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**A Theological Analysis and  
Lutheran Response to William  
Paul Young's *THE SHACK***

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*The Shack*, a novel by William Paul Young, has been an almost universal topic of conversation in the United States in recent months. As of the writing of this response, it is #1 in paperback fiction on the New York Times Best Seller List as well among the top-selling books on Amazon.com. This book is probably the most popular topic in religion today, among Christians and non-Christians alike. Whether one endorses or opposes the views expressed in *The Shack*, it is hardly possible to be part of the cultural conversation without knowing and understanding the book.

For the sake of space, I will not retell many details of the book here. If you have read it, you already know them, and if you have not, I don't want to decrease your enjoyment of the book, if you do read it, by revealing the whole plot. The necessary details are that a man named Mack, whose daughter was murdered, receives a note from "Papa" requesting to meet him at the shack where the murder occurred, and when Mack arrives at the shack, he encounters god as the Author portrays him. The time Mack spends with "god" at the shack takes up 12 of the book's 18 chapters. The other 6 "frame" this encounter with the background and conclusion to the story.

### **Difficulties of Theological Fiction**

One difficulty of giving a theological response to a piece of fictional literature is that there is a degree of interpretation involved before one can even evaluate the positions of the book and its author. For example, some details of fictional books are not meant to be literal, but are just devices to move the plot along. This does not make these details neutral, because unwise choices on the part of the author can still lead the reader down false paths if they lend themselves easily to misunderstanding. Additionally, since, by its nature, a fictional work is not able to be an exhaustive treatment of a

theological question, sometimes the author will be silent on a particular point, so we may have inadequate evidence to determine where the book stands on that question.

Even further, we must examine whose mouth a statement comes from. This occurs, not just in humanly-authored fiction, but even in Biblical literature. In the book of Job, Job's friends make statements that are significantly off-base. If we were to take these out of context, we might attribute them as actually being Scriptural truth, but if we look at them in context, we find out that they are really only the opinion of the one speaking the statement, and actually express the opposite of the book's intended message. We see an example of this in *The Shack* when Mack is talking to his daughter, Missy, about a Native American legend. She asks, "Is the Great Spirit another name for God—you know, Jesus' papa?" Mack responds by saying, "I would suppose so. It's a good name for God because he is a Spirit and he is Great." (p. 31) We can't justly conclude this type of statement to be the position of the book or its author, because it could easily be just the opinion of the character. On the other hand, when the character making the statement is proposed to be God Himself, there is no other reasonable conclusion than to presume that statement to be the position of the book and the belief of its author. It is this type of statement which will be used as evidence in the sections which follow.

### **Bright Moments in *The Shack***

For those not already familiar with it, *The Shack's* picture of God begins with Papa (God the Father) as a large, African-American woman. (Many readers have compared her to Aunt Jemima.) Jesus is a Middle-eastern man in His mid-thirties. (Sounds pretty accurate) Sarayu (The Holy Spirit) is portrayed as a small, light-hearted Asian woman. (I imagine the character to resemble a young, Asian Hippie.)

In spite of this bizarre picture of God, I had some moments of hope early on that all the criticism might be just Fundamentalism run amok. Many dismiss the book immediately upon reading or hearing about this description, but I was prepared to suspend judgment over the non-traditional physical portrayal of God until after I had read what that god actually said, because the author has stated in interviews that this is not meant to be a literal depiction of God. If what was said was otherwise orthodox, I might have been able to look past the book's visual description of the persons of the Trinity as a mere metaphor or device of fiction.

Early on, *The Shack* seemed to be good reading, and I even encountered several seemingly orthodox statements in the early part of Mack's conversation with Papa [my reaction in brackets]:

"Mackenzie, the Truth shall set you free and the Truth has a name; he's over in the wood-shop right now covered in sawdust. Everything is about *him*." (Papa, p. 95)

[Sounds like a great confession of Jesus. Even more, in an age where Christian literature seems to properly belong in the self-help section, how often do we see it said that everything is about Jesus?]

"But instead of scrapping the whole Creation we rolled up our sleeves and entered into the middle of the mess—that's what we have done in Jesus." (Papa, p. 99)

[This too sounds like a welcome and all-too-uncommon reference to the Incarnation.]

