

## The Shack Reviewed

Some of The Crossing staff recently read and discussed the popular novel, *The Shack*. In this review, Veritas staff member Andy Patton and Student Ministry Director Luke Miedema discuss their reactions to William Young's first novel.

### **First, a summary of the shack in 500 words or less:**

William Young wrote *The Shack* for his children and did not actually intend to publish it. Two of his friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, read the novel and were so moved by it that they started a company to publish the book. It has steadily increased in popularity and has peaked as high as #5 on Amazon's bestseller list.

At the beginning of the novel we meet a man named Mackenzie Phillips (Mack), a man with a disturbing and storied past. After running away from an abusive father and living a wandering, solitary life, he is now married with 3 wonderful kids. His life is stable, happy, and fulfilled. The problems that haunted his past are distant memories. Then one day on a camping trip with his children the unthinkable happens: his youngest daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and later found murdered. The ensuing months surpass any pain Mack has felt before. He is plagued with guilt and self-blame. He slowly begins to rebuild the life he had with his family before Missy died, but he is a shell of the man he once was. Through his mourning he becomes acutely aware of the lack of faith he has in God. His wife, he freely admits, has faith that he envies, but his relationship with God has never been like hers. She calls God "Papa"; he cannot imagine feeling that intimate with God.

One day he receives a postcard from God inviting him to meet him at a shack in the woods, the very place his daughter was killed years before, and Mack accepts. The rest of the novel is the record of Mack's conversation with God at the shack. God does not fit the conceptions Mack has held in his mind for so long. He is surprised, refreshed, and the wounds and doubts, which he calls The Great Sadness, that have plagued him since Missy's murder are healed and so is his relationship with God.

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**Andy:** So Luke, what did you think of the book?

**Luke:** After reading it, I remember being excited to discuss it with other people. It seemed like the kind of book that would generate great conversations because there is so much in it that is good, as well as so much in it that is close to being good, but just wrong enough to be misleading and even dangerous. I was excited to parse through that murkiness with other thoughtful people and try to separate the pros from the cons. What did you think?

**Andy:** I had a similar reaction, both seeing the issues that needed to be discussed and carefully understood regarding *The Shack's* view of God and also very much enjoying the good things about the book and the picture of God that it presents. That picture of God is a different one in some ways than one I am

used to and it was good to be stretched in that. The main character has to learn that he is loved by God and to live in that love which, personally, my mind knows but my heart often has a hard time feeling.

**Luke:** It sounds like we agree that there are some great things about this novel and some things that require our closer attention. Lets start with what you liked about the book.

**Andy:** Mack must learn to connect with God again after so many years of feeling God's absence in his life, and I felt like I benefited from eavesdropping, as it were, on that journey. It is easy, for me at least, to think true thoughts about God that unfortunately never enter my heart nor bear fruit in my life. The difficult thing for me is to experience God on a heart/emotional level, and that is the place Mack's journey leads him, and I felt I was dragged along as I read. You?

**Luke:** My favorite aspect of the book was the way Young portrays the Godhead as a community in themselves. Each person of the Trinity is an actual character Mack interacts with at the shack. Papa (The Father) is a large black woman (think Aunt Jemima), Jesus, is a 30-something middle-eastern man, and the Spirit appears as an Asian woman who is 'whispy' - hard to place in space. Even though I didn't like everything about the portrayal of the Trinity, the best part of the whole book for me was the picture of each of them as being perfectly content and fulfilled in themselves. I rarely think about God as a community in Himself. Humanity was made for community; we thrive on it. Where does that come from? It comes from being made in God's image - he is community within himself. Tim Keller explains it well in his recent book, Reason for God:

Jonathan Edwards, in reflecting on the interior life of the triune God, concluded that God is infinitely happy. Within God is a community of persons pouring glorifying, joyful love into one another. ...That is what God has known within himself but in depths and degrees that are infinite and unimaginable. That is why God is infinitely happy, because there is an "other-orientation" at the heart of his being, because he does not seek his own glory but the glory of others. (217-18)

This book provided a mental picture of that Biblical truth that stuck with me long after I finished it.

