The Shack Reviewed

Michael d'Offay 6 April 2017



The Shack has sold millions of copies and the movie was a Box Office success. Many will watch the movie thinking they are seeing a solid, Christian message that doesn't conflict with the Bible. This article gives some reasons why The Shack is dangerous for your faith and why we need to exercise discernment.

The Basic Plot

William Young tells the fictional story of Mack, an angry, disillusioned church-going man living in the midst of a "great sadness" who receives a cryptic note from God. In the note, God invites him back to the place where his daughter was brutally murdered – an abandoned old shack. In the shack, he meets the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who like to hang out, have fun together and hug each other a lot. They reveal themselves to him, have a long series of dialogues and help him find healing and forgiveness.

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Positives?

There are some aspects of truth that you can find in Young's story. Some believers I know who have come out of a legalistic Christian home or church (and viewed the Lord as a harsh, demanding God), have been encouraged by the book. The God of The Shack is not a distant, stern deity but a highly relational and kind being who deals empathetically with suffering. Young also depicts the mystery of the Trinity in human form, which has helped some people understand God is three persons (yet of one substance), and not one person in three forms.

Problems with The Shack

However, along with these positives come some serious problems. Just because many have found the book to be emotionally moving, does not mean it is full of truth.

God the Father

The author depicts the Father (called 'Papa') as an African-American woman. He is trying to break the stereotype many people have of God the Father as an old man with a white beard – a stern, disciplinarian, authoritative and distant figure. Mack, who had an abusive father, was never able to relate to God, because he projected his twisted experience of his father onto the Lord. We applaud him for trying to break the stereotype, but ultimately we are still called to love God the Father and receive the love of the Father (1 John 3:1).

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While God is not a male (He is a spirit being) and there are places where He is referred to as being like a mother (Isaiah 49:15, 66:13), we can't ignore that Scripture chooses to use male pronouns to depict God. To rightly portray the God of the Bible, we mustn't reinvent God or slide into disuse of biblical terms, but rather bring the terms into right use.

The Trinity and Authority

The relationship between the Trinity shown in the book is an unhelpful, sub-biblical one. 'Papa' explains that "we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity." Jesus also tells Mack: "Papa is as much submitted to me as I am to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect…"

In other words, according to Young, there is no submission and authority among the Godhead, only a circle of love. This is totally contrary to Scriptures, such as John 17 which speaks of Jesus' submission to the Father.

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This disregard for authority and hierarchy is played out in the rest of the book. 'Papa' and Jesus subtly teach Mack to be anti-church, anti-authority and anti-Bible study. He is only concerned with organic, as-you-feel-led relationships. The values we cherish in needing to live a normal Christian life are turned on their head and the book discourages people from loving the local church and honouring our leaders.

The God Who Doesn't Judge

In numerous places, 'Papa' comments to Mack's on how fond he is of people. "'Are there any who you are not especially fond of?' She lifted her head and rolled her eyes as if she were mentally going through the catalog of every being ever created. 'Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is.'"

Yet the living God of the bible has an attitude very different to this. Mankind is not the center of God's affection but of God's wrath (see Romans 2:8, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). People have rebelled against God and God isn't fond of them, He is offended by them!

With regard to the question of dealing with sin, 'Papa' challenges Mack's theology and says, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it."

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The idea of sin being "its own punishment" actually fits the Eastern concept of Karma and not the Christian gospel, as pointed out by Albert Mohler in his insightful review.[1] So we see that 'Papa' embraces all and loves all in a non-judgmental way. This is heresy. Just a basic understanding of the New Testament and the Church fathers will show that this is not the God of historic orthodox faith (see Romans 3:23 and 6:23). Sin is serious and a just God doesn't ignore or sweep our sins under some kind of cosmic rug. He has rightly punished it in His son Jesus, who died in our place.

More concerning is that Mack asks Jesus, “Do all roads lead to Christ?” Jesus responds, “Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.” ‘Papa’ later also tells Mack that the world, whether they believe in him or not, will be reconciled to God. This sounds very much like Universalism – the heretical idea that God will save all people ultimately, regardless of whether we repent or not.

Objections

Some Christians object to all this and say that we should not take The Shack seriously as a theological work, since it is a fictional story. But we take it seriously because the author is portraying ideas about God that shape our understanding of who God is, which makes the story deeply theological. It is clear in this light that The Shack diminishes the glorious character of the God of the Bible and celebrates William Young’s imagination and skewed theology.

Conclusion

Adam Hellyer sums up for us: “As with any lie, The Shack contains a fair amount of truth. Many Christians have read it and found only good. I do not condemn them, and will chalk that up to the Holy Spirit leading them into all the truth. The book is at best a mine field, and at worst a septic tank. Many fine meals find their way into a septic tank, but you will never go to that tank for a fine meal. Just because there are recognisable elements of Christian doctrine in the book, does not make it safe to eat.”[2]

[1] http://www.albertmohler.com/2017/03/06/shack-missing-art-evangelical-discernment/
[2] Adam Hellyer’s Unpublished notes on The Shack