"We are not three gods, and we are not talking about one god with three attitudes, like a man who is a husband, father, and worker. I am

one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is completely and entirely the one." (Papa, p. 101)

[Most of this sounds like an orthodox, almost Athanasian, definition of the Trinity. The last clause was a little unclear to me, but seemed harmless enough at the time.]

"I am fully God, but I am human to the core. Like I said, it's Papa's miracle." (Jesus, p. 112)

[Wow! Is it even necessary to comment?]

"You mean," Mack interjected sarcastically, "that I can't just ask, 'What Would Jesus Do'?" Jesus chuckled, "Good intentions, bad idea. Let me know how it works for you, if that's the way you choose to go...my life was not meant to be an example to copy. Being my follower is not trying to 'be like Jesus...'" (p. 149)

[This is probably the highlight of the book for me. What Christian author would have the guts to challenge "WWJD"? That's not something you see every day.]

"The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus." (Papa, p. 197)

[This comes late in the book, but even after having largely seen the book show its hand about God's identity, this gem still stood out.]

If these statements were the only excerpts one read, and were separated from the remaining material in the book, one might conclude the book to be orthodox, even to a Lutheran. There are also

bright spots in the broader themes of *The Shack*. First, it is about God, which is a far cry from much of what is currently being published under the label of Christian literature. Additionally, the book has a commendable purpose in encouraging people to examine their understanding for misconceptions about God and His nature. Its central theme seems to be to confront the “problem of evil,” that is, it attempts to help people who experience emotional pain understand God’s purpose in their circumstances and to propose a solution concerning how suffering and tragedies can be reconciled with a God who loves humanity and cares about people. Addressing this question is certainly a commendable cause, but does the book remain faithful to Biblical Christianity in its attempts to answer this question?

### **Overstepping the Boundaries**

We cannot deny that people, even Christians, hold to many false understandings of God. One example specifically mentioned by the author of *The Shack* is a sort of Gandalf-god, where God the Father is a large old man with a long white beard sitting on a throne. Another false impression of God which is rightly challenged by *The Shack* is the view that God is an angry dictator in heaven uttering commands and waiting to smite people. Unfortunately, the principle of questioning one’s conceptions of God is taken far beyond these in the book, even encouraging the reader to question Biblical descriptions of God in favor of what one can be perceived through one’s own emotion and understanding, independent of any scripture or body of believers.

Likewise, the author goes too far in his attempt at reconciling a loving God with suffering and tragedy by speaking where Scripture has not. St. John warns in the last verses of Revelation about adding to or taking away from the words of Scripture, and the author of the Shack

is culpable of both by attempting to explain the unexplainable concerning the Trinity and by taking away such things as the Law, God's wrath, punishment for sin, and the authority of Scripture. In a work of fiction, one can abide with a small amount of license for the sake of advancing the plot or developing a character, but obvious contradiction of Scripture, especially in an alleged work of Christian literature where three of the four main characters are presented as a revelation of God, is well beyond the limits of this license by any standard.

In the sections which follow, I will first address a few miscellaneous inconsistencies between the worldviews of Scripture and of *The Shack*, followed by doctrinal difficulties on which all orthodox<sup>1</sup> Christians could agree. The emphasis will then shift to some particularly Lutheran observations about *The Shack's* problems.

## **A Strong Foundation? – Biblical Inconsistencies**

There is a recurring pattern in *The Shack* where Mack confronts one of the God characters with a Scriptural teaching or quotation, only to have the God character respond by dismissing the Biblical teaching as a misunderstanding, as if to say, "That's not what I really meant." Not only does this serve to devalue the Bible as the authoritative revelation of God, it also seeks to inspire doubt about important Biblical teachings. The most obvious example of this technique is when Papa and Mack discuss the crucifixion.

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<sup>1</sup> By "orthodox," I mean all Christians who hold the definitions of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ expressed in the three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles' Nicene, Athanasian) as well as the Divine Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture.

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

Mack was surprised. "At the cross? Now wait, I thought you *left* him—you know—'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"...

..."You misunderstand the mystery there.

Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him."

