

REFLECTIONS ON W PAUL YOUNG'S *THE SHACK*

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Part Two: Relationship with God

Much of *The Shack* centres on Mack trying to figure out who God is and how to relate to him. In my conversations with those who have read the novel, this seems to be where the power of the novel lies. I have been told, “*The Shack* will make you fall in love with God all over again” and that “the God of *The Shack* is the God that I pray to every day”. Relationship with God is a central theme in *The Shack* and one that deserves some attention. However, such relationship is expressed in a novel and it is worth clarifying how to read and address such literature.

CLASSIFYING THE SHACK

The Shack is a work of fiction. Mack is not a real person and the story is ‘made up’. The title page calls it ‘a novel by Wm Paul Young’. However, the conversations between the characters are primarily of a theological nature and since these make up well over half of the novel, it would seem that the novel is not simply a work of fiction: it has a theological element to it. It doesn’t fit easily into either category and so it must be approached on its own terms. The function of the story is to serve the theology. *The Shack* makes

theological ideas digestible as its characters make theological declarations. It is almost like preaching in dialogue; a gospel presentation encased in the fictional story of Mack searching for answers to the question of suffering in the light of his own past and the death of Missy. Very few books attempt such theological reflection in the context of fiction without slipping into allegory. The only other example that I can think of is CS Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* although this is primarily an imagining of how demons would reflect on human nature, whereas *The Shack* largely consists of imagining what God himself would say in response to human questions. It is an ambitious task and one that deals with issues far deeper than who God might be. This is a question of who God is!

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

During the three years after Missy’s death, prior to his encounter with Papa and the others at the shack, Mack has felt a rift growing between him and God. Ignoring this sense of separation, he has “tried to embrace a stoic, unfeeling faith” (p.65). Thus the note from God comes as quite shock. After all:

In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God’s voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners’ access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. (p.65-66)

It is against this view of relationship with God against which *The Shack* contends and rightly so, for there is nothing of the intimate dynamics of relationship with God that the Bible presents here. Furthermore, it replaces the Lord Jesus by his Spirit as mediator with “the proper authorities and intellects”, a proposition which echoes the early modern Roman Catholic church that the Reformation Fathers fought long and hard against.

The Shack dismantles this view of God, firstly by Mack's encounter with the Godhead. From the outset, God is not interested in mandating the terms of his relationship with Mack. Rather, when Mack is hesitant to respond to Papa, she says, "Not ready?... That's okay, we'll do things on your terms and time" (p.83). This is at least in part why Papa initially appears as a woman: because Mack's difficult relationship with his own father makes it difficult for him to think of God as Father (p.93). In fact, Papa's primary concern is for Mack's wellbeing, "to heal the wound that has grown inside [him] and between [them]" (p.92). This is a God who is deeply relational and accessible—a God who within himself is "simple, warm, intimate, genuine; this was holy" (p.107)—and who invites humankind into such communion. The relationship on offer is characterised by two things: submission and conversation.

SUBMISSION: THE GODHEAD

As I mentioned in Part One, the strength of *The Shack* is the call to trust God, to give up our independence and to live in relationship with him. And so, Papa says to Mack, "This weekend is about relationship and love.... As much as you are able, rest in what trust you have in me" (p.102). The God of *The Shack* is worthy of trust and living in submission to him will always be fulfilling. Indeed, Jesus explains that submission is the key to any relationship because it "is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect" (p.145). For this reason, each member of the Godhead are submitted to each other. Jesus tells Mack, "Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her" (p. 145) and as Mack witnesses it, the reader is told that it is a "joy to watch" (p. 107).

There is a faulty suggestion here that obedience is a negative thing. While this may be true if God were capricious or unfair, this is not the case. The Psalmist says, "Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them" (Psalm 119:129). It is a wonderful thing to obey God! There is no need to suggest

that Jesus' relationship with the Father would be anything less than perfect because he is obedient. Indeed, in Matthew 26 in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus chooses to obey his Father and it is through such an act that salvation is won for sinful humans. Similarly, the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son actually expresses their love for their people, comforting, teaching and empowering them for life and service (John 15:26, 16:13). Others wiser than I have dealt with the issue of hierarchy in the Trinity and so I will simply say here that hierarchy in the Trinity is not a sign of domination but of love.

SUBMISSION: GOD AND HIS CHILDREN

The Shack maintains that all "genuine relationships are marked by submission" (p.145) even the relationship between God and his people. Jesus tells Mack that the Godhead are submitted to him, "because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don't want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me" (p.146). The Jesus of *The Shack* is adamant that this submission is essential to genuine relationships "even when your choices are not helpful or healthy" (p.145).

