

## Discernment and *The Shack*

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Long ago in his book, *A Call to Discernment*, Dr. Jay Adams used a brilliant illustration from William F. Buckley's book, *The Jeweler's Eye*:

The title is, of course, a calculated effrontery, the relic of an impromptu answer I gave once to a tenacious young interviewer who, toward the end of a very long session, asked me what opinion did I have of myself. I replied that I thought of myself as a perfectly average middle-aged American, with however, a jeweler's eye for political truths. . . The jeweler knows value; that is his trade. (Adams, 45)

Dr. Adams rightly pointed out that Buckley was speaking of discernment. The jeweler rightly distinguishes a common stone from a precious gem, the right mineral from the matrix and mineral, the flawed from the truly valuable. Individuals in discernment ministry, people with a jeweler's eye for historical biblical Christianity and theological truth have stared long and hard into the rough crystal people call *The Shack*, by William P. Young. It looks like a diamond, but it is not; it is common quartz crystal filled with inclusions and cracks that mar whatever value it may have had, even as costume jewelry. The jeweler looks at the stone and asks the questions, "What is this?" "Is it valuable?" "How can it be cut in such a way to produce beauty and create value?"

I am an average Christian with a jeweler's eye for biblical truth. An interesting crystal may fool a child but not a person who handles precious stones for a living. There is a large dark spot in this crystal; a crack runs through it; a flaw so profound that it renders the stone useless rather than priceless.

*The Shack* contains subtle and not so subtle heresies. *The Shack* also contains what many Bible scholars would call "aberrant" teaching. Former Professor of Theology at Denver Seminary Dr. Gordon Lewis wrote me in a private e-mail that "*heresy* is a conscious and deliberate rejection of orthodox teaching and the acceptance of contradictory views on the biblically revealed essentials of the Christian faith" (Lewis). In the category of aberration, Dr. Lewis writes, "unorthodox doctrine leads to aberrant behavior that wanders from the path of right action (ortho-practice) on biblically revealed moral and spiritual essentials of Christian living. Beliefs have consequence" (Lewis).

I am hard pressed to judge Young's motives. I cannot judge one way or another if he knows historic biblical Christianity and has decided to represent God in a fresh way.

I am more than happy to reveal my own motives.

Someone reading this review might ask, "What is motivating me to write this monograph?" My answer: I am an ordinary Christian, a pastor, a middle-aged Christian who loves the Lord Jesus, who embraces historical biblical Christianity, who is asked by scores of people, "What do you think of this book?" "What is wrong with this book?" I have no axe to grind or score to settle. If a child finds a piece of glass washed smooth by the ocean's tide, and the child believes she has found a precious stone, a valuable gem; who am I to rain on her fantasy? But if the child tries to sell me the polished glass as a precious gem; or attempts to swallow the glass for reasons that only a child would know; do I have some kind of responsibility to tell the child her precious treasure is not really valuable?

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I am not envious of Young. I must admit a deep sense of concern; that several of my Calvary Chapel pastor friends have read this book and mistaken it for a jewel. Some things are easy to write about. Some themes are timeless and valuable to Christians in every generation. Who doesn't love devotional literature, priceless fiction saturated in Bible promises with eternal themes? We love the stories of hope; we love the stories filled with the love of God, and the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

Jude certainly desired to write about the theme of "our common salvation," and then stopped and wrote, "I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

Jude uses the definite article "the" faith for good reason. "The faith" embodies the essentials of Christianity. In their wonderful book, *Conviction Without Compromise*, Norm Geisler and Ron Rhodes outline some of the essentials of Christianity and preface their book with Augustine's oft repeated dictum, "In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all things charity" (7). In the essentials category at the top of the list we find God's unity; the historical, biblical revelation of the Trinity; Christ's deity; and Christ's humanity. *Conviction Without Compromise* also includes notes about essentials: *salvation* essentials, a *revelation* essential (the inspiration of the Bible), an *interpretation* essential which means to the authors the historical-grammatical method of interpreting Scripture (Geisler, 8-9).