There are huge implications to this difference. Jesus was forsaken by the Father as the condemnation for our sin. If the Father did not actually forsake Jesus at the cross, then our sins have not been paid for and Jesus has not been made our substitute. Additionally, we actually lose an important source of comfort. One of the book's primary themes is that God does not forsake us, regardless of the circumstances, but the primary Scriptural reason we can say this is because Jesus was actually forsaken. He was forsaken by the Father so that we would not have to be. In addition, if Jesus exclamation about being forsaken at the cross is not factual, how can we know any of His other statements are factual rather than merely His flawed perception of the event?

Additionally, although they are not the type of foundational doctrines addressed in the next section (the definition of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ), the book contradicts clear statements of Scripture on several topics, for example:

- Government – Papa says "I don't create institutions—never have, never will." On the other hand, Romans 13 says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority

except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." This statement by Papa also has implications for the Church, Marriage, and Family.

- Creation – The Jesus of *The Shack* says, "From the first day we hid the woman within the man, so that at the right time we could remove her from within him." Genesis reveals that God took a rib (not a woman) from the man and *formed it into* a woman.
- The Law – Sarayu correctly identifies the law, Specifically the Ten Commandments, as the mirror which shows us our sin as opposed to a set of rules which tell us how to please God and earn His favor. Unfortunately, this leads, in the book, to the conclusion that "In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful." (p. 203) And further, "because of Jesus, there is now no law." (p, 224) This is in clear opposition to Jesus teaching, which says, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished." (Matt. 5:18) The moral law itself is not negated in Christ, only its power to condemn. God does not cease to demand that the moral law be kept. He does not ignore the law's demands, but instead, He has forgiven the believer's trespass against it because of Jesus' Sacrifice. The God of the Bible forgives sins because of Christ. The god of *The Shack* knows no sins because he knows no law.
- Divine Revelation – "You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours, Mackenzie." (Sarayu, p. 195) A few pages later, she goes on to direct Mack to look for God's revelation in art, music, silence,

people, Creation, joy, sorrow, and the Bible [not as the definitive source, but as one among many]. (p. 198) In Romans 1, among other places, the Bible makes a distinction between natural revelation (the ability to discern God's existence, although not His precise identity or His grace); as distinct from God's revelation in the Bible, which tells us who He is and reveals to us His grace. The God revealed in nature can only be assumed to be great, mighty, and holy, and we should be rightly afraid. It is only through Scripture that we can know Him in His grace, revealed in Jesus.

## **Removing the Cornerstone? – Christological Difficulties**

*The Shack* does acknowledge Jesus as both God and man and even as the central focus of everything. Disappointingly, further reading reveals details which undermine these definitions. What the book affirms in principle regarding the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, it eventually denies in fact by its later statements. Early in Mack's time at the shack, Papa goes into a lengthy description of Jesus and His saving work.

When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human...

Although by nature he is fully God, Jesus is fully human and lives as such. While never losing the innate ability to fly, he chooses moment-by-moment to remain grounded. That is why his name is Immanuel, God with us, or God with you, to be more precise...

Although he is also fully God, he has *never* drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has

only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost...

He [performed miracles] as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.

From this excerpt, it is evident that the Jesus of *The Shack* is not actually God in human flesh. Although the author acknowledges this in principle, his further explanation results in a denial of the Scriptural teaching concerning the Incarnation. First, Scripture never teaches that Jesus relied only on the Father's divine authority, never His own. He lived as a man and "became obedient unto death," (Philippians 2:8) but when He exercised divine authority, such as in miracles, it was His own. The Biblical Jesus' humanity never diminishes His divine identity as God the Son. The Jesus of *The Shack*, although voluntarily, is somehow diminished in his divinity, by reason of his becoming man.

Secondly, while the shack portrays a Jesus whose relationship with Papa is no different than that attainable by any other human, the relationship between God the Father and the Biblical Jesus is dramatically different from that of God with other humans. As God, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is one with the Father. We are not. Whatever closeness we enjoy with the Father, whether in heaven or on earth, we can never live out the relationship with the Father which Jesus has, because He relates to the father within the Trinity, while we

are only able do so from the outside. Third, *The Shack* states later that Jesus does not exercise Divine Authority, even now, after the resurrection. In Contrast, the Gospels and Acts demonstrates that the resurrected Jesus gives evidence of His divine nature by doing things such as entering locked rooms in His post-resurrection appearances. Because of his divinity, the resurrected Jesus is not limited by time and space as the rest of humanity is.

