

***The Shack – A Reasoned Response In 5 Parts***  
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## Part 1: Why Bother Talking About It Now?

It seems kind of odd to be talking about *The Shack* now, seeing that the book has been out for a few years and has already been conversed to death in various circles. But the truth is, a lot (and I do mean a LOT) of folks have just started picking up the book. Two people in my congregation within the last two weeks mentioned it to me. I went on vacation and was given a copy by my friend and former pastor. Quite simply, while there's been plenty of time for this book to be making the rounds in Christian circles, it's hitting critical mass at the mainstream level. While I've been aware of it for a long time, when something like this hits my congregation, as a pastor I need to be aware of it and discuss it.

Another good reason to be discussing this book is that it's become a phenomenon. People are handing out copies to friends because they say they've been touched, moved, and changed by it. Endorsements of it are coming from relatively conservative Christian circles – well, at least as conservative as Eugene Peterson and Michael W. Smith, which ain't half bad. There are people out there who are changing their whole view on God because of it. That makes it important.

But perhaps the thing that has most intrigued me about it is the way that it has been vigorously defended. I mean, if you rag on this book in any way, it causes a bit of a stir. I posted today on Facebook that I had finished it and made a lot of negative notes, and before I could even thoroughly comment I got a letter from an old college friend explaining why he found the book “not so bad” and an Asbury friend in shock, calling the book “so refreshing.” I kind of expected this just because of the reaction my former pastor had when I told him I'd been hearing some negatives. The kind of defense has been nothing less than surprising and, in fact, a bit unnerving. Quite frankly, it seems many people aren't as quick to defend biblical truth as they are this book.

That sets off alarms in my head. I've heard defenses of similar books by Brian McLaren and other “emergent” leaders that play fast and free with theological underpinnings. But I'm not sure such defensiveness is Christ-like, especially because Christ gave both praise and condemnation exactly when necessary. In Matthew 16:17, Christ calls Peter blessed because the Father had revealed to him His divinity. Not six verses later, Christ tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” when Peter rebukes Him for saying He would suffer and die. Jesus had no aversion to calling a spade a spade. I think Christ would make no excuses for this book. I think He would

praise Young for the things he got right and chastise him for his significant lapses. I do not think there's any point in defending a book "on the whole" that gets as much wrong about God as this one does. But if you have gotten into it, there's no need to lose a teaching moment. And that's what I'll be discussing as we go. But we've got to set some ground rules to make some sense out of how to read this book.

## Part 2: Don't Play The Fiction Card

The first time I heard about *The Shack* from one of its supporters, I was told, “Remember, read it as fiction.” The next time I heard about the book from a supporter, guess what? Felt like déjà vu. The rallying cry to get solid Christians to read this thing is the fiction argument. And guess what? It doesn't work.

It'd be easy at this point to say, “Jason, you're a loony. Paul Young clearly says this is a novel and not some true story.” I have no beef with the idea of Christian fiction in principle, and I think a lot of novels revolving around Christianity can be worthwhile. But this book isn't what many people claim it to be. It may be fiction in the broadest sense, but it isn't intended to work like fiction. So let's be clear about this book is and isn't.

**It isn't Christian entertainment.** Most books that are given the title of Christian fiction are intended to be primarily entertaining. Jeanette Oke and Frank Peretti (regardless of what you think about them as authors) write books that convey a basic Christian truth or thought, maybe even a few, but the intent is for the storyline to carry the message holistically rather than for it to be pounded into you with a gavel. Some authors like LaHaye and Jenkins want a bit more from you and (in their case) want you to believe in their particular take on Revelation. But again, their books are primarily about entertainment. *The Shack* seems to fit into this category for its first 60 pages or so, as we get deep into the world of Mack and his suffering that comes about from the tragic kidnapping of his daughter. But once Mack reaches the shack and encounters God, the whole book changes direction. Events happen, and they do so in such a way that they could be considered entertaining. But pages upon pages upon pages are spent in theological dialogue. It can't be called anything else. Granted, Young does a good job making the dialogue interesting enough as to not grind the book to a halt. But the purpose of the book is not to entertain. If it was, the theological dialogue would have been kept at a minimum.

**It isn't an allegory.** Some folks have tried to call this book an allegory along the lines of, say, the Narnia books or *Pilgrim's Progress*. This makes no sense whatsoever. An allegory is a type of extended metaphor where there is both a literal and a symbolic meaning. Some allegories are more hidden than others; for example, some folks without a Christian background have read or seen *The Chronicles of Narnia* (which are considered an overt allegory) and enjoyed the stories without ever understanding the Christian meanings underneath. There is no metaphor

within *The Shack*. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the book are intended to be speaking for the true Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They don't stand for anything else. Just because these words have never actually been spoken by God in reality doesn't make this an allegory, either.

**It isn't a parable.** A parable by definition is a short, pithy story that intends to teach the reader one specific lesson, usually moral or faith-driven in nature. *The Shack* is neither short nor pithy, and it contains a variety of lessons that jumble together. Nor does *The Shack* employ the use of parables. One key element of virtually all parables is the story's displacement from the people hearing the parable. For example, think of the parable Nathan told to King David about the rich man who stole the poor man's beloved lamb. The parable worked because David did not see himself in the parable until it was explained to him. There are examples given in *The Shack*, but each example relates back directly to Mack's own personal experience. So we can't place it in this category.

**What it is: a didactic narrative.** That sounds like a ridiculously big term, but it's not. A didactic narrative is simply a fictional story whose purpose is to teach factual truths the author desires the readers to learn. This form is ancient and is seen in the Bible – Job is a classic didactic narrative. While some Christians believe Job was a real person – and I have no problem with that on a cursory level – the book of Job has always been part of the poetic books of the Bible and not the historical ones. It was never intended to be read as a literal, factual account. And in fact, *The Shack* has a few basic similarities to Job, particularly in its plotline. This teaching format exists in the modern day as well, and is probably best reflected by Ayn Rand's novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* which teach her own (wildly misguided) philosophy.