### In Essentials Unity

People who love and hate *The Shack* usually agree with the saying; "in essentials unity" but are hard pressed to ask and answer the question, "Does *The Shack* compromise the essentials of historic biblical Christianity? Is this something we should even care about or fight about?" The Apostle Jude's admonition "to contend earnestly for the faith" must mean a vigorous defense of the truth; and a willingness to divide over the truth rather than unite under the false flag of tolerance or bad theology.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Discernment is not a matter of simply telling the difference between right and wrong; rather, it is telling the difference between right and almost right" (Elliott).

What is it about this book that otherwise discerning Christians suspend belief, enter the story, feel spiritually uplifted and encouraged, and speak of God's love and forgiveness with fresh perspective? The fundamental problem lies in the reader's inability to tell the difference between what is biblically right and biblically wrong; between what is right and almost right.

Does God love us? The answer is yes. Does God forgive us in Christ? The answer is yes. Does the Bible paint a picture of the Godhead where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit carry on like your country cousins, eating collard greens, spilling beans, and playing practical jokes on each other? We believe Jesus was a real human being. But we do not believe Jesus is some cartoon character. I am all about fun. But guess what? God's ways are not our ways. No wonder thoughtful people who have read this book and its characterizations of God have come up with terms like "blasphemous," "sacrilegious," "loathsome," and "irreverent."

The book, *The Shack*, has generated countless comments, endless reviews, and more criticism than a presidential candidate.

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Does *The Shack* misrepresent the God of the Bible and distort, pervert, or mislead the sinner who doesn't know God or the saint who does know God? Young presents a God who loves and forgives but ignores the God who judges, who condemns both sin and sinners on the basis of His perfect Holiness. In my reading of *The Shack*, the author seems committed to a low perhaps even disparaging view of the Scripture. The author seems quite content to mock the Bible, but does not appreciate when critics mock him.

In seminary [Mack] had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners' access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that gilt edges. (Young, 65-66)

There is a theme in *The Shack*: when Papa is asked questions about the Bible, characters in the Bible, or events in the Bible, the character is almost glib and condescending, and the character goes on to explain how things really are.

At GotQuestions.org under, "What is GotQuestions.org's review of *The Shack* by William P. Young," the author wisely notes,

If one is to teach error, it is important to do away with Scripture, either by adding to it (Mormonism), mistranslating it (Jehovah's Witnesses) or simply mocking it (*The Shack* and some others in the "emergent church"). (Houdmann)

Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses if hard pressed would tell you that they love and honor the Bible; for the Mormons, "in so far as it is correctly translated," and for the Jehovah's Witnesses, "in so far as it is correctly interpreted by the Watch Tower and Tract Society." What is Young's view of the Bible? He seems to distance himself from the Biblical themes, images, and concepts in the Bible.

Does *The Shack* claim to teach about the God of the Bible? Michael W. Smith writes, "My wife and I laughed, cried, and repented of our own lack of faith along the way. THE SHACK will leave you craving for the presence of God" (Smith).

*The Shack* is not really a parable, an earthly story that represents a heavenly truth. *The Shack* is more of an allegory; an attempt to use literary devices to represent and communicate truth; truth about God, truth about forgiveness, truth about the nature of pain and suffering.

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### A Brief Summation of *The Shack*

*The Shack* seems to be a book that people either love or hate. I have not met too many people who have read the book with detached ambivalence. Tim Challies rightly points out, “The book is all about the content and about the teaching it contains. The book’s reviews focus not on the quality of the story but on its spiritual and emotional impact” (Challies).

*The Shack* has been called a modern parable. Eugene Peterson went so far as to write, “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress* did for his. It’s that good!” (Peterson). Is the book that good? Not really. It fails the literature test (great story, memorable characters, timeless truths). *Pilgrim’s Progress* was a book soaked and saturated in the Scripture and in timeless biblical themes and truths.