In addition, the Shack's view of Christ is flawed in that it misunderstands sin, the cross, and salvation. Papa says, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It is not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it." (p. 120) The third sentence of this statement is certainly true, although only through Jesus. On the other hand, both testaments of Scripture clearly attribute punishment of sin to God. Old Testament examples are plentiful, and in the New Testament, this includes the death of Ananias and Sapphira as well as the visions of Revelation.

Beyond misunderstanding sin, the author seems to have a serious misunderstanding of salvation. In fact, He never mentions it. Attaining a relationship with God is a prominent theme, but that relationship does not seem to include faith in the Christian sense or even Christ as the exclusive means to attain that relationship. The Jesus of *The Shack* talks about "Buddhists, Mormons, Baptists, and Muslims" who "love him," While he then acknowledges there are "some roads that lead to nowhere," He then follows immediately by saying, "I will travel any road to find you." (p. 182) I find it hard to conclude anything from this paragraph of the book, other than that the

author proposes that somehow Jesus saves people even outside of their being Christians. It eerily resembles Brian McLaren's statement about making Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu, "followers of Christ" who do not become Christians, but remain in their original religion. In fact, in the same discussion about salvation, *The Shack's* Jesus even says, "Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian." (of course not. He's *Christ*. He can't follow *Himself*.) A few pages later, Papa says, "I am now fully reconciled to the world." Mack replies, "The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?" To which Papa replies, "...Reconciliation is a two way street, and I have done my part." The broad conclusion given in the book is that God is actually reconciled to the whole world, which is then experienced in an act of free will by humans to live in relationship with Him. On the other hand, the Christian teaching is that while Jesus died for the whole world, it is only through faith in Him that salvation is actually applied to the individual by God's grace.

### **A house built upon the Rock? – Trinitarian Difficulties**

The broadest area of difficulty by far in *The Shack* is a misunderstanding of the Trinity. The author recognizes that the Trinity is a mystery. Through Papa's words within the book, as well as in his own responses during interviews, Young indicates that he describes the persons of the Trinity in pictures which challenge traditional expectations in order to force people to reexamine their concrete perceptions of God. He acknowledges that these descriptions are not meant to be literal, but have his choices of imagery been wise? In a culture where goddess worship is growing in popularity, does it benefit the reader to have God the Father and the

Holy Spirit portrayed as women? Is there another way that the author could have disrupted the reader's false perceptions of god without leaving an opening for the reader to see his work as an affirmation of goddess worship? Some might argue that God the Father does not have gender-specific anatomy, thus to portray Him as a woman is an acceptable choice, but God never reveals Himself as "Mother." Similarly, it has been argued that God describes himself in terms such as a mother nursing an infant (Isaiah 66) and Jesus describes Himself like a "hen gathering her chicks under her wings." (Matt. 23:37) However, these descriptions are of a far different nature than God's revelation as Father. God is the Father of Jesus. He is the one who created the world and gave us life. He does continue to provide for and protect us. When God describes Himself as Father, He describes His nature and identity. In the examples above from Matthew and Isaiah, God is not describing His identity. Instead He is describing His actions. Additionally, He does so by way of simile, using "like." He does not say, "I am a mother," or "I am a hen." He says, "like a mother," or "like a hen." On one hand, we cannot accuse the author of *The Shack* of promoting goddess worship or promoting a "God the Mother" theology, since he has acknowledged in interviews that this is not a literal depiction. On the other hand, it seems that if God has given us a certain revelation, we ought to honor that revelation and not depict him in a way which is entirely opposite, even for the sake of catching the reader's attention or challenging their preconceived ideas.

Earlier Papa's description of the Trinity was cited, which said, "We are not three gods, and we are not talking about one god with three attitudes, like a man who is a husband, father, and worker. I am one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is completely and entirely the one." (Papa, p. 101) At the point in the book where this sentence occurs, the words, "...and each of the three is completely

and entirely the one," seemed unclear, and perhaps awkward, but as the book progresses, the meaning behind them becomes clearer. As Mack interacts with the characters, we realize that all three persons bear the *Stigmata* from the crucifixion. Nowhere does the Bible teach that the Father or the Spirit were crucified or died. In fact, this teaching, called *Patripassionism*, is a form of Modalism and was expressly condemned by the ancient church as early as the third century A.D. In addition, The Bible speaks of the Father raising Jesus from the dead (Galatians 1:1 and Romans 6:4, among others). If the Father were also crucified, then how did He raise Jesus from the dead? It is proper to say that "God died on the cross," because Jesus is fully God, but it is not appropriate to take this so far as to assert that the Father or the Spirit died on the cross. This is an example of the danger of attempting to offer answers which are beyond the scope of Biblical revelation. Because Young seeks to say more about the Trinity than God has revealed in Scripture, the god of *The Shack* is ultimately not the Holy Trinity.