There is no problem with *The Shack* being a didactic narrative; it is an understood form of literature. But we need to be very clear that a didactic narrative's primary purpose is not to entertain but to teach a specific philosophy. Not only does the form of the book show us that it intends to teach first and foremost, it has been confirmed by Paul Young's own admission. The book began as a project where he was going to put together a short compendium of his thoughts and beliefs on God for his children and grandchildren. They were the teachings he wanted to pass on to them. It grew from there into the book we now have.

So why are folks still defending it as a piece of "fiction" to just enjoy? I believe that it's for a variety of reasons. A lot of people are drawn to the story despite their own reservations with

the picture of God it portrays. When someone criticizes the book, it's like they personally are being criticized for enjoying it. By saying that it's "just" fiction, it allows them to distance their beliefs from the beliefs in the book while still embracing it. It also gives them an "out" when they are not theologically savvy enough to thoroughly discuss what Paul Young is attempting to teach them. Still other people love the story so much that they think that pointing out the problems is like missing the forest for the trees.

The problem with all of this arguing is that the good parts of *The Shack* can all be found in the Bible. If you love the good and true parts of *The Shack*, you will find yourself falling in love with the true God of Scripture. But the problem then comes with separating the good from the bad, because the bad and good are so intermingled within *The Shack* that they will be difficult for the average reader to untangle them. That's why this book really is problematic. And calling it "fiction" is not going to get rid of those problems.

So if you can, as you read my upcoming portions, please throw away the idea that this book is just "fiction." It's not written as a simple entertainment, and Paul Young didn't intend it to be. Let's talk about it as what it is... a story designed to make you believe what Paul Young believes about God.

### **Part 3: What's True Within The Shack (and Defense Against False Criticisms)**

Believe me when I say that this is the section I hoped to write before I read the book and one I wish I could be longer. The book has found an audience for a reason, and a good chunk of that reason has to do with the truth that can be found within *The Shack*. You'll find that some things that bother other people don't bother me. So let's start with getting rid of the false criticisms and working from there.

**This book is not Paul Young trying to sell people on another religion.** There are folks on the Internet who have found that a couple of the names Young uses for God are in use in other religions – in particular, Sarayu is a name used in the worship of Kali. (Yes, the same Kali from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.) However, Young has explained that Sarayu is simply one word for “wind,” the same as pneuma means “wind” or “breath” or “spirit” in Greek. Trying to attack this book thinking that Young is selling worship of another god is just goofy. *The Shack* may be advocating a heretical form of Christianity, but it's certainly not advocating a faith system outside of the theological spectrum of Christianity.

**The book does not intentionally promote universalism (though one could make an argument for it happening unintentionally).** There's a very misunderstood passage in the book (the last page of chapter 12) where “Jesus” says that he does not want to make believers in other religions Christians, but he does want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of “Papa.” Young should have written this section better to avoid the charge of universalism, because it certainly can be read that way. While there is much to be said about Young's own universalism which was edited out of the book, which we'll talk about in section 4, that's not his intent in the paragraph as edited. Young is very anti-establishment and anti-institution throughout the book. When he uses the word “Christian” in this paragraph he is talking about someone who is part of the institutional church who might attend church, sing a few songs, and puts a few bucks in the plate, but who is not actually all that interested in true relationship and radical transformation. The idea of a “Christian” to Young is somebody so sucked into the system that they don't actually know God. Thus, Young is arguing that God isn't interested in making more triumphalistic, imperialistic, religious social-club pseudo-believers that fit the 20th century American paradigm of what it means to be a “believer” but aren't actually in relationship with God. I don't believe the Bible agrees with Young's viewpoints on

institutions per se, but when you read the book from Young's point of view, it's not promoting the idea that anyone will be saved without Christ in some fashion. As a friend of mine made a reference to an old John Fischer song, "Jesus is the only way, but there's more than one way to Jesus."

**The book is not picturing the members of the Trinity as specifically feminine.** While "Papa" appears as a large African-American woman, "Papa" also appears eventually as an older man. In the book, "Papa" is appearing in forms that Mack can relate to while breaking down his stereotypes and his own worship of an image (that of the wise old man with a long beard and a kindly smile). The book is very clear that "Papa" is spirit and that the forms "Papa" takes are not gender-oriented, since a spirit has no defined gender per se. God in the Bible presents Himself as masculine exclusively with the exception of a couple of metaphors where God is "like" something feminine. However, the book explains that the images should not be taken as an attempt to genderize God. Your mileage may vary on this one, but we certainly don't have Young presenting a feminist god.

Now to some of the true positives: **this book makes a very good and biblically sound case concerning the problem of evil, known as theodicy.** As I mentioned in part 2, the classic didactic narrative is Job. *The Shack* is not as focused as the book of Job, and it does not give exactly the same answer as Job, but it is very close. When God answers Job, He answers with questions that all point to the fact that Job is not God and as such does not have the tools to judge God or the problem of evil. *The Shack* is a little kinder and gentler but ultimately winds up in the same place. *The Shack* explains that we are responsible for evil in our world through our sin, not God. God is big enough to understand the whole picture and to see the perfect order inside the chaos. God is making something wonderful out of our horror and is setting everything right, and the completion of the "setting right" will be found in eternity. This is a classic view of theodicy that *The Shack* explains well.

**The book defends the concept of absolute truth.** In today's post-modern culture, truth is relative and nobody has the one and only truth. Young argues through Sarayu that "if there is no reality of good that is absolute, then you have lost any basis for judging...[to fix it,] you must give up your right to decide what is good and evil on your own terms." Ultimately, the book holds that God is the only one who holds absolute truth, and the only way to that absolute truth is through the Spirit. While we could argue that Young does not put the appropriate emphasis on

Scripture as the way to understand God's absolute truth, the book does promote that only God has absolute truth. It also very smartly shows (in a pretty good chapter) why we are useless when we take over God's role as judge, since He's the only one who has the ability to see the proverbial big picture.

