

WE NEED MORE SHACK TIME

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It has topped *The New York Times's* bestseller list and has been called *The Pilgrim's Progress* of our generation. But what is it about William P Young's *The Shack* that has captivated so many people—Christian and non-Christian? Paul Grimmond investigates.

With middle age approaching at the speed of my four-year-old son hurtling down the hallway, it should have come as no surprise: the cutting edge of popular culture had passed me by again. Here was a *New York Times* bestseller that was taking the world by storm, and I had never heard of it. Undaunted by my complete lack of contact with the outside world, and spurred on by the words of my colleagues who assured me that this was a book that *The Briefing* 'must' review, I set out to enter *The Shack*.

The prologue to William P Young's surprise blockbuster introduces us to Mackenzie Allen Phillips, a deeply attractive character whose upbringing was full of pain. Mack left home at the age of 13 after a more than usually vicious beating by his alcoholic father who, it turns out, was an elder in the local church. Before leaving, he poured poison into every bottle of alcohol he could find. But Mack's biggest problem is not his earthly father. The real action commences as we meet Mack, now the father of five children, battling his way through an ice storm to collect the mail from his front gate. The chill of the weather is nothing in comparison to the cold that grips him as he reads the letter he finds there. On a family camping trip four years previously, Mack's youngest daughter, Missy, was kidnapped and brutally killed by a serial killer. The letter is a cryptic invitation to come to 'the shack' where, four years earlier, the search for Mack's missing daughter uncovered her bloodstained dress. Reluctantly, Mack borrows a friend's car and drives into the wilderness to confront the scene of his worst nightmare. Somewhat surprisingly, he meets God in 'the shack' and spends the weekend with him.

The story line, while engaging, is ultimately a vehicle to set the scene for this meeting with God. The heart of the book is a series of extended conversations between Mack and the various members of the Trinity about how God could possibly allow such pain in his creation. Through these conversations, God reveals deep secrets about both his character and the nature of the universe that slowly heal Mack's anger and pain.

So, what secret does God possess that can deal with the depths of Mack's agony? It turns out to be not much of a secret at all: God just happens to be a reasonably able exponent of the 'free will' defence. What is the 'free will' defence? Without wanting to diminish the extensive treatment the argument receives, the following is a reasonable summary, straight from the God of *The Shack*.

"All evil flows from independence, and independence is your choice. If I were to simply revoke all the choices of independence, the world as you know it would cease to exist and love would have no meaning. This world is not a playground where I keep all my children free from evil. Evil is the chaos of this age that you brought to me, but it will not have the final say ... If I take away the consequences of people's choices, I destroy the possibility of love. Love that is forced is no love at all." (p. 190)

The discussion of these foundational ideas about love and free will covers a lot of territory. It touches on areas as diverse as the nature of the Trinity, the meaning of freedom, how to listen to the Spirit, and Jesus' thoughts about the church. It's probably worth pointing out in passing that *The Shack* depicts God the Father (addressed throughout the book as "Papa") as a middle-aged, slightly overweight and extremely cheeky African American woman who loves to bake, Jesus as a nondescript man of Middle Eastern appearance, and the Holy Spirit as a slight woman of Asian appearance who is seen more clearly when you aren't looking directly at her.

Young is not afraid to stray quite a way from biblical orthodoxy, and you could easily fill several articles responding to these errors biblically. However, I do not wish to repeat a task that others have already performed admirably.¹ I would prefer, instead, to ask a couple of questions.

Firstly, how does a passably written novel, which consists of large slabs of undiluted dialogue about theology and which recites a well-worn argument that has been made more eloquently in other places, manage to sell one million copies in the space of 12 months? Secondly, why has it been so appealing to people from Christian backgrounds and even to those currently attending church?² Let's start with the question of the book's broad popularity—popularity which extends even into the secular world.

WHY IS THE SHACK SO BROADLY POPULAR?

At several key points in *The Shack*, God declares that love must involve no compulsion and therefore no expectations. The Holy Spirit says to Mack, "Responsibilities ... are the basis of guilt and shame and judgement, and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as the basis for identity and value" (p. 206). Mack has some trouble wrapping his mind around this, and asks God whether he has ever been disappointed with him. God's response is that it is only people who don't know the future who need to use expectations to control another's behaviour. God knows everything, and therefore he has no expectations; therefore Mack has never disappointed God (p. 206).

How wonderful to hear God declare that he has no expectations! The message is reinforced when the Father declares, "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." (p. 120). Put quite simply, the God of *The Shack*, while sometimes angry at people's folly, is never angry with actual people. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that his anger will never lead to judgement. In my old workplace, we

used to joke that there is nothing quite so heart-warming as a prejudice clearly affirmed. *The Shack* expertly affirms the prejudices of sinful people by using God himself as the mouthpiece to declare what rebellious human beings so desperately wish were true.