Young's error regarding the Trinity is not limited to the distinctiveness of the three persons, but even extends to reveal Papa in multiple forms—first as the African-American woman already mentioned, but later in the book, as an older long-haired man in hiking gear. Papa tells Mack,

"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...To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes." (Papa, p. 93)

Papa goes on to explain that (s)he appears as (s)he does because Mack had a poor relationship with his father and so an image of an African-American woman is easier for Mack to relate to than one similar to an earthly father. The god of *The Shack* does not eternally exist as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but is a god which temporarily manifests itself in whatever way is most effective at the time. For Young, Scripture's revelations of God appear to be only revelations for that time, and God may choose other revelations at other times.

In addition, *The Shack* repeatedly asserts that the Trinity—all three persons—became human. Papa says, "When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human." (p. 99) and "He [Jesus] is the very center of our purpose and in him we are now fully human." (p. 192) In contrast, the Bible unmistakably teaches that only God the Son became man. The Trinity does not become human, nor do the Father or the Spirit, but only Jesus.

Another area of discrepancy between the book's Trinity and Scripture's is in their relation to one another. *The Shack* presents the Trinity as "a circle of relationship" (Sarayu, p. 122) and a relationship where all three members of the Trinity are mutually submitted to one another. (Jesus, p. 145) To the contrary, Scripture talks about Jesus submitting to the will of the Father (John 6:38, John 8:28, 1 Corinthians 11:3, etc.), but never speaks of the Father submitting to Jesus. Likewise, Scripture never speaks of the Father or Son submitting to the Spirit. Biblical teaching indicates that the Spirit always points us back to the person and teachings of Jesus and is sent to believers by the Father and the Son. (John 14-16)

Young extends this idea of submission to the point where it is said that God actually submits to humans in the same way that he

proposes the persons of the Trinity submit to one another (Jesus, p. 145) and that even parents and children and all other relationships in society should be lived in an identical state of submission. Certainly we are to submit to God, but, even though God does serve us in Jesus, He is never spoken of as submitting to us. Both testaments of the Bible speak of children obeying their parents and servants obeying their masters, but never the reverse. There are Biblical instructions that parents not provoke their children and that masters treat their servants well, but hierarchy remains intact and the distinctions are not abolished. The god characters in the book even go so far as to insist that responsibility is not a Biblical concept (p. 203ff), while the Bible frequently speaks of the responsibilities of parents, rulers, masters, servants, children, and many others. *The Shack* views hierarchy as foreign to God and a result of sin. Scripture presents hierarchy as a God-ordained structure which is to be respected.

## **A Mighty Fortress? – Lutheran Responses**

The previous sections have already covered difficulties with *The Shack* which Christians can broadly agree exist. These include: the Trinity, the person and work of Jesus, the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, natural and revealed knowledge of God, sin, salvation, the Law, and earthly authority. In addition to these, there are numerous other ideas expressed in the book, which although they would not be universally problematic for Christians, are of special concern for Lutherans.

- Knowledge of God—This teaching is foundational for several of the others. The difference between natural and revealed knowledge of God was discussed above, as well as the book's

failure to properly distinguish between them. Additionally, the book seems to denigrate any concrete knowledge of God. The previously mentioned cases where the god characters contradict Mack when he confronts them with Scriptural teachings are one example of this. In addition, Young seeks to use the events of the book to knock down not only the reader's false conceptions about God, but all understandings of God which exist in the mind of the reader. The god of *The Shack* seems to be completely unknowable, and it seems that, according to the god characters in *The Shack*, all claims to knowledge about God, even Biblical ones, are inaccurate. The book ultimately proposes that knowledge of God is irrelevant, but that what matters is relationship with him (her, it?). It seems to suggest that God must be experienced rather than known, but how can one have a relationship with or an experience of someone or something which he does not know? An knowledge of God's character and identity must be possessed before relationship can exist. Lutheran theology, in agreement with the majority of Christianity, teaches that God is, in fact, knowable as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. While we do not have license to propose to know more than revealed there, we can be certain of those things which have been revealed. Rather than seeking God through Jesus and through Scripture, *The Shack* encourages readers to seek God nearly everywhere, such as through their own contemplation and introspection as well as natural revelation, other people, and the arts.