**The book points out that our core problem and the root of most every sin is our lust for independence.** This is a strong and needed corrective to our American cultural standard that personal independence is the key to everything. The sin in the garden of Eden was disobedience, trusting that we knew better than God did when He gave His command not to partake of the fruit of the tree. Since then, we have wanted to be on our own, able to prove that somehow we can be self-sufficient. Our salvation is based in our total inability to save ourselves and our need to throw ourselves completely on Jesus for salvation. In one quote I really liked, it's said, "Jesus didn't hold on to any rights...He gave up everything, so that by his dependent life he opened a door that would allow you to live free enough to give up your rights." In a world where we shout about rights so often, it is good to realize that in our claiming them we do not model Christ. Sadly, Young's book actually promotes independence in practice, which I'll discuss in part four. Nevertheless, the book clearly teaches that we cannot please God when we are determined to live without Him.

**The book challenges the modern WWJD paradigm.** *The Shack* realizes that even a non-Christian could attempt to answer the question, "What would Jesus do?" and then act on whatever one believed. However, it's impossible to get that right; nobody can read the mind of God. Instead, as the book says, "My life was not meant to be an example to copy. Being my follower is not trying to 'be like Jesus,'" it means your independence is killed. I came to give you life, real life, my life." As it's been said, the question is not "what would Jesus do", it's "what has Jesus already done?" Again, Scripture is a key *The Shack* fails to mention in knowing that our

lives are in genuine submission to God, but at least the book doesn't go down the path of thinking that we can follow Jesus faithfully without actually having the Spirit.

**The book properly breaks down the performance model of God-priority.** Let me explain. There is a very real problem when we follow the popular JOY model for marking priorities – Jesus, others, you – as a paradigm by itself. When the paradigm stands alone, it's uncertain when I've given enough time to Jesus or others, let alone myself. This is why I can study Scripture for hours and pray and still not feel like I've given enough time to God; when is it enough? *The Shack* wisely understands that God wants to be a part of everything in your life and the whole of our lives should flow out of our relationship to Him. Then Bible study and time spent in service to others and even personal time for fun and reflection become about Him holistically. We'll talk a bit about Young's misplaced dislike for hierarchy in the next section, but we need to realize that it's not an either-or proposition, not *either* hierarchy *or* centeredness, but both-and.

**The book presents a compelling portrait of Trinity.** I wish Young wasn't so confused about some of the realities of the Trinity because the parts he gets right are so compelling. *The Shack* understands that God is a relational God in the very core of His being. The pictures of God interacting are at times breathtaking. You understand that God is a God worth being in relationship with because it's the purpose for which we were made. Young's portrait suffers from being a little two-dimensional at times – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a little too shiny happy in a way that made me nervous – but I think that's more an issue of a first-time writer who self-published without an editor. Still, there's no doubt that many people have found this book compelling, and its picture of Trinity (though flawed) is a big draw. Many Christians have never been shown anything remotely like this picture of the Trinity; for them it's just a theological abstraction, and that's too bad. The church has believed this for years but taught it poorly; Young takes some steps in the right direction.

## Part 4: What's Dangerous Within The Shack

The Bible tells us that we have a responsibility – despite what Paul Young says – to teach with integrity (Titus 2:7), to patiently correct and reprove with all authority (Titus 2:15 and 2 Timothy 4:2), and to restore those who have erred without ourselves falling into temptation (Galatians 6:1). As such, when we have a book filled with as many major theological errors as this one, we must be bold in showing its faults. For those who would presume to teach people about God as Paul Young attempts to do will face a stricter judgment (James 3:1), and Paul told Timothy to instruct those who were teaching false doctrines to stop (1 Timothy 1:3). As such, here are the issues that make *The Shack* dangerous reading. (For it's clear to me now that even some seminary graduates can't always point out heresy when it's in plain sight!) I will warn you: some of these arguments get technical. There's so much here that breaking down every problem would take far more time than I have and go past the scope of this article, which is really to show just how far this book misses the mark. You may find holes in my arguments caused by my desire to be brief, believe it or not.

***The Shack's "Trinity" is deeply confused and mired in heretical, unbiblical concepts.*** It becomes clear to any true Trinitarian that Paul Young is not so much trying to create a heretical god as he is deeply confused about the Trinity. His heresies merge together; this Trinity makes no logical sense to anyone versed in the Bible. But let's just look at a few of the heresies that he mixes together. Young's "Papa" has the scars of crucifixion; in explanation "Papa" says that he suffered when Christ died. This is a form of patripassianism, which taught that the Father suffered and died on the cross. This is heretical because there is a clear delineation between the three persons of the Trinity and what they do; they are all of one essence, but they are also individuals, and what happens to one does not necessarily happen to the others. The Gospels tell us that the Son does what the Father says. There are things that the Father knows that the Son does not (Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32). And moreover, the Father was pleased to crush the Son (Isaiah 53:10), not because the Father desired the Son's suffering but because He knew it would bring salvation. The Father was not harmed by the death of the Son; He was reconciled to humanity through the Son's death.

But what lays behind this whole thought is another heresy, that of modalism. Modalism says that there is really one unified God who just puts on three faces – Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. It's the only way that all can experience the exact same things. In *The Shack*, there are three persons who are interacting, so it's impossible for this trinity to truly be just modal, but the signs point to things that could only happen if God was modal. There's also a concept in here of tritheism, that the trinity is really three gods that co-exist. Again, Young says no, but the things that happen to the persons of the trinity seem to deny the true definition of Trinity as three persons, one essence. Quite honestly, it's difficult to pinpoint an attack on Young's trinity because it is so confused. I literally went through making notes showing how he'd skip from modalism to tritheism to actual proper Trinity and so forth.

You may ask, what's the point? The concept of the trinity is not explained fully in the Bible, certainly, but the Bible is so full of references to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit together that we have to respect what's actually there. Moreover, the danger here is that it is very easy to think that the book is representing the Trinity as shown in the Bible. *The Shack's* "God" has no internal consistency. Frankly, a lot of people don't care about logic. But give this book to someone who does care about it, and they'll rip it and its god to shreds. And when someone does look at it carefully, they'll have to ask – who exactly did die on the cross (chapter 6)? Did all three persons of the trinity actually speak themselves into existence as the Son of God (also chapter 6)? Has the Father "crawled" into this world (chapter 11)? Through Christ, are all the members of the Trinity fully human (chapter 13)? What the book teaches on the doctrine of the Trinity is simply a mess.