However, even though *The Shack* speaks words about God and sin and judgement that will scratch itching ears, I am not sure that this in itself accounts for the book's popularity. If there is one thing that Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has revealed, it is the sheer volume of public approval that can be garnered by exposing the failings of the organized church. Conveniently, the God of *The Shack* taps this wellspring of emotion by explaining that false impressions of him have been propagated by none other than the church.

The failure of the church is woven into the fabric of the story. After taking a walk across the lake together, Jesus tells Mack that he isn't a Christian and doesn't want to make people into Christians; he just wants a relationship with people. It is a sentiment that harmonizes beautifully with one of the anthems of modern culture: institutions and labels are impersonal and inauthentic. Thus, Jesus isn't saying anything that we don't already know when he describes religion, politics and economics as the unholy human trinity that ravages the earth.

Mack himself becomes an example of institutional failure when he candidly admits that his years in seminary taught him stuff that didn't result in a real relationship with God. Jesus highlights this clash between stale, unreal doctrines and living personal relationships by insisting that Mack's experiences of hymns and sermons are not the church he came to build. It is a heady and compelling mix of ideas with only one possible conclusion: the church is to blame; God really is a nice guy after all.

It is hard to convey how deeply satisfying it is to hear God saying things that you wish were true. By speaking so clearly to the prejudices of western individualism, while distancing himself so elegantly from the problem of pain, the God of *The Shack* becomes someone almost anyone can believe in—that is, anyone who doesn't want to think too deeply about the problem. I never quite got why it was that a God who was determined never to make anyone do anything was so sure that everything would turn out all right in the end. But this, of course, explains the popular appeal of *The Shack*. It's good to know that someone as big as God has got the situation generally under control, that he believes in humanity, and that he doesn't really demand all that much after all. But I guess this is also where the mystery deepens for me. I can understand the book's place on *The New York Times* bestseller list; what I find a little more difficult to fathom is why so many professing Christians find the book so helpful.

WHY IS THE SHACK APPEALING TO SO MANY CHRISTIANS?

Part of the answer lies in the issues *The Shack* debates, and in the language and imagery it uses. So much of *The Shack* is essentially Christian. For example, God explains to Mack at one point that the creation is relational because the Trinity is relational. Jesus' death is mentioned over and over again, even though the book never really explains why Jesus died. After an encounter with Wisdom, Mack humbly acknowledges that he really isn't in a position to judge God. And, at one stage, in spite of Jesus' assertion that he has followers in every major religious group in the world, he rejects Mack's suggestion that all roads lead to him.

The Shack is a beguiling mix of truth and error. The combination of ideas and language sweep the reader along so that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two. In fact, the book works in such a way that you don't want to. The theological discussion comes wrapped in an incredibly powerful emotional journey. I found myself getting caught up in Mack's story in the early chapters of the book. The tears trickled down my cheeks when Mack was led into the shack to see his daughter's bloodstained dress lying on the floor. When Mack's anger bubbled to the surface, I too wanted to shout at God and ask him to explain. And I found myself moving, almost against my will, to a place where I experienced Mack's acceptance and peace by the end of the book. This combination of Christian imagery and emotional experience is undeniably powerful and deeply appealing. But I am still not sure that it explains the level of 'Christian' praise *The Shack* has received. Eugene Peterson has declared that "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!" Why are professing believers so willing to accept a God who isn't sovereign, who speaks more clearly through nature than the Scriptures and who refuses to judge? Surely there is more to it than a good story and some Christian language.

Let me suggest another piece of the puzzle: the uncritical acceptance of the gospel of 'relevance'. For many years, Christian belief has been declining in the West. In an attempt to stop the rot, the church has turned to the marketers and church growth gurus who have diligently taught us the importance of 'relevance'. The church needs to speak to 'real' people about their 'real' issues so that we can meet them 'where they're at'.

In the process, the agenda for Christian discussion has been increasingly set by the world, not by God. The key theme of *The Shack* is a case in point: the main issue driving the book is the problem of pain.³ I do not want to suggest here that pain is not a topic for Christian discussion, or that God has nothing to say about it. Nor do I want to dismiss out of hand the reality, depth or emotional significance of suffering in our world. I remember all too clearly watching a brain tumour suck the life out of my father-in-law at the age of 54, and the sadness of holding a friend's stillborn baby in my arms. But I do want to suggest that in allowing the question of pain to become the central question, we have been drawn onto the wrong playing field.

Let me illustrate. In early September, *The Globe and Mail* (a leading Canadian newspaper) ran a story entitled 'A message of hope—or pressure to keep the baby?'⁴ The story was about American vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's choice to give birth to a child that she knew from genetic testing would have Down syndrome. In the story, Dr Lalonde, executive vice-president of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, was openly fearful about the precedent Palin set. He was worried that "Ms. Palin's widely discussed decision to keep her baby, knowing he would be born with the condition, may inadvertently influence other women who may lack the necessary emotional and financial support to do the same".

