

Some thoughts on The Shack

by David McFarland

An unlikely novel called *The Shack* has become a phenomenal success story. William P Young had never written a book before but was encouraged to publish something he wrote for his children for Christmas 2005. Today, the book is #1 on the NY Times Best Seller List for the 33rd straight week and has more than 5 million copies in print.

The Shack has received rave reviews in some Christian circles. Eugene Peterson has written; *"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!"* Greg Albrecht writes: *"You will be captivated by the creativity and imagination of The Shack, and before you know it you'll be experiencing god (sic) as never before. William Young's insights ... are biblically faithful and true."* Singer-songwriter Michael W Smith says, *"The Shack will leave you craving for the presence of God."*

The publishers of *The Shack* encourage readers to use the internet and other media to comment on the book. This brief review is an acceptance of that offer. I am, though, a somewhat reluctant reviewer. Firstly, many more worthy contributions have been made and I have links to a few of them at the end of this article. Secondly I do not want to appear to agree with some reviewers who have been most ungracious in their attack upon William Young. Where I disagree with him, I hope I do it graciously.

My aim in this review is primarily to address my many hurting **2hearts** friends (<http://2hearts.org>) who have sought help in *The Shack*. Many readers have stated that this book has helped them through major traumas in life, and have recommended it to their friends. Because I am concerned about my hurting friends and because I have a desire to see God glorified in our hurts, I feel compelled to offer this contribution.

I have read the book and found some parts of it fascinating and moving but other parts very disturbing. It is, of course, a novel but it aims to do more than entertain. The author calls *The Shack* *"a metaphor for the places you get stuck, you get hurt, you get damaged...the thing where shame or hurt is centred."* But it also appears to be a vehicle to criticise "religion" for its legalism and lack of heart for hurting people. *"We live in a world of uncertainty, in which religion has not been able to produce the authenticity, forgiveness and love that resonates deep in the human heart,"* says Young. The book certainly has a "theological" agenda and wants to change the way people think about God and religion. It appears to be having that effect on many. One of a great many Amazon reviewers says, *"It really changes the way I view God and the way I can relate with him. My relationship is so much deeper now."*

For those who have not read it, *The Shack* tells the story of a man called Mack whose little daughter Missy was abducted and viciously murdered in a remote shack. Mack spent the following years in a *"Great Sadness"* until a cryptic note from God invited him to return to the shack. There he spent a weekend with the Trinity. Much of the book is taken up with conversations and experiences with Papa (most of the time God is a woman of African origin) with Jesus (a young Middle Eastern man) and with Sarayu (The Holy Spirit – a small Eastern lady) The events of that weekend totally transformed Mack's life. Baxter Kruger, with more emphasis given to personal experience than Biblical truth, writes of that encounter: *"... the most important moment in the West in the last one hundred years was when a fictitious broken-hearted, angry, and cynical white man named Mackenzie met God face to face. And God ... ran to embrace him, lifting him in an eternal hug. ...It is way too scary to let ourselves believe that God could be so good. ... We just don't have a theology to go with our heart's knowledge."* Mack came away feeling He knew God better than any seminary training or

church membership or personal quiet time had ever given him. He found healing for his deep hurts.

Young deserves credit for trying to address difficult topics. He seeks to defend God in a world of sin, shame and suffering. In interviews, he often says his aim is to declare that [“God is good and He is involved.”](#) Many are asking “Where is God when I am suffering?” When life is in turmoil and there appear to be no answers, we must not run from God but seek to truly know Him. And to truly know Him is to have a relationship with Him. My family has had personal experience of some strange providences, but by God’s grace, our desire has been to know Him in all His perfections, majesty, sovereignty and love. Indeed it has been through getting to know Him better that we have been able stay afloat in the storms of life.