***The Shack* teaches panentheism.** Chapter 7 states that "God...dwells in, around, and through all things." This is a classic statement of panentheism. This doctrine comes from a misunderstanding of passages like Ephesians 4:6, which is speaking about God being in all believers through the gift of the Holy Spirit and not (as it is misunderstood) in all things. The Bible teaches that God is different than us and separate from us. The idea of transcendence says that God is over and above all things. God is also immanent; God is with believers through the Holy Spirit, and Jesus was on earth physically with us. But God is not actually in everything. The problem with God being in everything is that everything suddenly becomes divine. If panentheism is true, I cannot eat, drink, touch, or taste anything without disturbing God! The air I breathe has God in it. Even vegans can't get past destroying God in the plants they eat. God is in the computer on which I work and apparently being pressed every letter I type. It's a doctrine impossible to live by or to truly believe, and it's also one that mistakes the presence of God with

His fingerprints. When all of nature shows God's glory, it's because nature displays His handiwork and His design is all over it, but not because He is somehow physically manifest and living within it. And why is it dangerous? Because it makes it very easy to worship the creation rather than the Creator.

**The book excludes those who disagree with it.** In the foreword, we're told that if we hate the book, we're told, "Sorry...it wasn't written primarily for you." If a book is true – and keep in mind, as we said, that didactic fiction like *The Shack* exists to teach truths within a fiction narrative – then there is no need to be defensive. Truth is truth whether or not we accept it. And remember part 3? *The Shack* teaches that there is absolute truth! What this does is create an "inside/outside" dichotomy. A fully-functioning orthodox Christian is placed on the outside from the very beginning by the book itself; when we begin disagreeing, we're obviously not meant for this book. It also means that the conversation about the book devolves into a conversation not about truth but about whether or not it worked for you, which is not absolute truth but relative truth. The fact that this book is creating huge rifts of disunity amongst relatively conservative Christians because of its content should say something.

**Before introducing the "trinity," Young sets up an explicit distrust of Scripture.** At the end of chapter 4, we're told that Mack was taught that God only speaks through Scripture, "properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper..." Mack then posits sarcastically that Scripture is now in the hands of the elites and not the ordinary person, that it can only be interpreted by the experts. But this is so untrue! The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). The Spirit is our counselor that confirms the words of Scripture and speaks to us through it, which is why we need to be actively reading it all the time. The Spirit does not contradict Scripture; it helps us understand how the Scripture relates to us where we are. And we live in an era where the Scripture is available to anyone in the Western world to read! For nearly 500 years the Scriptures have been in the hands of common people, and in many languages it has been translated at an educational level where the vast majority can easily understand the text. While it is true that some traditions like Roman Catholicism downplay the need for the laity to read Scripture, to their shame, Young's real argument is not about the interpretation of Scripture. Young really wants to remove Scripture as the foundation of faith. He is so interested in a mystical relationship with God that he dismisses the actual means that we know how to be in relationship with Him. This is incredibly dangerous

because it places personal, untested experience over the tested revelation of God. Without Scripture, how does one know that “the spirit” speaking to you is the Holy Spirit and not a demon? You don’t.

**Young’s depiction of God reinforces harmful racial stereotypes.** I have had the pleasure and privilege of knowing quite a number of black women in my life...and not one of them acted anything like “Papa.” They have come from a variety of backgrounds and had a great number of experiences across the African-American experience in America. Instead of seeing that reflected in “Papa,” we get a stereotype that has been called in some circles an “Aunt Jemima.” Having just gone to a conference that talked about the difficulties in creating a truly multicultural church due to both overt and latent racism, I can say that these stereotypes serve to create more division in the body. While I think many of my friends might appreciate moving away from a stereotype of God as a WASP-y old man, I don’t think they would think “Papa” is much better. (I also think the Asian community might have certain problems with the depiction of the Holy Spirit, but for most of us the blatant stereotype is the easier one for us to see.)

**The trinity of *The Shack* is the god of open theism.** Open theism teaches that God does not know the future. They are varieties of open theism, but the version in *The Shack* is called voluntary nescience – that is, that God voluntarily limits His knowledge of the future to facilitate relationship with us. Chapter 7 states that God, when He is listening to Mack talk about his children, does not “bring to mind” His knowledge of Mack’s children so that He can experience Mack’s children through his eyes. This is a very popular doctrine currently in postmodern Christian circles because it lets God react emotionally to events in human lives. However, how does one not know what one knows? In my own experience, when I try to put something out of mind, the more it pops back in! And indeed, biblically we see that God knows all things (1 John 3:20) and knows people even before they are born (Jeremiah 1:5). The problem with open theism is that, if God does not know the future (even voluntarily), God has no means by which to make perfect decisions. God could make mistakes. The atonement could have been a mistake. In comparison, God’s total knowledge of everything means that God knows everything perfectly.

Let’s look at the example *The Shack* gives. In truth, God knows exactly how Mack experiences his children, not only at this moment but at every other moment. Knowing that does not damage relationship. Think about people who’ve been in relationships for a very long time. They tell the same stories they’ve told time and again, and yet they grow deeper and richer in the

retelling. Sometimes they even finish each other's stories. Knowing the story does not make it any less worth telling. A god of limited knowledge, whether voluntary or involuntary, is a finite, untrustable god. God does not need to limit Himself in order to be in true relationship with us. (By the way, Young uses an analogy of a person letting a child win a game as an example of someone limiting themselves to build relationship. However, this is a bad example because the person playing the game does not forget the rules of the game or forget how to throw a fastball; they simply limit their power or choose not to do something that would cause them to win. It is a decision based in full knowledge and limiting of power, not in limiting knowledge.)