The story revolves around the main character Mack (Mackenzie) Phillips. Mack’s daughter Missy is abducted and killed by a serial killer while on a family vacation. The story painfully unfolds and we are taken to a shack where evidence exists of foul play. Mack receives a mysterious note from “Papa.” Papa is the affectionate term Mack’s wife uses for God. The pain and tragic loss of the daughter is simply called his *Great Sadness*. Through a series of events Mack finds himself back at the shack; the scene of the crime; and has a supernatural encounter with three figures: Papa, Jesus, and a character called Sarayu. The author has the main character Mack embark on an emotional, psychological, and theological journey.

The problem critics have with the book is not simply the journey, but the misrepresentations of God, the Godhead, the Trinity, revelation, and forgiveness.

The people who have expressed gratitude and joy over the book seem unaffected by its blatant misrepresentations of God; but rather sympathize and identify with the character’s journey of pain, understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

You have to be pretty hard-hearted not to feel some sympathy for a man whose daughter is kidnapped and brutally murdered. Like Job in the Old Testament, Mack goes through a series of questions and answers designed to answer the problems of the presence of evil, the relationship of God to man; the issue of forgiveness and hope. But unlike Job, Mack does not have an encounter with the God of the Bible.

Young, in a sermon he delivered at Crossroads Church in Denver, suggested he would like his book made into a movie.

I have some ideas and suggestions for the main cast of characters:

- Mackenzie Allen Phillips: David Duchavney (Fox “Spooky” Mulder from the X-Files)
- Papa: Oprah Winfrey (still struggling with her weight) or Della Reese
- Jesus: Dr. Phil (with an appropriate hair piece and a nose prosthesis)
- Sarayu: Lucy Lui (dressed in gossamer, looking kind of like an Asian fairy). Sarayu is Sanscrit for wind but in its root means “to flow,” and is the name of a river in India.

Years ago A.W. Tozer warned of what he called “a new decalogue adopted by the neo-Christians of our day, the first word of which reads ‘Thou shalt not disagree,’ and a new set of Beatitudes too, which begins ‘Blessed are they that tolerate everything, for they shall not be made accountable for anything’” (*Gems*, 47-48).

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Tozer pointed out, “It is now the accepted thing to talk over religious differences in public with the understanding that no one will try to convert another or point out errors in his belief. Imagine Moses agreeing to take part in a panel discussion with Israel over the golden calf; or Elijah engaging in a gentlemanly dialogue with the prophets of Baal” (*Gems*, 47-48).

The author of *The Shack* doesn’t seem to be too interested in addressing the criticisms brought by defenders of historic biblical Christianity.

“What you are about to read is something that Mack and I have struggled with for many months to put into words. It’s a little, well . . .no, it is a lot on the fantastic side. Whether some parts of it are actually true or not, I won’t be the judge. Suffice it to say that while some things may not be scientifically provable, they can be still true nonetheless.” (Young, 12)

The author then offers a couple of disclaimers, “. . .if you happen upon this story and hate it,. . . “Sorry. . .but it wasn’t primarily written for you. Then again, maybe it was” (Young, 13).

What are we to believe or not believe? Was the story written for you or not? If you hate the story, the story is for you; if you love the story, the story is for you.

2 Timothy 4:4, “and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (NKJV).

Cathy Lynn Grossman, of *USA Today*, writes, “As for critics, he shakes his head” (Grossman). She quotes the author of *The Shack*:

- "I don't want to enter the Ultimate Fighting ring and duke it out in a cage-match with dogmatists. I have no need to knock churches down or pull people out."
- "I have a lot of freedom by knowing that you really experience God in relationships, wherever you are. It's fluid and dynamic, not cemented into an institution with a concrete foundation."
- "But it's not about me. I have everything that matters, a free and open life full of love and empty of all secrets."

The author claims “a free and open life full of love and empty of all secrets.” The author leaves me with the impression that he elevates his own personal experience over the revelation of God in the Bible. Is that a problem? I believe the Bible teaches we can experience God in life-giving and life sustaining relationships. I don’t believe our experience informs our theology but rather our theology informs our experience.