I have ministered to a great many folk who have faced enormously difficult situations. I have witnessed how their deepening knowledge of God and their assurance that He is in control of all things has been a rock to them when life is turned upside down. In all our traumatic experiences, God is speaking to us and we need to listen to Him. As CS Lewis said, *“But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

William P Young has known very traumatic experiences throughout his life; in some he was a victim and some were self-inflicted. There is no need for me to recount those experiences and add to his pain. My pastor’s heart goes out to him. Knowing that he hurts deeply, helps us see his writing as an emotional response to his own pain. It also helps us understand a little of his desire to help others know God as they face their pain. In the author’s pain, I fear he may have faced a lack of grace and a judgemental attitude by the people who should have been of most help – his Christian brothers and sisters in the church – hence the “criticism” of religion I mentioned earlier. If I could talk to him, I would say, “Do not allow an emotional response to cause you to stray from orthodox truth and do not think that everyone who questions your emotional response is cold-hearted and judgemental.” One of my fears in writing this review is that I am seen as caring more about orthodoxy than I care about those who hurt. I care passionately about both. They are not mutually exclusive; indeed I do not believe I can truly pastor unless my care is thoroughly Biblical. I quoted Kruger earlier saying [“We just don’t have a theology to go with our heart’s knowledge.”](#) I believe that truth (theology) come first.

The essence of the message of *The Shack* is, “You do not understand God; this book will introduce you to Him.” But does it really introduce us to God? Young’s novel is helpful in some ways. If I can somehow see past God as a woman, cooking in a kitchen, there are very useful messages here. In one early passage Mr Young makes this statement (apologies for its length but I think it is important you get the whole sense), quoting God the Father addressing Mack; [“Mackenzie, I am what some would say holy, and wholly other than you. The problem is that many folks try to grasp some sense of who I am by taking the best version of themselves, projecting that to the nth degree, factoring in all the goodness they can perceive, which often isn’t much, and calling that God. And while it may seem like a noble effort, the truth is it falls pitifully short of who I really am. I’m not merely the best version of you that you can think of. I am far more than that, above and beyond all that you can ask or think.”](#) How much more helpful the novel would have been if the author had followed through on this statement.

Through the novel the author helps us see that God is good and that we can only truly trust God if we believe Him to be good. He attempts to portray the loving relationships within the Trinity and identifies the Trinity as the source of love. He is to be commended for making us think about whether we have a loving, personal relationship with God and whether we have enough “Shack time” with him. He rebukes the kind of Christianity that majors on religious externals with no heart for God. And if I believe in a God who is sovereign in *all* things, (as I firmly do) then I have to believe that this book has a purpose in that sovereign plan, even with what I see as serious deficiencies.

However, I believe *The Shack*’s attempt to introduce us to God as he really is, actually introduces us to a God who falls short of the God of scripture. Its attempt to show a God [“who](#)

is good and who is "involved", fails to show One who is Sovereign over all; One who is so Just and Holy that to see Him means death; One from whom the Seraphim hide their faces and their feet; One who is able to save His people from their sins. I am perplexed by *The Shack* publicity blurb which states: *"God as you've never seen him before"* To use the novel's words, I believe the God of the Bible would say that the god of *The Shack* *"falls pitifully short of who I really am."*

William Young's friend, Baxter Kruger would disagree with me. He says. *"The wild popularity of Paul's book shouts to us that people across the world are seriously thirsting for something beyond the Western god."* But who is the western God? Have we lost sight of the God of the universe who has revealed Himself to us? If we have, we need to return to his revelation and that is not in a novel but in Scripture. If reading the Shack makes us hungry to know God better, that is wonderful. But where do we go to know him?

Do not be put off by the story's denigration of Church, Seminary, Sunday School, quiet time or even its sarcasm about our Bibles *"Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one, bound in leather with gilt edges. Or was that gilt edges?"* The author has major problems with church and apparently is no longer a church member, saying, *"(The institutional church) doesn't work for those of us who are hurt and those of us who are damaged."* In interviews, he steps back from being *"negative about systems (meaning churches)"* but his hostility shows in the story when "Jesus" of the Shack says *"I don't create institutions; that's an occupation for those who want to play God. So no, I'm not too big on religion..."*

I urge you, please do not be "indoctrinated" by this and other recent fiction that seek to blame religion for everything. Not all Churches are legalistic institutions without heart. Find a good church where the Word of God is faithfully expounded; join a good Bible Study group; read good books (see just a few suggestions at the end) and study the Bible for yourself. Do not base your understanding of God on fiction but on truth. Check to see what the Bible says and ask God for discernment.