**Young removes urgency from the call to turn to God.** In chapter 5, when "Papa" first welcomes Mack, he is unwilling to trust what "Papa" says and let go. "Not ready?" she responded. "That's okay, we'll do things on your terms and time." Now if this quote was the only one of its kind, it might be out of context. But everything that happens in Mack's turning to God happens as he desires. It sounds like a very caring, loving, non-coercive thing to do. But it's the total opposite of the biblical teaching. The parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the wise and foolish servants (Matthew 25), alongside the parable of the rich man who prepares for himself but not for God (Luke 12:16ff), clearly teach that the time to repent and turn to God is now. Who knows the day of his own death? As a hospice chaplain, I saw many people who even in the face of impending death still delayed turning to God, and it was heart-wrenching. Is God patient with us? Yes. But many people who die in fires are killed by smoke inhalation, not the actual fire itself – they think they have time because the flames aren't yet near, but the real killer is already in the room waiting to suffocate its next victim. It is the height of spiritual irresponsibility for any teacher to imply that God will wait for us to be ready to come to Him. "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). It's proof of Young's latent universalism, which I will deal with next.

***The Shack* diminishes the reality of sin's sinfulness and the actuality of divine judgment, showing remnants of the author's former (?) belief in universalism.** In part 3 I said that the book does not intend to promote universalism; however, as a good friend pointed out to me and knows personally, Young was a universalist when he wrote the book, and much of the book was edited to try and eliminate its most overt forms so that it could be sold to Christians who would not accept a universalist book. Paul Young denies being a universalist on his website, but those who have known him for over a decade like seminary professor James DeYoung say

that he believes in a particular form of universalism called UR, or Universal Reconciliation. Paul Young is so inconsistent in the book itself that it's not surprising that he is inconsistent in his statements.

Turning to the book for proof...God is submitted to us (chapter 10). God doesn't punish sin but cure it (chapter 8). Most spiritual roads lead "nowhere," but Jesus will travel those roads to find us (chapter 12). The book claims that all people are forgiven their sins, but only some choose relationship (chapter 16). And finally, God doesn't need to punish sin (chapter 8). These things sound OK, but they are all destructively incorrect. God punishes and avenges sin both now and in eternity, both in the Old Testament and the New (Exodus 34:7, Romans 2:12, 1 Thess 4:6, 2 Thess 1:8). Submission is commanded of us to God and to one another (Hebrews 12:9, James 4:7, Ephesians 5:21), but nowhere is it suggested that God is submitted to us. Jesus commands us to go down the narrow road, for wide is the road (wide are the roads!) that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:12). And the idea that we choose "relationship" with God makes no sense; there is no biblical basis for it, and one could say it has no logical coherence. As a recent author I read put it, everyone is in relationship with God: they either dwell in God's wrath for staying in sin and rejecting Christ's forgiveness or dwell in God's mercy through faith (which is a free gift) and repentance.

Nobody wants judgment; God Himself desires that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4). But God's wrath is not a human anger full of sinful rage and hatred. God's wrath is true justice given in total knowledge, wisdom, and even mercy. None of us has any concept of how awful sin is. If God had even the tiniest drop of sin in Himself, He would instantly cease to be God. Sin is anti-God. But sin isn't punishment in and of itself, like the book claims. Sin is pleasurable; thus says Hebrews 11:25. Just because a pleasure is wrong doesn't make it any less pleasurable! It requires punishment in some fashion. And the best thing we can do is to teach of God's righteous wrath and then the solution to that wrath. Because as C.S. Lewis pointed out in the Narnia series, God isn't nice. He's good; He defines goodness. And when we substitute a nice god who saves everyone without judgment for the unrepentant, we no longer have the true, good God of the Bible. And if you think about it, we don't want a God who will not ultimately punish the wicked and unrepentant. If we wanted this kind of god, we'd open up the prison doors and let everyone free. Why don't we do that? Because we believe, we know, even as non-Christians, that punishment is just. Universalism may

sound nice, but it's not biblical and it's not just – not unless everyone in the world does indeed come to faith and repent, which we're told in the Bible will not happen.

This also means that Young doesn't understand guilt. The book's god says that guilt will “never help you find freedom in me.” But that's not true. Galatians 3:24 teaches us that the Law existed as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ so that we might be justified by faith. The law produces guilt, which points to our need for salvation and redemption. We feel guilty because we *are* guilty! If there is no guilt, there is no need for Christ. Guilt is exactly what helps us find freedom in Christ because it drives us to our need. In Acts 2:37, after Paul preaches how the Jews killed the Son of God, his audience is cut to the quick by their guilt! It is through their realization of their trespass that they understand their need for salvation. But because Young does not see the reality of sin for what it is, he cannot see why guilt about sin could lead one to Christ.

**The book's god is an anarchist.** *The Shack* claims that hierarchy is inherently bad and not how the “trinity” operates (chapter 8). The book believes that relationship can be forged without rules (chapter 14). The book attacks institutions and systems, particularly religion, politics, and economics (chapter 12), which Jesus says are responsible for all “mental turmoil and anxiety.” And the book claims that responsibility isn't a word or a concept in the Bible because if we have responsibilities, God “would not have to be with you at all.” (chapter 14).

It's virtually impossible to cover all these without going on for pages, but what we have here is not a biblical picture but Young's '60s countercultural distrust of authority. Sometimes Young outright distorts Scripture, for it does have the word “responsibilities,” and the word “duty” (which has the same meaning) appears 57 times. God does have requirements and responsibilities for us! Even the most popular verse amongst social justice liberals, Micah 6:8, tells us we have responsibilities: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God! As a parent, my children have chores – responsibilities – and we often do them alongside to teach them. The relationship occurs through the responsibility!