The author of *The Shack* doesn’t want to enter the Ultimate Fighting ring, but he has challenged historical biblical Christianity. Jim Croce warned in his hit tune from the 70’s, “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape; you don’t spit into the wind; you don’t pull the mask of the Lone Ranger.”

If that constitutes risky behavior, how much more to misrepresent the Bible’s representation of God? And there’s the rub. The author doesn’t seem to either know or care that he is misrepresenting the Bible’s picture of God. The author has made public comments about the critics who are heavily invested in a God of wrath or judgment. Somehow the god of *The Shack* is kinder and more understanding than the God of the Bible.

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I have had the privilege of working with law enforcement officials and their families. In the F.B.I. if you pull a gun on a federal agent, you are pulling a gun on every federal agent. When you threaten a marine, you threaten every marine. If you threaten an American citizen, you threaten every American citizen.

When you dismiss the historical, biblical view of God, Jesus, the Trinity; when you reject the Bible's revelation; when you downplay the Scripture at the expense of personal experience (Challies); when you revisit the central message of salvation being something other than the cross of Calvary (psycho-babble); when you redefine redemption; when you portray God in a way inconsistent with the Revelation of God in the Bible; when you redefine the roles and hierarchy within the Godhead; when you leave the reader with the impression that you believe in Universalism but privately or from pulpits affirm the exclusivity of Jesus, you are going to create misunderstandings. And for the person who cares about truth, for the person who sees himself or herself not as some sort of dogmatist but rather as a person in love with the revelation of God given in the Bible, *The Shack* constitutes a threat.

### Misrepresentations in *The Shack*

Young doesn't seem interested in defending his warped and weird views of God, the nature of the Trinity, or his heretical views of subordinationism and patripassianism (definitions to follow).

Patripassianism is a form of modalism, the teaching that there is only one God, who appears in three different modes (as opposed to the orthodox teaching that there is one God, who exists in three persons). Patripassianism comes from the Latin, and means "the father suffers." The name refers to the teaching that God the Father suffers on the cross as Son— since the two are different modes of the same person (according to this false view).

At one point, Mack notices "scars in (Papa's) wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his," (Young, 96) and later Papa says, "When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also choose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood" (Young, 99).

No--God the Father and God the Holy Spirit did not speak themselves into human existence; only the Son became fully Human (John 1:14). Orthodox Christianity teaches that Jesus is one Person with two natures: fully God and fully human. The Father is not the Son and does not have a human nature; the Spirit is not the Father or the Son and does not have and never will have a human nature.

Norm Geisler rightly and soundly points out *The Shack* contains a heretical view of the Father suffering. Geisler points out that patripassionism was condemned by the Nicene Council (A.D. 325) and the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). At issue or at stake is the notion that *God changes*. "Suffering is a form of change, and the Bible makes it very clear that God cannot change." "I the Lord change not" (Mal. 3:6). "There is no shadow of change with Him" (James 1:17). When all else changes, God "remains the same" (Heb. 1:10-12)" (Geisler, normgeisler.net).

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Does *The Shack* and its author paint a picture of a God who changes? In what way does God change? The floodgates of heresy open (i.e. open view; or neo-theism). *If God can change then the revelation of the Bible is false.* If God can change in any way, can God change in every way?

Young's character has God the Father as well as God the Son "suffering," confusing the nature of God. "Haven't you seen the wounds on Papa (God the Father) too?" I didn't understand them. 'How could he. . .' 'For love. He choose the way of the cross. . .because of love'" (Young, 165).

The way God changes according to Young's characterization, God changes out of love; God is willing to change, able to change, "to get inside your stuff" (Crossroads Church audio file). If God is willing to change, motivated by love, to get inside your stuff, then the change God proposes must be good, right? Wrong.