Wayne Jacobson is one of the Editors of *The Shack* and he responded to criticisms that *The Shack* devalued scripture by saying: *"... at every point we sought to be true to the way God has revealed himself in the Bible except for the literary characterizations that move the story forward. At its core the book is one long Bible study as Mack seeks to resolve his anger at God."*

I humbly ask to disagree. *The Shack* is not a Bible study. I believe that there are more than a few areas where *The Shack* strays from Scripture. Others have addressed these in more detail so I will summarise a few of them here.

- Firstly I believe the novel downplays the Bible as the written Word of God, implying that because *"God's voice had been reduced to paper"* it was somehow second-rate. The written word is essential, because without it, the 'true' gospel would be a matter of hearsay and personal opinion. *"What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us"* (2Ti. 1:13-14). There are suggestions in *The Shack* as to how we might expect to hear God speak today; *"You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours"* or *"you might see Me in a piece of art, or music etc."* The Bible is the complete, inerrant, powerful and sufficient final authority for what we must believe and how we must live. *The Shack* appears to make personal experience and fresh revelation at least as important as Scripture.
- The whole concept of portraying God visually is going against the clear teaching of Scripture. Christ became flesh, with a body like ours but any attempt to portray the immortal, invisible God in human form is to break the law of God as expressed in the third Commandment. Paul points out man's error in this regard. *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities- his eternal power and divine nature- have been*

clearly seen, ... although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him...(they) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Romans 1:20-23. I know that fiction has been greatly used by men of God in the past to help convey Biblical, theological and spiritual truths. *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by CS Lewis are good examples but I feel Young takes this a great step too far.

- The book attempts to help us understand the Trinity; indeed it is a central concept of the book. I appreciate the author's attempt to make a very difficult concept clear but in doing so he presents a false picture of God. The Bible makes clear that the essence of the Trinity is that God is one God, manifest in three Persons, with the Persons equal in identity. *Ephesians 2:18* "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." *Matthew 28:19* "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." While the three members of the Trinity are distinct, this does not mean that any is inferior to the other. Instead, they are all identical in attributes. They are equal in power, love, mercy, justice, holiness, knowledge, and all other qualities. The Trinity works together in perfect harmony but each member has a role, for example in creation and redemption. And it is here that the author moves away from Biblical truth. There are several examples, such as when Sarayu says, "*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.*" But it is not Scriptural! The Father is the Sovereign over all. He manifests Himself in the Son; the Son submits to the Father. The Spirit is sent by the Son and the Father, submitting to both in doing the will and work of both. There is much evidence in Scripture of this hierarchy within the Trinity and yet of their perfect unity. Jesus said in *John 6:27-30* "the Father has given him authority to judge everyone because he is the Son of Man. ... I can do nothing on my own. I judge as God tells me. Therefore, my judgment is just, because I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will." Or in *John 15:26*. "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me." Or in *Revelation 2:26,27* "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations ... just as I have received authority from my Father."
- The novel teaches that the Son became flesh but also the Trinity "*became flesh and blood.*" The Father in the story bears the scars of crucifixion. Papa says "*When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human.*" This has no basis in Scripture. The Bible always makes proper distinctions between members of the Trinity. Jesus Christ is always the one "*in the flesh.*" *1 John 4:2* "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." Scripture always talks of the suffering of the Son of God, not of the Trinity. "*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death .. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people*". *Hebrews 2:14-18*.
- It is not scriptural to suggest that God the Father never left the Son while he suffered on the cross. Jesus cried out, "My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?" Yet in the novel, Papa is quoted as saying about the Son on the cross; "*You misunderstand the mystery here. Regardless of what he felt at that moment, I never left him.*" And then goes on to say "*Mackenzie, I never left him and I have never left you ...When all you can see is your pain, perhaps you lose sight of me.*" It is comforting for God's child to know that, even when we lose sight of Him in the midst of our trials, He never leaves us. "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" *Hebrews 13:5*. But this is very far different

from what happened at Calvary. The Father left the Son when He bore the wrath of God for us so that we who believe on Him might never be left.