But this leads us to Young's idea that relationship can (and indeed must) exist without rules. But this makes no sense. The universe itself has cosmic laws that God set in place. They are part of the natural order. And all relational interactions have rules. You can't have a relationship unless both parties know the rules! It's the reason why people with autism have a difficult time making friends – they don't read social signals telling them what the rules are. And

do you know why experts say so many couples who cohabit don't get married and the ones who do usually divorce? Because the relationship was not founded on the "rule" of commitment! And guess what? 1 John 2:3-6 tells us how we know we are in relationship with Him (using the terms "know Him, live in Him, abide in Him"). How can we know we are in relationship? By obeying his commands! 1 John 3:10 and 3:24 echo this. Paul in the book of Galatians goes on for a considerable time talking about how we are under faith and not under law, but then in Galatians 5 he shows how those who have the Spirit – who are in relationship with God – will not do the things of the flesh like sexual immorality, rage, discord, envy, etc. Are we bound to the Law without forgiveness? Absolutely not! But to throw out "rules" is to throw out the very nature of existence. I couldn't even type this note to you without rules...for what is a dictionary but a set of rules about what a word can mean and what it can't?

When Young attacks institutions, he seems to forget that Jesus did establish the church through Peter in Matthew 16:18. God also implemented worship of Himself in the temple in the first books of the Bible. Those are institutions and systems. What Young really hates is the organized church. He has said in many interviews that the organized church doesn't work for some people like himself. Are institutions and systems and hierarchies sometimes corrupted? Yes, but we can be salt and light in them and through them! Young says that God can work through systems without becoming a part of them, for which I give him credit. But in reality, the book's god promotes individualism (despite the argument about independence) and rips apart the church as the bride of Christ. This is a "Jesus and me" philosophy that doesn't see the need for the church. And it's because Young doesn't understand that it's not politics, religion, and economics that cause all our stress...it's sin! Systems are neutral! A system can be exploited, but there is nothing wrong with order. The very way that Young argues (well) for the question of evil is to show that God sees the order in what we see as chaos. And the very orderedness of the universe should point to this.

The long and short of this one is this: Young has created a god in his own image rather than God of Scripture, one that shares his baby-boomer mentalities about society and power.

**The book gets entangled in concepts from other religions.** The idea of "auras" that Mack sees in a sequence when he forgives his father is directly from New Age teachings. These do not exist in the Bible, and one could argue that "auras" are created by demonic influences. The book also subtly posits that this world is unreal. This is something that comes from far

Eastern religions, but the Bible teaches that this world is totally real. I saved this argument for last because I don't think Young meant for his readers to believe in other religions; I think that both of the times these occur, they are intended to be literary in nature rather than stating something absolutely true. Nevertheless, one would expect a Christian author wouldn't want to mislead his audience with beliefs and practices found in false religions.

## Part 5: The Proper Use of The Shack

If you've made it this far, I think you'll indulge me to start with a parable. I do not claim to be a fantastic author of fiction myself, but maybe this will help you understand my perspective on a proper use of *The Shack*, if there is one.

Once a man was given a gift certificate to an exclusive, exotic restaurant. He called ahead to make his reservation. He was told that he must choose in advance what kind of dish he would like so selections to his taste would be ready. He told them he would like fish.

When the man arrived, the chef met him at the door. "Good evening," he said. "I have three dishes prepared for you tonight that you may choose from. You are entitled to eat any or all of them as you choose. The first two dishes are variations on fugu, the Japanese delicacy. The third dish is called ichthus."

"As you may know, fugu is made from the pufferfish. The first dish is made from one that was carefully bred and cultivated. This variety of the pufferfish contains only the tiniest traces of the poisons that the fish is well known for. You will find it quite pleasant to the palate, though afterwards you will probably not feel full. Because of the trace amounts of poison it is likely you may find yourself lightheaded or experience discomfort. However, this meal will in no way permanently harm you."

"The second fugu dish is prepared from a pufferfish caught in the wild. Its organs are saturated with poison which can be deadly. It is very difficult to remove all the poison from the fish, as it is found in the liver, the skin, and other organs. If you were to eat the liver, you would almost certainly die. I am very willing to help you remove those dangerous parts of the fish, but there is no guarantee that you will not bite into the poison. Many of our customers like this fish because it is something fresh and exciting and dangerous, and they say eating it changes their lives. But then again, some of those who say this are also dead come morning."

"The ichthus is a strange fish. It is tough and you can only cut it with your teeth. Its skin is deep and has a strong bitter taste. Many people give up on eating it at this point, claiming it is inedible. But the bitterness prepares you for the center meat of the fish, which while still tough is warm and deeply satisfying, with nutrients that are life-giving. Most of my customers who get to

the center find the fish well worth the endeavor, though many reject it without even attempting the first bite.”

“Which fish shall I bring out to you?”

Now I’ve been told that my parabolic abilities are just like those of Jesus – impossible to understand without further explanation. So here’s what I’m trying to say...the first dish is the standard piece of Christian fiction, fun to read, easy to get through, and generally forgettable. They might make some mistakes around the edges or be misleading around doctrines that aren’t central to Christianity, but they aren’t very harmful or helpful. The second dish is *The Shack* and other books like it. They are fascinating, interesting, thrilling. They challenge the status quo. But when consumed whole, they are deadly to faith. Because when someone begins to find the real God, they will feel that somebody sold them the proverbial bill of goods along the way. The third dish is the Bible. It’s tough going, and realizing that one is a sinner destined for hell and destruction is a bitter pill indeed. But when we get to know God’s mercy and grace and love in its truth, it is magnificent and worth the cost. The question we have to ask is this: why serve poison when we can serve grace? And unlike the parable, when we give *The Shack* to people willy-nilly, we aren’t even as gracious as the chef who would remove the worst of the harmful bits for us!

**Objection 1: But so many people who weren’t interested in God have developed an interest in Him through this book!** Guess what: I guarantee you that if you give someone a copy of *A Course In Miracles* or Eckhart Tolle’s *A New Earth* or L. Ron Hubbard’s *Dianetics* (all bestsellers in the same league as *The Shack* if not more so), they will be thinking about God too...just not in ways Christians would accept. There is no doubt that *The Shack* is a spiritual book; it is simply not a Christian one, no matter what you may have been told or thought. The god of *The Shack* is a counterfeit that imitates the true and living God. That doesn’t mean that a person can’t see through it and get to know God in reality, but it means that believing in this god sets the reader up for failure when the true and living God starts knocking on the door of the heart. For Christians who already believe, the errors are such that it could have you chasing after the wind rather than seeking out the Savior you already know.