For some reason, perhaps for several reasons, those who love *The Shack* embrace the notion that God indeed does change! **The Shack offers psychological relief for the human heart and invites the reader to embrace a God who changes--so you don't have to.** For those who "love" *The Shack*, they are invited to embrace a God who changes--who changes because of love in order to get inside your stuff.

God doesn't change. The cross of Jesus does reveal the love of God--the love of an unchanging God. Jesus came to die to absorb the wrath of God, to please His heavenly Father, to learn obedience and be perfected, to achieve His own resurrection from the dead. (Read John Piper's book, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came To Die*, if you think the Bible doesn't contain enough reasons to declare God's love.)

Young defends his position by appealing to 2 Corinthians 5:19, "That God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself;" with the net result that the reader is left with the impression that Young's view is some kind of modified form of Universalism. In Young's analysis and interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:19, God the Father is literally present (in some unknown way) in Christ—suffering; even experiencing Roman nails; taking on permanent wounds; visible, tangible, real. But for purposes of discussion, let's suppose that Young does not mean real, physical, tangible, but in some sense metaphorical or allegorical. Is the net result a God who changes?

Paul is convinced that God the Father was *by means* of Jesus' death on the cross reconciling the world to Himself, and *not coexisting* or taking on an additional nature or experiencing ontological change with Jesus. Tozer writes,

For a moral being to change it would be necessary that the change be in one of three directions. He must go from better to worse or from worse to better; or, granted that the moral quality remain stable, he must change within himself, as from immature to mature or from one order of being to another. It should be clear that God can move in none of these directions. His perfections forever rule out any such possibility. (*Knowledge*, 49)

He then continues,

God cannot change for the better. Since He is perfectly holy, He has never been less holy than He is now and can never be holier than He is and has always been. Neither can God change for the worse. Any deterioration within the unspeakably holy nature of God is

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impossible. Indeed I believe it impossible even to think of such a thing, for the moment we attempt to do so, the object about which we are thinking is no longer God but something else and someone less than He. The one of whom we are thinking may be a great and awesome creature, but because he is a creature he cannot be the self-existent Creator. (Tozer, *Knowledge*, 49)

Subordinationism is a heretical teaching that any One of the Trinity is lesser in rank or dignity than others. In contrast, although there is no autonomous Person of the Trinity, none who is God apart from any other Person, yet each Person is autotheos ("αυτοθεος," God in and of Himself).

## Gender Bender God

Tim Challies cites Bruce Waltke's *Old Testament Theology* where he argues that both representation and misrepresentation matter:

God, who is over all, represents himself by masculine names and titles, not feminine ones. He identifies himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, not Parent, Child, and Spirit, not Mother, Daughter, and Spirit. Jesus taught his church to address God as "Father" (Luke 11:2) and to baptize disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). God's titles are King, not Queen; Lord, not Lady. God, not mortals, has the right to name himself. It is inexcusable hubris and idolatry on the part of mortals to change the images by which the eternal God chooses to represent himself. We cannot change God's names, titles, or metaphors without committing idolatry, for we will have re-imagined him in a way other than the metaphors and the incarnation by which he revealed himself. His representations and incarnations are inseparable from his being.

Young has "re-imagined" God in *The Shack*. What Waltke calls "inexcusable hubris and idolatry" becomes excusable and laughable to Young who presents a God who gives the main character greens that may give him the runs. The inexcusable becomes excusable as Young has the character Papa explain the mystery:

Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to **appear** (emphasis in the original) to you as a man or woman, it's because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning" (93).

Theologians concede that God is neither male nor female; but would be hard pressed to accept that God communicates his nature by mixing metaphors "to help" people from falling back into religious conditioning. Is the Bible's revelation of God "religious conditioning" or is Young's mixing metaphors the product of his own imagination? A careful reading of the book suggests that Young is sympathetic to the person who imagines his own failed father as the Heavenly Father; and rather than give God a bum rap, he abandons the Biblical revelation of God for a psychological accommodation to help re-imagine a loving God.

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Young leaves the reader (at least this reader) with the impression that his father failed him on many levels. Was Young's father emotionally unavailable, cold, distant?