- The book presents an unbiblical view of sin and its consequences. Satan said to Eve, “You shall not surely die” which was precisely the opposite of God’s threatened punishment. But the God of the Shack says, *“In fact, God does not need to punish sin at all.... I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it.”* Of course sin often carries within itself its own punishment. And yet we often are troubled that the wicked seem to prosper more than God’s people. Such thoughts troubled Asaph in Psalm 73:14-17 *“For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.”* When Asaph drew near to God, he saw a sovereign God who will judge justly. Scripture is full of references to God’s impending wrath against sin and unbelief. e.g. Hebrews 10:29-31 *“How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” ... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* A just God cannot leave sin unpunished and choose simply to ‘love’ instead. Only by punishing sin in Christ can God be both just and also the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). Asaph discovered that the wicked will not always prosper for they have no eternal hope. But he had a future and he ends his Psalm on a different note: *“But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge.”*
- I find it particularly disturbing that the novel is so ambivalent about Jesus Christ being the only way to God. The Jesus of the novel says to Mack, *“I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu.”* Jesus says, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”* but the Jesus of *The Shack* states merely that He is the best way. That suggests there may be other ways to God but Acts 4:12 is very clear *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*
- The story hints at universalism, (that all will eventually be saved) though Young and his editors deny that is the intention. But underlying the story and in particular the chapter *“Here Comes Da Judge”* is a disturbing ambiguity. The uncertainty is heightened when it says that Christ’s death has fully reconciled the world to God. That is quoting scripture but in the context in which Young uses it, it is implied that everyone will eventually be saved. We must be clear. God is a peacemaker for *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).* *“He made peace by the blood of the cross.” (Colossians 1:20).* Though by nature we are rebels against God and deserve eternal condemnation, God has sacrificed his own Son and now declares that there is no condemnation to any who believe on Jesus. *“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.” Romans 8:1,2.*
- The God of *The Shack* supposedly has forgiven the whole world, including those who crucified His son, but He waits powerlessly to see if they want a relationship with Him. Mack needs to forgive the murderer of his child before God can redeem that man. Yet this is to ignore scripture such as Romans 8:28-30 which says, *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”* Does our salvation or

the salvation of others depend on us doing something? If it does it is not a salvation by grace. *Ephesians 2:8-10*. "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece."

- The novel keeps referring to a relationship that Papa seeks with us. But before fallen sinners such as us can have a relationship with God, God must resolve our legal condemnation and guilt. Young suggests that we can "*return to relationship*" with God but shows little concern for our sin, God's violated law, or our exposure to His righteous wrath. The novel that is supposed to introduce us to God is terribly deficient in pointing out man's sinfulness before God. "*Woe to me!*" I cried. "*I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.*" *Isaiah 6:5*.

I have tried to be gracious in pointing out these things, not as an attack on the author of *The Shack* but as a Shepherd who wants to guard his sheep. If you are curious, by all means read the novel but read it with your Bible nearby and seek the help of the Spirit to discern truth from error. Be careful not to be swayed in wrong directions by a very emotional story. The Bible warns us about the danger of being "*blown about by every wind of new teaching.*" *Ephesians 4:14*. It is very natural for any of us passing through traumatic days to identify emotionally with Mack, to wear his shoes and to want to accept his solution and his theology. But emotional responses must be based on truth or we are always in danger of believing a lie.

From personal experience I have found the God who has sustained me all these years is very far above anything the novel portrays. When my life turns upside down; when I can find no answers; when the darkness never seems to break; when my prayers seem to remain unanswered; when my faith falters, where can I turn?

I turn to a Great God. My only refuge is in God who is big enough to control all things; sovereign over everything; who is majestic and glorious and transcendent and holy. One before whom I must fall; One of whom I stand in awe; One whose ways are perfect; One whom I can trust absolutely, knowing that His purposes for me are perfect and that He is being glorified.

