

BOOK REVIEW
THE SHACK
by William P. Young
(Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007)

What's good about this book?

1. It does a credible job of presenting the classical answer to the “how can a good, powerful, all-knowing God allow evil” question.¹
2. There is an excellent passage on the otherness of the holiness of God. (page 98)
3. There is a fine explanation of the *kenosis*² of the Son of God. (pages 99-100)
4. The concept of the three-in-oneness of the Trinity is well-described (pages 100-101)

What's problematic with this book? In weaving the fictional setting for his piece of theodicy³, author William Young commits a number of theological indiscretions and errors. If someone might protest that some poetic license must be extended toward a piece of fiction, I would concur to a degree. But fiction does teach, and teaching unquestionably is the intent of this book. The doctrines in the book which are misleading are:

1. “The Great Spirit,” of Indian legends is supposed as another, a good, name for God. (page 31) God has never let himself be identified by the names of the deities of false world religions.
2. The book introduces another level of knowledge called “suprarationality” with the possibility that this is realm of faith—*There are times when you choose to believe something that would normally be considered absolutely irrational. It doesn't mean that it is “actually” irrational, but it surely is not rational. Perhaps there is suprarationality: reason beyond the normal definitions of fact or data-based logic; something that only makes sense if you can see a bigger picture of reality. Maybe that is where faith fits in.* (page 67)
Now, one might think that **Hebrews 11:1** is saying the same thing: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* But notice that the verse links faith to assurance and conviction. Faith is decidedly supported by the factual, objective, rational revelation from God. Certainly there are dimensions of God's nature and His work that are beyond our inspection and understanding, but to posit “faith” as suprarational without caveats is misleading.
3. God is presented as *a large beaming African-American woman* who is called Papa and Elousia. (pages 82, 86) To critique this identification of God is to risk being labeled a fundamentalist misogynist or a racial bigot. Let me put the racial image aside. If one is to fictionally depict God as a human character, he would need to be of some race, and one is just as valid as another. But the female depiction of God is unbiblical. Admittedly, God has no gender and has no body. As Jesus said, *God is*

¹ As ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (342?-270 B.C.) expressed it: *Is he willing to prevent evil but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?*

² *Kenosis* is the Greek word for “emptying” and is used of Christ in Philippians 2:7.

³ “Theodicy” is a *vindication of God's justice in tolerating the existence of evil.* (Random House Webster's College Dictionary (NY: Random House, 1995)

spirit. (John 4:23) But God has consistently revealed himself as “Father;” never as “Mother.” Jesus consistently referred to God as his Father. The Fatherhood of God is God’s idea and it makes me uncomfortable to see someone messing with God’s self-designation. Jesus is presented as a Middle Eastern male carpenter and the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu. (pages 86-87) Grammatically, the New Testament presents the Holy Spirit also in male terms, and sometimes employs masculine pronouns in the place of the neuter noun, *pneuma* (spirit). But never in the Bible is the Holy Spirit described as female.

There is an attention-getting shock value in presenting two of the members of the Trinity as women. But it is not necessary to the story and is complicit with cultural movements toward the feminization of God. In fact, the switching of genders with the Papa character is explained as necessary to counteract religious conditioning and stereotypes (page 93). Papa explains that the reason the Bible presents God as Father is because broken humanity is more lacking in credible fathering and thus more needful of the biblical emphasis on the fatherhood of God (page 94).

Toward the end of the story, “Papa” changes gender and appears as a pony-tailed outdoorsy man. Papa answers Mack’s confusion by explaining, “This morning you’re going to need a father.” (pages 218-219) What this connotes is that God assumes changing identities according to our need of the moment (on page 91 Papa explains that she is “showing” herself as a woman). Now this might be if the idea of the fatherhood of God was derived from the human family structure. But I argue that the human family structure is derived from the divine “family structure.” Jesus is the “only begotten Son of God” who embraces his Father. The sonship of the second person of the Godhead did not begin with the incarnation, but is an eternal relationship. Biblically we must remember that the idea of God as *Father* is God’s idea and is universal in Scripture.

4. Papa has crucifixion wrist scars just like Jesus. (page 95) This is designed to italicize the Father’s pain in the work of redemption, but it confuses the uniqueness of Jesus’ humanity and resultant scars. God the Father never became flesh and thus cannot bear scars.
5. The wrath of God against sin is soft-pedaled. (page 119, *It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it.*) Contrast the woes against the Pharisees and Scribes in Matthew 23 and the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20. God has, does, and will punish sin.
6. Male headship is dismissed as a defective human convention. It is obvious that the author is a member of the egalitarian camp regarding gender issues. (pages 122, 148) In this discussion, the author also dismisses any sense of hierarchy between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
7. The local church is treated dismissively as a man-made institution (pages 177-179). In fact, these pages paint God as decidedly anti-institutional. Papa says, *I don’t create institutions—never have, never will.* Contra this assertion, God created the institution of the nation of Israel complete with laws, leaders, jurisprudence, and

more. Additionally I argue that every local church is an institution with defined leadership, accountability structures, doctrinal formulations, and norms of private and congregation priorities and behaviors. “Institution” is not a dirty word.

8. The author seems to embrace inclusivism⁴ in an enigmatic statement of Jesus (page 182): *“Those who love me come from every system that exists. There were [notice in fairness to the author that he uses the past tense, were] Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don’t vote [note that the verb tense shifts here to the present] or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who are 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 as he reached for the door handle to the shop.

*“Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.” [Is this a creatively evasive way to express inclusivism? It seems to dodge the statement of Jesus in **John 14:6**, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”]*

9. The author does a good job of disarming legalism in contrast to relationship (pages 197-198) but overstates the case by entirely dismissing the role of law on pages 202-203, *In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful*. But Scripture clearly teaches that although the Christian is released from the Old Testament Law, he is not antinomian; he is under *the Law of Christ* (I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Additionally the Apostle Paul tempers his statement that *all things are lawful*” with the cautions that one’s exercise of Christian liberty must not lead to addictive behaviors,⁵ must not hinder the spiritual health of less mature believers,⁶ and must not lead to careless, fleshly behaviors under the cloak of grace.⁷

Conclusion: While the book is orthodox on theodicy and emotionally touching regarding God’s love for his children, it is deeply flawed on most of the other biblical issues it touches. It is not a book for the biblically undiscerning. Fiction is often more dangerous than prose because it slides arguments in rather unobtrusively. We read and view fiction for entertainment and the “doctrines” addressed are often absorbed passively and uncritically.

Timothy Walton
Alderwood Community Church
June 25, 2008
[revised 102708]

NOTES:

⁴ “Inclusivism” is the belief that there are people “living up to the light they have” whom God will admit to heaven on the merits of Jesus Christ despite the fact that these people have never heard about Jesus.

⁵ I Cor. 6:12

⁶ I Cor. 8:13

⁷ I Peter 2:16

1) For a more extensive review, visit this website:

<http://www.discerningreader.com/review/the-shack/>

2) *World* magazine has a recent article on Young and his book at this website:

<http://www.worldmag.com/articles/14137>