- Means of Grace—Many Lutherans would also object to the methods which God uses to reveal Himself in *The Shack*. Specifically, by leaving a note in Mack's mailbox and by taking on visible form to speak directly to him. If the author is proposing that direct revelation of God exists apart from the Word and the

Sacraments, then they are right to object to this as Lutherans. Lutheran theology teaches that humans are not to seek God in any other way than the Bible, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, because He has never promised to reveal Himself in any other way. While I agree with this objection, I am not convinced that the author is proposing that individuals seek experiences like that described at the shack. From a literary standpoint, I would conclude that the direct revelation experienced by Mack is not intended to be normative for humans, but is, instead, a fictional tool to provide opportunity for God to interact with Mack. On the other hand, as discussed in the previous section, Lutherans can rightly object to the numerous additional sources of revelation proposed in the book, such as the arts, silence, and emotions as contrary to the doctrine of the Means of Grace. *The Shack* also seems to imply that the revelation of God to the world can evolve over time, such as the frequent instances where the god characters re-explain clear Biblical teachings. Lutheran theology holds that all statements about God are to be tested against Scripture, and that no new proposition can add to or alter what Scripture has already taught.

- Sin—The faulty understanding of Sin evident in the book has already been explained, and this has further implications in light of Lutheran theology. If sin is to be understood in the way it is in *The Shack*, then humans would not actually be sinful creatures. There is no indication given in the book that people are separated by God by anything but their own ignorance. Furthermore, the ability assumed by the book for humans to understand God apart from Scripture and seek Him by their own free will would necessitate that they are neither sinful nor naturally separated from Him. Additionally, if God does not punish sin and has no expectations of humans in a legal sense, there would be no need

for a savior, a cross, or even the incarnation of Jesus. Lutheran theology holds that the central doctrine of the Christian faith is Justification—particularly, that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Jesus alone. Because sin does not separate us from God or condemn us to His punishment in *The Shack*, Jesus does not become our substitute on the cross to suffer God’s wrath. In fact, the Jesus of *The Shack* does not suffer God’s wrath at all. If there is no punishment for sin, and Jesus does not suffer God’s wrath, then the only purpose of the cross is to be a demonstration of God’s love or an example of submission and humility for us. *The Shack* talks a lot about “grace,” but it is a meaningless grace, because its god knows no wrath or punishment, nor does he actually redeem anyone.

- Law and Gospel—Lutherans teach that there are two doctrines in Scripture: Law and Gospel. The Law tells us what God expects us to do, and ultimately reveals our failure to live up to its requirements. The Gospel reveals what God has done for us in Christ and is the solution to our failure to live up to the Law’s demands. *The Shack* undermines both of these. As explained in an earlier section, the god characters in the book explain the law not as fulfilled by Jesus, but as abolished by Him. The god of *The Shack* has no law by which His creatures are expected to live. As a result, any talk of grace in *The Shack* is not truly Gospel, because in the view of the book, there is apparently nothing to be forgiven and thus no need for grace. Gospel and grace in *The Shack* are not that God has forgiven our sins because of Jesus, but, instead, that He has repealed the law and instead seeks to live in us so that we respond in love to every situation. (p. 204-205)
- The Church/Ministry—Throughout *The Shack*, all earthly “institutions,” including the Church are looked down upon. For

*The Shack*, God does not seem to have a use for The Church or pastors in revealing Himself to humans. In contrast, Cyprian of Carthage summarized the Bible's teaching by saying in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, "He cannot have God as his Father who has not the Church as his mother," and "Outside the Church there is no salvation." Hebrews 10 admonishes "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing." In harmony with this, Lutherans have always taught that Christians are intended by God to meet together regularly with other fellow believers in Christ to hear the Word and receive the Sacraments. In light of *The Shack's* view of organized churches, it follows that it would also have no use for an ordained ministry or other professional clergy. In contrast, Jesus called 12 disciples and sent them out to be the first pastors. In keeping with this, Lutherans believe that the office of pastor is instituted by Christ Himself and the Church is instructed to call pastors who will publicly preach the Word and administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Church. It seems that, in *The Shack*, God is to be sought nearly everywhere, with the exception of the places where He has specifically promised that we will find Him—namely, the Bible, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

