason that He did: to provide a sin sacrifice for those He came to save. There would have been no reason to save anybody if evil had not given Adam and Eve the opportunity to sin. So, in order to know about God’s grace and mercy offered through Jesus Christ, evil had to exist.

61 One purpose of evil in the life of a Christian is for the Christian’s good. Romans 8:28 says that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.” Another purpose of evil is to bring about the purposes of God. 2 Kings 19:25 mentions this when Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying, “Long ago I did it; from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass, that you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.” So whatever else evil does, God uses it to work for the good of those who are saved and He uses it to accomplish His purposes.

62 For instance, God forgives Mack before Mack even asks for it.

Mack set back and let her words sink in. “Will you please forgive me,” Mack finally

offered.

“Did that a long time ago, Mack. If you don’t believe me, ask Jesus, He was there” (Young, 189).

At another time in the book, God tells Mack that he/she/whatever will free Mack from every institution in the world.

Mack, the world system is what it is. Institutions, systems, ideologies, and all the vain, futile efforts of humanity that go with them are everywhere, and interaction with all of it is unavoidable. But I can give you freedom to overcome any system of power in which you find yourself, be it religious, economic, social, or political. You will grow in the freedom to be inside or outside all kinds of systems and to move freely between and among them. Together, you and I can be in it and not of it (Ibid., 181).

Does this mean that Mack can now drive his car past the speed limit just because he believes in Papa? Does it mean that he can cheat on his taxes without being penalized? Does it mean that he has the ability to jump out of a 10-story building and not die? All of these are institutions, systems, and ideologies that Papa said Mack will have the freedom to overcome. Such a statement is sheer nonsense.

63 Ibid., Title Page.

64 Webster’s New World Dictionary, ed. by Michael Agnes (New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2003) 441.

65 Young, 253.

66 Quotation from Kathy Lee Gifford, Ibid., Inside Flap.

67 Quotation from Patrick M. Roddy, Ibid.,

Inside Flap.

68 Webster’s New World Dictionary, 17.

69 Young, Title Page.

70 For the other references to what The Shack claims, see above. For the reference to God not punishing sinners in Hell, see Ibid., 119, 169, 182.

71 Ibid., 7.

72 Christianity & Liberalism (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1923) 18-19.