**Andy:** What *didn't* you like about Young's portrayal of the Trinity?

**Luke:** I'm uncomfortable with the fact that Young bases his view of the trinity on the (I think false) belief that complete love leaves no room for submission. He seems to say that because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfectly fulfilled in one another's love, there is no possibility for a hierarchy within the Trinity. Young took pains to emphasize that no single member of the Trinity was above the others. All are equal. "Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are a circle of relationship, not a chain of command.... What you're seeing here is a 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 " (122). Yet, pitting love and submission against one another does not jive with the way the Bible speaks about love. In the Biblical picture, love and submission are not exclusive, but simultaneously upheld in both the Trinity and human relationships. Consider Jesus' prayer to his Father in the Garden, "Not my will, but yours be done (Luke 22:42)" and elsewhere, "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19)." Likewise speaking of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, "He will glorify me..." (John 16:14). Those are clear statements of voluntary submission within the context of a loving relationship.

**Andy:** I agree. While we need to hold the book accountable for what it is saying about God, there is also a need to extend leniency in our criticism, especially in the Trinity. The triune nature of God is a profound mystery whose full reality is beyond the grasp of our human minds, and rightly so, for God is infinite and we are finite. So, while we can't possibly fully comprehend the nature of God, we do need to make sure that our view of him fits with the Bible. And yet if we only criticize, I'm afraid that no one will want to listen to us because it sounds like we are a bunch of know-it-alls. Instead I think that we want to be the kind of people who say "yes, lets talk more about the Trinity and understand it more and explore its wonders more fully" while always keeping in our minds the truth that no human picture of the Trinity is perfect.

**Luke:** One thing some people have had issue with is portraying God as a woman. Is that a problem for you?

**Andy:** Not really. God portrays himself in the Bible as a Mother, a fire, lover, having wings, etc. Is it saying God IS these things? No. God is using these images and metaphors to say true things about himself, to say he is LIKE them not that he IS them. I see Young doing the same thing with his portrayal of God as a woman.

One thing that I did like about his picturing of God as a woman is that he is trying to deconstruct the paradigm of God as the faraway, angry judge. By picturing God as a gentle, matronly woman making cookies, he challenges pre-conceived notions of what God is like. Challenging and questioning unexamined assumptions is always a good thing.

**Luke:** I think you just hit on the crux of Young's goal in this novel: he wants to challenge our previous conceptions of God and replace them with new ones. The God he is deconstructing is a moralistic, legalistic God - a God who is primarily concerned with rules and behavior, a God who is not in intimate relationship with his creatures, but aloof and judgmental. I cheer the deconstructions of these unbiblical paradigms. There is a moral fabric to the universe, but God is not a "rules God" in the way some people mistake him to be. He is not a "checklist God." Jesus criticized the worshipers of that kind of god more often and more intensely than anyone else.

**Andy:** However, there is a danger implicit in the act of deconstructing, or challenging, notions of God. You can't go on tearing down forever. It is not enough to simply leave it deconstructed; it must be replaced with something. The danger, of course, is replacing one false image of God with another false image of God. It is good to tear down false images, but they must be replaced with the biblical picture of God, which, I think, at points *The Shack* fails to do.

Consider this quote, (God speaking):

"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 then call that God. And while it may seem like a noble effort, the truth is that it falls pitifully short of who I really am. I'm not merely the best version of you you can think of. I am far more than that, above and beyond all that you can ask or think." (98)

This is ironic because, while I agree with his statement, it is exactly the trap that *The Shack* falls into. He does not replace the image of God he deconstructs with the biblical image of God, but one which is, in some ways, simply the likes and dislikes of our culture projected upwards into heaven.