While I would not hesitate to affirm the importance of choosing to die to self daily (Rom. 8:13, Col 3:5) the question must be asked how a God who submitted to a human can bring lasting change to that human's life. This God and his redemptive purposes are at the beck and call of a changeable human being. The over-emphasis on human responsibility as we invite God to be at work, to the detriment of God's sovereignty leaves little room for hope for the person struggling with sin. While Jesus promises that "we will come and live our life inside of you, so that you begin to see with our eyes and hear with our ears, and touch with our hands, and think like we do" (p. 149), that process will be on Mack's terms and Jesus is willing to be patient for Mack to come around. He says, "Time is on our side" (p.149). Again, there is a staggering apathy towards Mack's holiness or the renewing of his mind. For the biblical Christian, one of the great joys of relationship with God is knowing his transforming and empowering presence in our lives and,

while *The Shack* affirms God's desire to redeem humankind, by suggesting that God is submissive to that same humankind, it robs God of his sovereignty and power to do so. A relationship that exists purely on human terms is not a relationship with the living, loving, transforming God of the Bible.

Furthermore, such relationship on human terms fails to account for Jesus' love for his bride, the Christian church. While Jesus acknowledges, "I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu. To see me is to see them" (p.110), it seems that this is because of his incarnation, on the basis that Jesus has become human, not on the basis that he has died for them. Thus the very idea of being called into a new people, the church, is foreign to the Jesus of *The Shack*. He says, "those who love me come from every system that exists... many who are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions... I have no desire to make them Christian" (p.182). Apart from the obvious question of religious pluralism, the individualism is also troubling. Where is the sense that God gifts his people "to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12)? How can God's children even think of themselves as Christ's body if Christ is not the basis for their unity? Divorcing relating to God from Jesus' death not only confuses our relationship with the Godhead, it also all but squashes any relationship with other children of God.

CONVERSATION

The vast majority of the novel consists of conversations back and forth between Mack and members of the Godhead. Naturally, this exists only in the book: there is not a suggestion that we each ought to expect Papa, Jesus and Sarayu to turn up the next time we go on holidays! However, Mack does wonder what will happen when he returns to ordinary life. He understands that God will hear him but how will he hear God's voice then? In answer to his question, Sarayu says,

I will always be with you, whether you sense my presence or not... You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours, Mackenzie... Of course you will make mistakes; everybody makes mistakes, but you will begin to better recognize my voice as we continue to grow in our relationship. (p.195-196)

Although the suggestion that God's purposes and voice will become clearer over time (and many an older Christian can testify to their growth in this area) the Scriptures are overlooked as God's primary mode of communication. On one hand, this is surprising because Sarayu is adamant that the Bible is not a book of rules but "a picture of Jesus" (p.197). She says, "while words may tell you what God is like and even what he may want from you, you can not do any of it on your own" (p.198). At this point I applaud Young: any reading of the Bible that is merely informational will be empty. Yet it is by the power of the Spirit that those words are written on to our hearts (Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:9-11). Jesus himself speaks of the power of his words, for "the words I say to you are not just my own. Rather it is the Father, living in me who is doing his work" (John 14:10). Scripture was not only God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), it is dynamic because God speaks and works through Jesus' words. This offers far more assurance than the idea that over time you might be able to hear God's words in your own thoughts. While the God of *The Shack* may communicate very directly with his people, they have no guarantee that they will be to correctly hear his words every time. This kind of communication is so subjective that God is unable to make himself clear—hardly the basis for a lasting or healthy relationship. The biblical Christian knows that God has spoken clearly and definitively in his word. He who has given us all things necessary for life and godliness provides a way for us to hear from him by his Spirit, through our knowledge of him (2 Pet. 1:3). Our primary expectation should be that our relationship with be nurtured in the Spirit's work as we read and consider the Bible.

CONCLUSION

There is much in *The Shack* that biblical Christians can affirm. Of course the living God desires a real relationship with human beings. Each of us must

choose daily to put away our desire for independence. God is a loving God and the world needs to hear that he has made it possible for them to be in relationship with him.

However, there is little that is disconcerting about the God of *The Shack*. While he may not fit into what Papa calls religious stereotypes (p.93), he does fit inside what many of us would like God to be. This is a God who comes to us on our terms, even forsaking the predominant way the Bible talks about him, as Father, in order to make himself more comfortable for Mack and presumably the reader. Yet *The Shack* fails to present a God who actually is bigger, higher, deeper and wiser than human beings. There is little that is difficult to understand about this God who explains himself so clearly in the pages of *The Shack*. I believe the great danger is that this God fits squarely into a caricature of what our culture wants him to be and therefore does not offer authentic relationship with the true and living God.