**Objection 2: But there’s so much good stuff in The Shack!** There is good stuff. I wouldn’t have written part 3 if I didn’t think so. But what in there cannot be taught in a good,

solid Bible study or church service? What truth in there do we who are faithful believers not already think and believe? Granted, there are many who have not heard this good news presented in a loving, caring way that they could understand. That is to our shame; we have not been good stewards in sharing the gospel in all of its fullness. But why submit yourself to all the bad to get the good? In my opinion, because this book is intentionally teaching about God's very self, this is not an issue of discernment such as one would use when deciding to go to a movie with good moral themes but bad language and realistic violence. I think *The Shack* is nothing less than spiritual pornography; it serves to excite the spiritual senses based on false pretenses without actually nurturing a relationship with the real God. I know saying this will make a lot of people really mad, but I'm dead serious about it. You cannot pursue relationship with the god of *The Shack* because that god does not exist.

**Objection 3: Why do so many Christians of all stripes like this book if it's not true?**

“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4) We live in a time when the number of those who stand by a faithfully biblical worldview is shrinking. The world has crept into our views so thoroughly that we excuse many things that other generations called anathema, and rightly so. But even more difficult is our total disinterest in spiritual truth. I mean, there was a time in European history where even the common people were ablaze with interest about the truths of God. Now, it's hard to find pastors interested in doctrine! So the love for this book should be no surprise. If our seminaries – and I don't mean liberal seminaries but Bible loving, conservative evangelical seminaries – won't train pastors to spot heresies, no wonder the rest of us can't.

**But I already drank the Kool-Aid and read the book!** Fear not. Just because you've read the book doesn't mean you can't get something useful out of it. Pray over it. Get deep into the Word of God. Determine to find out what the Bible reveals as truth about God. Accept (for those of us who would just throw the book against the wall) that some things you read in *The Shack* about God are true, and that those things are indeed excellent and praise-worthy about God. Accept (for those of us who embraced the book) that the god presented here is not fully the God of Scripture and pledge to throw away those ideas that are mistaken, no matter how much you love them. Throw yourself headlong at the foot of Christ, willing to die to yourself and your

ideas of who God is and willing to accept the Bible's portrait of God no matter how hard it is to do, and you will find the One who is the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior.

**So what is the proper use of *The Shack*?** A book filled with this much theological error should not be something that we recommend. In my opinion, it should not be a gift or something where you give out copies or loan out the one you've got. It shouldn't be a book you read out of curiosity about the buzz. I cannot stress this more strongly – do not give it to non-Christians to stir up their interest. I can think of at least one good reason to use *The Shack*: as a master class for solid Christians with a deeply-rooted pastoral leader to understand the nature of spiritual deception and to root it out. I could see using it for a class on cults. But there is one other possibility. Strong Christians and pastors could use it wisely to find out the means of expression that *The Shack* uses to make God more understandable and palatable to those outside the faith. Its style is really what people like...not the sophomoric writing, but the loving way in which God is portrayed. Many Christians really do need to understand that the persons of the Trinity are in deep harmonious relationship sharing one essence, and this book's illustrations of that, while wildly flawed, could if properly redeemed help us create a truer picture of relationship within the Trinity. It certainly can be found in the Bible, and we just need to be able to create truthful pictures that illustrate that truth in all its glory.

**What if my church is doing a Bible study (or sermon series) on *The Shack*?** Pray whether or not you should be a part of that conversation. If you are a young Christian – and by that I mean new to belief – or not well-versed in the biblical faith, I'd suggest not participating. There's no shame in being humble enough to admit that you are not yet spiritually prepared to deal with it. On the other hand, if God leads you to be a part of the discussion, then get a copy of the book and mark it up like a madman. (I hate marking up books, and I wrote all over this thing!) Find out the truth behind the things you love and the things that make you uneasy through reading Scripture and discussing it with other solid Christians. Be prepared to speak truth to people in power, because you may find yourself up against pastors and other people in positions of respect and authority. And then pray some more, and then again, and then more. Because if you can point out the good and the bad within the book, you may lead many others to a knowledge of the true and living God.

**What about those people who came to faith through *The Shack* and seem now to be biblically-oriented Christians?** Praise God! Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery...and many

years and hardships later, Joseph was second in command of Egypt and saved thousands of people from starvation. God used an evil thing for good. I'm not calling *The Shack* evil; nor am I saying that about Paul Young. I simply believe that this book doesn't teach the full truth about God and may even tell some lies about Him. But if someone picks up on enough of the real truth through it to become a true believer and has ditched the un-Christian elements, I rejoice with that person! God uses many unique and strange means to bring His children home, even ones that spring out of sin, but that doesn't mean that we should place an unbeliever in danger's way in the hopes that it might just work out.

**What about those people who have been hurt by organized religion but love God through this book?** We owe a great many people in the world an apology for being lukewarm, unkind, unrepentant, shallow Christians who have not been true to the Lord our God. We need to apologize for making our churches Mack's hypocritical social clubs rather than spiritual outposts where all people can come and find the love of Christ in word and deed and welcome. We must make sure our churches reflect the fruits of the spirit in their fullness to the world. But that doesn't mean that we can ever drop the church from our vocabulary. God has chosen it to be His unique vehicle in this world for bringing people to Himself, as flawed as we are. The church is wounded, broken, unfaithful...and yet God loves us so much! He loves us as a community. And the faithful believer, while also wounded and broken by the church, will love it because God does.

I am sure there are more things we could discuss about the use of *The Shack*, but from here I believe it comes down to the individual. I cannot ultimately tell you if you should read the book or not. I certainly cannot stop you. I do want you to be fully prepared from a reasoned biblical perspective for what you will find. If you do feel led to read it or use it, do so wisely...and may our God, the living and true and wonderful God revealed in Scripture, guide your heart and mind as you do.