So, after all the deconstruction and reconstruction you are left with a new picture of God. But it is just exchanging one incomplete picture of God for another incomplete picture of God.

**Luke:** I think you are right on. And if I had to put a name to the picture of God that he paints in this novel, I would call a "therapeutic god." God is less concerned about the atonement of sins than he is about the emotional healing and completeness of his creatures. You will notice as you read this book, the greatest problem in Mack's life is *The Great Sadness*, which is his term for the pain he feels because of the death of his daughter.

By the end of the novel (without spoiling too much), God brings him to a place where the healing of that *Great Sadness* can begin. The deepest bitterness and guilt is excised from his heart and a fresh, raw, emotionally healed heart can now develop over time. I want to say this carefully, because it could be misunderstood. Emotional healing IS a result of the real work of God in human lives. We are only truly complete as humans (spiritually, mentally, AND emotionally) when we are living in a right relationship with God. But even though this is a result of our sincere faith (and even an indicator we can look to as we test whether our faith is real or not) our personal *Great Sadness* is not our deepest problem. Our deepest problem, on the biblical view, is the sin that has infected our reality and fundamentally separated us from God. Reading *The Shack*, I would have no idea personal sin is a problem in the world. The God of *The Shack* saves us from our emotional pain, not our spiritual depravity.

However, the Bible clearly expresses, in book after book, that our greatest problem is our sin which separates us from God and our greatest need is to be reconciled to him.

Andy, earlier you mentioned why you like the book, but not what concerns you about it yet. What do you find troublesome?

**Andy:** One of the biggest things that I find troublesome is how it subtly undermines the importance of good doctrine and nuanced theology in the life of the Christian. We can see this happening in *The Shack* in at least two places. When Mack first meets God he is advised, "You are going to find this day a whole lot easier if you simply accept what is, instead of trying to fit it into your preconceived notions." (119) And again later Mack finds that, "[He] struggled to make some sense of what was happening. None of his old seminary training was helping in the least." These preconceived notions are Mack's understanding of God (his theology) that he has had up to this point. There is a negative light cast on the helpfulness of theology in enabling him to understand who God is. It is implied the sooner he lets all that go and simply "accepts what is," the better.

The book portrays the place of doctrine in the life of the Christian as something which detracts from a real, vital relationship with God. *The Shack* sets an understanding of doctrine against an understanding of God. Instead of being the means by which God is understood and experienced, theology is a roadblock. God is painted as being beyond doctrine, and thus, doctrine is ultimately unhelpful if we are trying to know him. I think the Biblical opinion of theology is much different, summed up wonderfully by A. W. Tozer when he said, "A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse." Tozer points to theology as the baseline guide which frames our interactions with God, not a roadblock.

This gives doctrine a place that is much different from the place it is relegated to in *The Shack*. You might think of Paul's advice to Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely, and in doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Tim 3:16) The command here is to pursue doctrine, watch it carefully, strive to sharpen it and align it with the biblical doctrine. Why does Paul give this advice? Because, simply put, doctrine is seeking to understand what God has revealed about himself. This gives a drastically different connotation to the concept of doctrine than a person would come away with after reading *The Shack*. The criticism has been made elsewhere that doctrine is a good servant, but a poor master. I agree in the sense that a full relationship with God consists of much more than simply getting bullet points of doctrine right. But that doesn't mean that the Christian is served by marginalizing doctrine. There is an irony to marginalizing doctrine in the name of having a real relationship with God. When doctrine is eliminated or marginalized you eliminate the very thing you need to have a relationship with the real God at all. You will fall into the very trap that Young warns of in the section quoted above, that of taking what scraps of

personality and character you happen to fancy and projecting them onto God. Without doctrine God is reduced to a composite of the culture's tastes. Without setting your picture of God at the feet of God's revelation of himself in the Bible (which is all true doctrine is) the only possible outcome is the worship of a man-made god.

