

A meeting at “The Shack”

BY DR. DANIEL R. LOCKWOOD



I first heard of the novel, *The Shack*, in a small group of seminary presidents. Each of us reported something we were reading to stimulate our minds or hearts. One president admitted that his reading choices followed a different path. Six months before, he had lost a son in an accident, so his reading list included books that spoke to his grief. One that moved him profoundly was *The Shack*, written by northwest author William P. Young.

Since that gathering, I have heard many reactions to this book, ranging from wild praise to critical concern. What follows is my theological review.

The Great Sadness

The riveting story at the center of the novel concerns Mack Phillips, a prototypical Everyman who suffers a wrenching personal loss which he calls his “Great Sadness.” Mack, along with his wife, Nan, their three children, Josh, Kate, and Missy, and two other families, are on an outing at Eastern Oregon’s Willowa Lake. A canoe tragedy involving their eldest son is narrowly averted. When Josh is safely brought to shore, however, Mack’s youngest daughter, Missy is nowhere to be found. After moments of frantic, fruitless searching, the authorities are called, widening the investigation. In the hours and days that follow, evidence is found that this is no ordinary case of a little girl lost. A missing shoe and a small ladybug pin point to criminal intent. Eventually, the FBI finds an old, run-down shack beside a pristine lake. Within the shack, something is found to indicate this may have been the place where Missy spent her final hours.

The following spring Mack finds a strange note—without stamp or postmark—in his mail box. It is an invitation to meet at the shack that weekend; and it is signed “Papa,” Nan’s favorite term for God. What unfolds next is the narrative of Mack’s encounter with the triune God, with an opportunity for transformation, reconciliation, and healing.

A Theological Novel

Anyone reading or critiquing *The Shack* must remember two things. First, this is fiction. While the framework of the Phillips family’s tragedy is realistic, the story employs imaginary devices created by the author to communicate spiritual ideas. To interpret

these too literally is, I believe, unfair to the author’s artistic prerogative. More importantly, it will divert the reader’s attention from the more central theological issues of the story.

For example, God is portrayed as three persons: “Papa” (a large African-American woman named Elousia), Jesus (a smiling, though ordinary-looking, Middle Eastern carpenter), and Sarayu (a wraith-like Asian woman who represents the Holy Spirit). Some may take offense at this portrayal, but I am not one of them. That God be visualized as other than Western Europeans is refreshing (besides, “Papa” later appears as an African-American man). But Young’s real point is to illustrate the Godhead’s genuine love, affection, and deference to one another. The author seems to have taken a cue from St. Augustine’s famous analogy of the Trinity: the Lover, the Beloved, and Love. He very deftly avoids the pitfalls of tritheism, modalism, or subordinationism in his homey portrayal of God as the Three in One.

Second, this is a theological novel. Once Mack joins God in

I DO NOT AGREE WITH
EVERY POSITION THAT
YOUNG TAKES IN THE BOOK,...



the shack, the conversation gets deep in a hurry. I do not agree with every position that Young takes in the book, but I admire him immensely for not backing away from discussing them. Don't bother reading the book unless you're ready to chew on some theological meat—and gristle!

Overwhelmed by the Love of God

I am not surprised by the positive responses to this novel's emphasis on the overwhelming love of God. We catch this love within the Godhead for each member expressed in unrestrained, spontaneous, and infectious ways. God needs nothing outside of Himself to bring Him pleasure. Mack feels deeply loved by God, though he has neglected God over the years. God warmly and naturally invites Mack into conversation. As a reader, I found myself longing to participate in that conversation in the old cabin around the kitchen table, hoping that heaven will be like this, too.

The Missing Pieces

Unfortunately, I cannot give *The Shack* unqualified praise. The problem lies in what is not said. Let me mention two vital missing pieces.

First, it is missing an adequate theodicy. "Theodicy" refers to an apologetic for the righteousness of God, particularly with the

problem of suffering. Predictably, many of Mack's initial questions to God probe the problem of evil because of Missy's tragedy. To his credit, Young does not take some of the easy ways out. He does not lapse into the divine finitism of Rabbi Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, nor drift toward open theism, another popular theological trap. Papa and Jesus are never caught by surprise at even the worst of events, all of which are, in fact, within their larger wise and loving plan.

But disappointingly, Young's ultimate answer to theodicy is universalism. In a cool cavern near the shack, Mack, who clearly blames God for what happened to Missy, is challenged to judge the world in God's place. When he cannot condemn one of his own children, the implication is unavoidable. Since all people are God's children, is it conceivable that God would ever condemn any of them? But universalism eviscerates Jesus' own incredible claims to be the exclusive and sufficient way to the Father.

Second, and more importantly, it is missing a biblical emphasis on the cross. The cross casts its shadow across *The Shack*: Jesus will always carry the scars (Papa does, too). But one searches in vain for exactly why Jesus had to die in the first place. After all, if God's love is the only thing that saves us, then the cross becomes irrelevant, a travesty. In fact, unless the cross is absolutely necessary, then the act of the Father sending His Son to the cross is nothing short of obscene!

But the cross *is* absolutely necessary. This is because God's plan of salvation lies at the intersection of two divine attributes: love and justice. Without justice, there is no reason for the cross; without love, there is no motivation for it. In order to be reconciled to God, God's wrath must first be satisfied. Disappointingly, this piece is missing from *The Shack*.

A Concluding Word

I heartily commend William P. Young for writing a novel with theological substance. His familiarity with Scripture is evident everywhere. But it is a book with missing pieces. I would recommend *The Shack* with a warning: read it to deepen your sense of the overwhelming love of God, but keep your eye on the cross! ❧

... BUT I ADMIRE HIM
IMMENSELY FOR NOT
BACKING AWAY FROM
DISCUSSING THEM.