- Vocation—*The Shack* frowns on all forms of hierarchy in the world and views them as a result of sin. It also sees all relationships as intended by God to be built upon mutual submission. Lutheran theology, on the other hand, sees a Doctrine of Vocation in the Bible. The various positions that we each hold, such as ruler, parent, child, employee, manager, pastor, teacher, or student, are actually blessed and instituted by God for our good. These distinctions do not arise out of our sinful desire to dominate each other (although they are sometimes misused for that purpose).

Instead, they are given by God as a means by which He provides for our instruction and protection.

## **A Shack built upon the Sand**

While I am not normally a reader of fiction, I did find reading *The Shack* to be an interesting and enjoyable experience. There were even a few moments of the book which I found amusing, such as the criticism of WWJD (mentioned above), the awkward scenario of saying grace at a meal god is your host and dining companion, and the very subtle communion reference during the characters' final meal together (p. 236). While *The Shack* might be an enjoyable read and have admirable motives, and it is certainly a thought-provoking piece of literature, it ultimately falls short of contributing anything to the understanding of God. On the Lutheran talk radio show Issues Etc. it was recently said that "*The Shack* is a book about God that gets God wrong." This is a description that I can wholeheartedly agree with, and one which points us to precisely the reason why the book fails. To attempt to explain how to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the facts suffering and tragedy in the world is not a successful endeavor if the author misrepresents the identity of God in the process. Likewise, an attempt to correct people's false understandings about God does not achieve its goal if it undermines all concrete knowledge about God in the process.

A book that seeks to answer deep questions about God, but gets God wrong, is like a bicycle wheel without a hub. Even with all its spokes, it will not take the bike anywhere, and will just end up harming someone with a lot of sharp edges as it spins. *The Shack* is Trinitarian enough to turn off a non-Christian, but it falls so far short of orthodox that it cannot offer any real insight to an orthodox Christian. Ultimately, a mature Christian already has an understanding of the

themes the book addresses. On the other hand, a new or weak Christian who needs to understand some of the ideas the book wants to express would suffer more harm than good from reading it because of the abundant false teaching saturating the book.

Many who are reading over reviews of this book are really looking for the answer to one question: Should I read this book? (or should I have read it?) For the mature Christian who is strongly rooted in the Bible's teachings, reading this book will not do any harm, providing it is read with the careful understanding that it is not a true and accurate portrayal of God. In fact, since so many of people are reading it already, it is beneficial for mature Christians to be knowledgeable enough about its contents that they can help guide others around its pitfalls. On the other hand, for children, most teenagers, new Christians, or those who do not have a precise understanding of the Bible's teachings, this book should most certainly not be on their reading list. It will only serve to obscure God's identity for them rather than reveal it, and has the potential to do great spiritual harm if its understanding of God is believed.

Young has expressed that *The Shack* was never intended for mass-distribution, but was originally a private attempt to communicate to his children the understanding of God in which he had found comfort. In the final analysis, though, I think the author is reacting to a perceived theological imbalance which was evident during his childhood and early adult years. The present church, however, actually seems to suffer from the opposite imbalance. While the church of 35-40 years ago may have been too heavy on God's greatness, holiness, and wrath, and painted a white male picture of a Gandalf-god, the church today is reluctant to paint any picture of God or may even allow every person to paint their own picture (such as Young's "Trinity"). Today's church has largely ignored God's

greatness, holiness, and wrath, and God's grace is too often understood as permissiveness instead of forgiveness. Young said in an interview that he believes our picture of God is often worse than our fears, but he would rather paint God as better than we can imagine. Both options fail to benefit anyone if they are unscriptural. While Young seems to see himself as unique, cutting-edge, and counter-cultural in portraying God the way he does, in my judgment, he has actually conformed precisely to the pattern of today's world where all religions are seen as equal and every individual has their own sovereign experience and definition of god which is not subject to comparison against Scripture or any other authority.

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