**Luke:** This dovetails with another aspect of the novel I found worrisome, and that is Young's treatment of the Bible:

"In seminary, [Mack] 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... Nobody wanted God in a box, just a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges?"

*The Shack* speaks about the Bible in almost the exact opposite way the Bible speaks about itself. To Young, the Bible is a reduction of God, but according to the Bible itself it is God's authoritative revelation of himself and the standard against which anything said about God must be measured. As Paul says in 2 Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Paul's view of the Bible is that it is God's word about himself that is not useless, but useful in knowing Him. According to *The Shack*, Scripture is subject to the authority of the scholar. According to the Word, the Word is the one ultimate authority. According to *The Shack*, the Bible speaks a message of bondage to guilt. But in the New Testament book of Galatians the apostle Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free (5:1)." This is the point at which Young is most at odds with sound Christian teaching. He says much that is commendable and true in this novel - much of which he gets directly from the Bible which leaves me simply confused as to why he would have such a low view of the Word of God.

**Luke:** Ok, next question. Consider this quote:

"Remember, the ones who love me are the ones who are free to live and love without any agenda. Is that what it means to be a Christian?"

...Who said anything about being a Christian? I'm not a Christian.

... No, I suppose you aren't.

...Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved."

"Does that mean," asked Mack, "that all roads will lead to you?"

"Not at all," Smiled Jesus..."Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you."

This section of the book touches on at least two controversial issues. First it seems to leave open the possibility of universalism (that all will eventually be in heaven with God) and then secondly it seems to imply that sincere followers of other religions are accepted into heaven. What's your response to how Young handles these sensitive issues?

**Andy:** I don't think *The Shack* explicitly teaches universalism, but it seems like it leaves the option open. Using quotes like the one above, if I came to the book with the perspective that God saves ALL universally and none will be separated from him for eternity, then I think I'd be able to make a case that the book teaches the same. The same can be said about other religions leading to God in that he is vague and leaves open the possibility of multiple paths. Young leaves both issues more open than I am comfortable with, because I think he leaves them more open than Christ was comfortable with. Jesus proclaims himself as the only way there ever was or ever will be to reach God. Do I think that there will be surprises in heaven? Certainly. God is more lavish with his grace than any of us can understand. Do I think that there will be "murderers, thieves, self-righteous... many who are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institution"? Absolutely. Do I think Jesus would "travel any road" to find his children? Without a doubt. Would I say "I have no desire to make them Christian" as Young has Jesus say in the novel? No, I would not. Why? Jesus did not say that. In fact, he said the opposite. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." It is hard to limit the graciousness of God (the fact that there will be anyone in heaven at all is a testament to that), but it is wrong to remove limits that God himself has identified. I want to stand up and shout for the bigness of Christ's love, but I do not want to achieve that bigness by removing the exclusivity of Christ's claims. I think Young may have crossed that line.

**Andy:** To sum things up: would you recommend this book?

**Luke:** I would strongly endorse it to a narrow group of people. I think it is a great book for the conversations it has the potential to produce. Conversations about what God is like, about the Trinity, about humanity's greatest need, about God's role in suffering, and much more. For that reason I would highly recommend that Christians who have a mature understanding of the Bible sift through this novel to glean its treasures while being aware of its shortcomings. It is a widely-read book, as we mentioned before. To make the top 10 on Amazon's bestsellers list means that more than just evangelical Christians are reading it. Any art that is widely read or discussed in the culture at large is exactly the place Christians want to be sharing common ground. However, this book is not a replacement

for The Book. It turns out it is a far cry from it. So those looking for spiritual and theological guidance and teaching must find it elsewhere.

**Andy:** If I recommend the book I would also strongly recommend discussing the book with someone (or several someones) afterward. It is a captivating book and an engaging story that often pulls on your hearts strings. The challenge is to be discerning in reading the book (or reading and watching anything). A lot can slip in under the radar, and there is a need to hold the book up to the light of the truth of Scripture and evaluate what it is really saying about God and the Christian life.