The essence of the argument seems to be this: it is wrong (and, I take it, morally wrong) for women without adequate financial and emotional resources (whatever that might mean) to be encouraged to give birth to a child with a birth defect instead of killing it. Dr Lalonde firmly believes that if women were influenced by Palin's example to keep their own babies in spite of the presence of abnormalities, that "could have detrimental effects on women and their families". What are the detrimental effects? The article doesn't state them explicitly, but it isn't hard to read between the lines. These women will have to shoulder the emotional and financial burden of caring for someone with a disability. The avoidance of pain has become the absolute. If we can avoid suffering, then that is the morally right thing to do. You can almost hear Satan whispering in the background when Dr Lalonde says, later in the article, "We're coming down to a moral decision and we all know moral decisions are personal decisions".

Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, we have thrown God away. As we have done so, it has become necessary to make our own decisions about right and wrong. What is the only basis that we have for making such decisions? It is the presence or absence of pain. So the existence of pain has become the problem that God must solve in order to be credible in the eyes of judgemental humanity. A key to *The Shack's* Christian appeal is that many of us now think this way too.

The raucous praise that you hear for Young's blockbuster is the sound of our theological chickens coming home to roost. Sinful human hearts notwithstanding, if people in our churches have been meeting the God of the Bible genuinely in all the fullness of his biblical self-revelation, they wouldn't be falling head-over-heels in love with the God of *The Shack*.

A moment's reflection on the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of the Bible reveals a God who is thoroughly unembarrassed about the existence of pain. God cursed the creation in response to the Fall (Gen 3). God is the creator of darkness and calamity (Isa 45:7). God has subjected the creation to futility (Rom 8:20-22). The sovereign King who spoke creation into existence out of nothing created a world in which suffering is the path to glorifying his one and only Son. And all this was in accordance with his plan hatched before the creation of the world.

Is it too much to suggest that Christians are meeting God in *The Shack* because they haven't met him face-to-face in the Bible? Would it be unfair to think that we have spent more time drinking at 'the shack' of individualism and comfort than from the well of scriptural truth? The church growth gurus with their insistence on 'relevance' have left us with such a terrifying theological hole in our churches that Christians have gratefully accepted an anaemic God who can do nothing but stand around and desperately hope that people will turn to him.

WE NEED MORE 'SHACK' TIME

How should we respond to *The Shack*? My first response was to run away as quickly as I possibly could. But then I realized that *The Shack* gets one thing right when it encourages us to meet God in the difficult issues. 'The shack' functions as a metaphor for two things: it is the place where we stuff the things that are too hard to think about, and the place where we meet with God face-to-face. Young is dead right to suggest that we need to get to know God in the midst of the hard questions. The problem is that he brings us face-to-face with a God who is not God at all. In his zeal to 'free' God from the chains of misunderstanding, Young has shackled God beyond recognition.

The solution, though, isn't to run away from 'the shack'; the solution is to spend more time there—not in William P Young's 'shack', of course, but in the place where the living God speaks for himself about the big issues of life. We need to spend more time gazing into the face of the God who reveals himself in the Bible. We need to think about the big questions of suffering and obedience and truth while we sit at the feet of our Lord. In fact, if we have been reading our Bibles, we will have found that these are issues that he is only too willing to discuss. Indeed, it is the triune God of Scripture alone who is both sovereign enough and good enough to deal with evil.

I am not pretending that there won't be difficult questions. Nor am I suggesting that the answers will be totally satisfying for everyone. We may even need to accept that God is not willing to answer some of our questions right now. But we will certainly be better off hearing from the God who sent his Son to die for us, than listening to the god of our imaginations.

If western Christianity had spent more time in 'the shack' with the true and living creator, and less time wallowing around in our felt needs, then, just maybe, less people would have been fooled. We might have recognized *The Shack* for the empty shell that it is. Our churches might even have become places where people could meet face-to-face with the holy God of Scripture. Only when we come into the presence of the loving, holy, majestic, glorious, gracious, judging, rescuing, creating, sustaining and redeeming God, who holds the future in his awesome hands, will we have a real message to offer a world obsessed with pain.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a helpful review of this nature, see http://www.challies.com/media/The_Shack.pdf.

² There are numerous examples of pastors and churchgoers who speak about the life-changing effects of *The Shack* at www.theshackbook.com, www.amazon.com (see the reader reviews) and <http://orders.koorong.com/search/details.jhtml?code=9780964729230> (click on 'reviews').

³ Young was asked on American television what he wanted people to take away from the book. His answer was twofold: he wanted people to know that God was good, and that God was involved in the world. You can view the interview at http://www.cbn.com/media/index.aspx?s=/vod/SUT22_WilliamYoung_030708.

⁴ C Weeks, 'A message of hope—or pressure to keep the baby?', *The Globe and Mail*, 9 September 2008, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com> (viewed 24 September 2008. NB: This is a pay-per-view article.)