Young portrays God as helplessly waiting for certain things to happen. I wait for things to happen in my life and feel helpless, but I am learning to rest in Him of whom it is written in Psalm 18:30-32. "*As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.*" Mack had no such assurance. Papa says to Mack, "*... even though you call me Lord and King, I have never really acted in that capacity with you? I've never taken control of your choices or forced you to do anything, even when what you were about to do was destructive or hurtful to yourself and others.*" And again; "*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.*"

The God of *The Shack* reacts to evil happenings, whereas Scripture shows that God is in control of all things. "*I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the LORD, do all these things.*" *Isaiah 45:7*. Job suffered more than most men but recognised the Sovereign hand of God. Elihu may have had more doctrine than heart, but he was right when he said to Job, "*He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen. Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.*" *Job*

27:10-14. God is sovereign over all sickness, all calamity and all evil. I have to constantly be reminded of that; life can be a great struggle.

Job is one of my favourite Bible characters. Yet he who said *"The Lord gave and the lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised."* (1:21) also said *"If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?"* (7:20). Through indescribable suffering, the Lord revealed His greatness to Job so that he could eventually say, *"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."* (42:2-6)

I turn to a Gracious God. How gracious God was to Job and his family. And how gracious to me; choosing me; giving His Son to suffer the wrath of God in my place; redeeming me, saving me; forgiving me; loving me; reserving for me an inheritance beyond description and through suffering, making me what He wants me to be so that in all thing His great Name will be exalted. And when my faith falters; when I want to get my own way; when I get frustrated and impatient, He is gracious to show me my sin and to lead me to repentance and to pour in His grace and forgiveness. He says *"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."* And I am slowly learning with Paul to say *"So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me,"* see 2 Corinthians 12:9.

I turn to a Faithful God. His promises will never fail. He says he will never leave me, whatever the circumstances. He is never aloof, hard-hearted or uncaring; He promises never to leave us. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; ... you are precious ..., I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you;"* Isaiah 43:2-5. How much I need to know Him more deeply, trust Him more fully and delight in Him more abundantly- so that when the storms gather and I feel I can take no more, then deep in the darkness I will have the assurance that His promises will stand.

I turn to the Lamb of God. I go to a God whose eternal plan was the slaying of His Son to redeem His people. I look again at the cross. There is the solution to the problems of this world; not an afterthought by God to deal with the problem of pain. God had a book of life *"before the world was made —the Book that belongs to the Lamb who was slaughtered."* Revelation 13:8. At Calvary, in the suffering of the sinless Son of God, is the answer to all pain. By suffering in our place, bearing our sin, He bore the wrath of God that should have brought us eternal suffering. *"He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities."* Isaiah 53:5. Through suffering he bought our perfect final freedom from suffering *"By his wounds we are healed."* Isaiah 53:5. Through suffering and rising again from the dead, He defeated death for all believe on Him. He will bring those He redeemed to God where there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more death – ever.

I pray that if you do not know this God, you come to know Him through Jesus Christ. I pray that whatever your circumstances you will hear the voice of Jesus saying He is *".. come to seek and to save that which was lost. I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

"And we know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding so that we can know the true God. And now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life."
1 John 5:20 (NLT)

Quotes in blue are from The Shack or about The Shack by the author or publishers.

In presenting this review, my earnest prayer is that God will be glorified. I am amazed that God should ever have called me to be a spiritual shepherd and I am reminded that I am to *“keep watch over you as (one) who must give an account.” Hebrews 13:17.*

Some books you might find helpful:

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God. by John Piper

The God I love – a lifetime of walking with Jesus. by Joni Earekson Tada

Job ~ a man of heroic endurance. by Charles Swindoll

The Pleasures of God. by John Piper

Knowing God. by JI Packer

Links to other reviews:

http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/issues/we_need_more_shack_time/

http://beholdinghim.blogspot.com/2008_06_01_archive.html (a helpful video blog)

<http://reformedbaptistfellowship.wordpress.com/2008/08/11/the-faulty-foundations-of-the-shack-part-1/>

<http://www.challies.com/archives/book-reviews/the-shack-by-william-p-young.php>

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