## The Cockburn Connection

As I bring my thoughts on *The Shack* to a close, I wanted to reveal a doorway that Paul Young may have left open for us to better understand his thoughts and attitudes. That doorway is the musician Bruce Cockburn (pronounced CO-burn). Why am I so fascinated by this connection? The long and short of it is this: Bruce Cockburn has been my favorite musician since 1992. Around my house, he's simply known as "Bruce." When I tell my wife Catha that a new "Bruce" album is coming out, she's knows I'm not talking about Springsteen. I have every last one of his albums, rare recordings, and so on.

But what does this have to do with *The Shack*? First, Young mentioned Cockburn by name in the book twice, and he even goes so far to give Cockburn God's stamp of approval. Young quotes Cockburn lyrics each time his name is dropped. But for those of us who are fans, there are more of Cockburn's lyrics hiding in the edges. One of them is a chapter title ("Festival of Friends"). Young has at least five Cockburn lyric quotes in the book, and it's possible I could have missed an obscure reference here and there. Now somebody can quote an author once or twice and not be enamored with them. But for Young to reference Cockburn's work no less than five times hints that he is deeply enamored with Cockburn and, perhaps, his philosophy on life.

The connections between Young and Cockburn are striking when you know them. Both of them are Canadians, and while Cockburn still is relatively unknown here, he's quite the powerhouse in his homeland. Both of them are products of the late '60s counterculture. Both had experiences that made them flee the "institutional" church. And both seem to fall well within the concept of the "Christian mystic."

Cockburn started writing music and playing during the late '60s, though he recorded almost nothing during that era. His first album was released in 1970, and for a long time he recorded about an album a year. His early material shows a strong spirituality with Christian undertones that nevertheless isn't very directed or focused. Then in 1974, he made the leap and became a Christian alongside his wife Kitty. His output through approximately 1979 showed a considerable maturing in the faith, but his songs weren't overtly evangelical. Instead, they were lyrically inventive and beautifully poetic. Songs like "Dweller By A Dark Stream" and "Creation Dream" expressed conversion and creation in ways most people could only dream about writing.

Cockburn's faith was nurtured in what he described as fundamentalism – taking the Bible literally – but he gradually drew himself away from that viewpoint. Never really being a part of an established church for any significant length of time, his material changed considerably around 1980 with the collapse of his marriage and his growing interest in social justice. He found it difficult to relate to the Christians he saw on television who told about how their lives had changed into miracle stories after their conversions, where his conversion led to trials and tribulations that contributed to his divorce.

While his beliefs were still influencing his material in the '80s, it became darker, more rock-oriented (though highly complex musically), and more world-interested, with an occasional profanity here and there for emphasis. Those tendencies continue to today, though his sound has returned somewhat to the more folk-tinged appeal of his earlier work. A few of his songs would not be welcome in conservative Christian circles, but Cockburn's music has never showed any direct theological problems.

Cockburn's personal views on faith, on the other hand, are more troubling. They have been written up in many magazines and online articles, but the basics are very similar to some of Young's views. Cockburn has expressed a limited belief in panentheism, a distrust of the institutional (and particularly politically conservative) church and politics in general, a disregard for "rules" (having been in a few cohabiting relationships after his divorce), and an intensely personal experience of God being core to his own faith. He has commented that the search for God, the relationship aspect, never ends. This experiential faith that sees the Bible as secondary to knowing God is the heart of modern Christian mysticism. The tradition of mysticism in Christianity goes back to a couple of hundred years after Christ's death, though traditional Christian mysticism was still rooted in Scripture. Because of all this, while Cockburn is respected as an astounding musician and a songwriting dynamo in many Christian circles, his music has never been released on a Christian label and is almost never available through Christian bookshops and distributors.

Being a huge fan of Cockburn's music, I've also had to be slightly cautious when listening to his music. I tend to see him as another lens that helps to serve as a corrective when some of my right-leaning beliefs have been more based in American conservatism rather than the Kingdom of God. On the same time, I also filter out some of his own issues that come from being pretty radically left politically and spiritually.

When I read the book, I was interested to find that Young's philosophies and Bruce Cockburn's personal leanings (that he has made public, anyway) are startlingly similar. Maybe it's coincidence. Maybe it's something more. But when I read the book, the more I saw Cockburn quoted and cited, the more I realized that something theologically eccentric might be afoot. It's something that most Americans would never, ever realize as a red flag since they've never heard of the man. But it is one more way that we might be able to confirm that Young's viewpoints really do fall outside the boundaries of orthodox faith. (That said, I still love Cockburn's music, and if you want to hear some of his absolute brilliance on the guitar without having to worry about the lyrics, I encourage you to pick up a copy of his instrumental compilation album called *Speechless*.)

## Final Reflections

When I started this project, I had no idea how many people it would touch almost immediately. I simply felt the need to get this book out of my system in a way that might help others who have been struggling to figure out why they both liked *The Shack* and were made intensely nervous by it. I never thought that friends would start telling other friends about my critique! But I am pleased that I might help the conversation go in positive directions. I would really love for the dialogue around *The Shack* to bring people to know the true and living God.

Some folks have asked whether or not I plan to create a blog to publish these thoughts in an arena where it might find a larger audience. I don't believe that will happen, simply because I am a pastor and my first duty is to my congregation. As a solo pastor, creating a sermon every week that's biblically sound and also meaningful in our own day is its own challenge! I simply don't have the time to deal with the amount of mail this discussion would generate.

I do encourage you to check out my church's website at [www.covenantmacomb.org](http://www.covenantmacomb.org); on the "Sermons" page, you can find a PDF version of my thoughts that you can distribute without charge. You can also find a link there to our podcasts, as well as my sermon backlog. And if you're in the Metro Detroit area, please come visit us! We are a small, growing congregation and we welcome you to experience the love of God in our midst.

Thank you for reading, and may God bless you as you seek to know Him in spirit and in truth.