Does it really help to re-imagine God as a non-threatening black woman to compensate for his own view of God?

### Non-essentials in *The Shack*

Dr. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says, "This book includes undiluted heresy" (Mohler). Although I agree with my friend Dr. Mohler, I would also suggest the book contains some fairly diluted heresy as well.

*The Shack* reminds me of how heroin and cocaine dealers would "stomp" on their product, dilute and divide their product so they could get the most bang for their buck. Heresy in large doses can kill the host; but heresy divided and diluted attempts to get the user high without killing the host. *The Shack* does an excellent job of masking the heresies and all the while giving the reader a psychological buzz by presenting a "God" filled with unconditional love and short on judgment.

The popularity of *The Shack* lies in its ability to share good news without pointing out the bad news. The cross of Jesus is barely mentioned. A fairly large amount of time is devoted to God's love and God's affection, but God's holiness and righteousness is largely ignored.

*The Shack* certainly presents Jesus as God and Man. Yet the Jesus of *The Shack* repeats the false teaching made popular by John Wimber and others, that Jesus performed miracles only as a man filled with the Holy Spirit in submission to the Father, thus denying the Bible's teaching of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

He has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just to do it to the uttermost--the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my appearance without regard for appearance and consequence. (Young, 99-100)

The author has his (god) character say something completely inconsistent with the revelation of Scripture. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus was before all things and all things were created by Jesus and by Jesus all things consist (see Col.1:16-17). *Subordinationism* reduces the Second Person of the Trinity in rank by implying that His human nature places Him with less glory, or dignity, or honor. The Scriptures teach and orthodox Christianity has always affirmed that the persons in the Godhead are equal in essence.

Young makes further statements that suggest that hierarchy and authority within the Godhead simply don't exist, and that hierarchy and authority are the result of sin. Once again Young has his (god) character Papa say:

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Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or “great chain of being” as your ancestors termed it. What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. (122)

What makes no sense to Young’s character makes perfect sense to the God of the Bible. The Scriptures reveal both authority and hierarchy within the Godhead. Jesus is sent by the Father; Jesus obeys the Father; the Holy Spirit obeys both Father and Son (John 14:26; John 15:26). The obedience and submission within the Godhead are not the result of sin, but rather the revelation of the Scripture concerning the way the Father relates to the Son and the way both Father and Son relate to the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3).

Paul warned Timothy, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

The chapter goes on as Paul reminds Timothy, “But reject profane and old wives’ fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7).

Young’s Jesus character informs Mack that Papa and Sarayu are “indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. . .In fact, we (READ TRINITY) are submitted to you (MACK) in the same way” (145).

What? In what way? In a conditional or unconditional way? Why then did Jesus submit Himself to the Father? Why did Jesus say, “Not My will, but Thy will be done?” Does the Bible teach submission to authority in spiritual and family and government? What do you think Young means? I believe Young is projecting his own anti-authority sentiments, including Young’s unwillingness to accept the authority of the Bible. God, according to, Young is an extreme egalitarian.

Papa asks Mack to forgive the murderer of his daughter. Papa says, “Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him” (Young, 224).

What in the world does that mean? That God is only free to redeem people who have been forgiven by their human victims? Does this mean we have no expectation of repentance, even though the Bible says, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him” (Luke 17:3-5)?

What about the Jesus character saying, “I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu” (Young, 109). Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, the life.” Are there other ways, less ways, less than best ways, yet still possible? Why does the character hold out hope for the reader that there might be another way?

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### In All Things Charity

Challies (Oakville Ontario) has an excellent review posted at his website. He writes:

Despite the great amount of poor theology, my greatest concern is probably this one: the book has a quietly subversive quality to it. Young seems set on undermining orthodox Christianity. For example, at one point Mack states that, despite years of seminary and years of being a Christian, most of the things taught to him at the shack have never occurred to him before. Later he says, "I understand what you're saying. I did that for years after seminary. I had the right answers, sometimes, but I didn't know you. This weekend, sharing life with you has been far more illuminating than any of those answers."

### An Idiot's Guide to Basic Bible Discernment

Robert M. Bowman Jr. wrote an excellent book titled, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*. There is a chapter in the book titled, "Judging Others--Is it always Wrong?" The chapter begins with a discussion of *when judging is wrong*: we are to avoid hypocritical judgments; hypocritical judgments are not bad because they are false; the judgment itself may be true; they are bad because they are given in a spirit of self-righteousness, absent self-scrutiny. Hypocritical judgments result in judgment for the hypocrite. We are to avoid presumptuous judgments. Bowman rightly points out "there are some matters on which human beings simply are not competent to judge" (29-30). We are not competent to judge if Young is saved or not saved. He also points out another sort of presumptuous judgment is taking a nonessential matter and making it the litmus test of Christian fellowship. Paul warns about this with dietary restrictions and feast days as matters of Christian fellowship. Does embracing or rejecting the content of Young's book constitute an essential of the faith?

Bowman then points out in chapter 3, "When Judging Is Right:"

- Judging truth from error and good from evil.
- Judging unrepentant sinners in the church.
- Judging teachers of false versions of Christianity. (30-32)

Bowman also points out in chapter 6, "It's Not Always Black or White:"

It is helpful to speak of religious doctrines which undermine or are in tension with a group's orthodox beliefs as aberrational or aberrant. Holding such aberrational views is a serious problem, and those who do so must be considered as being in serious sin and should be treated accordingly. Specifically, those advocating such errors should not be allowed to teach or minister in the church, and those refusing to keep such aberrant views to themselves should be excommunicated. (53)

He continues and says, "The charge that a person's or group's beliefs are aberrational is a serious one that cannot be made easily. It is arguable that at one level any incorrect belief is at tension with or undermines orthodox beliefs. By aberrational, however I am referring only to false beliefs which do serious damage to the integrity of an orthodox confession of faith (53).

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### Conclusion

One person named Michael Burton posted this in the review section of Amazon.com: “Upon sober reflection, perhaps you will discern that this IS an amazing book and THE book for you if, and only if. . .

- You want to recreate God in your own image;
- You find Isaiah’s portrayal of a holy God seated upon His throne to be a disturbing image;
- You would prefer to metaphorically cast God the Father as a loving and large black woman named “Papa,” Jesus as a laid back and friendly Middle Eastern man, and the Holy Spirit as a calm and cool Asian woman;
- You want a God so small that you and she/he/she can just hang out as best buddies;
- You regard the Bible as an extremely biased, narrow-minded and insufficient revelation of God in leather binding with “guilt edges” (p. 65);
- You therefore believe that God talks to people today, and that whatever she or he says to people trumps biblical truth (p. 66);
- You believe that God is never to be feared (p. 90);
- You believe that Jesus’ miracles do not affirm Him as God, but prove only “that Jesus is truly human” (p. 99);
- You want a God who does not hold people accountable for, nor punishes sin (p. 119);
- You want a God who does not demand that you submit to him or her, but one who submits to YOU (p. 145);
- You want a God who accepts everyone--“Buddhists. . .Muslims, bankers and bookies”---as his or her children no matter what their beliefs or behavior, and that Jesus has “no desire to make them Christian” (p. 223);
- You believe that Jesus lied when He warned, “Broad is the road that leads to destruction” (Matt. 7:13), because in *The Shack* Jesus says, “Most roads don’t lead anywhere” (p. 182).

Young has suggested that he never meant for those quotes in his book to be read to mean that he believes in Universalism. He has suggested that his critics are too deeply invested in a God of judgment to read his book in the spirit in which it was written.

The confusion and misunderstanding might go away if Young would affirm historical, biblical belief. Creedal theology does serve a purpose. Statements of faith have real value.

One of the great challenges that any writer faces is to write in such a way that the core message is understood. What is the core message of *The Shack*? I have read the book twice, once quickly and once carefully.

The core message of *The Shack* seems to be—historical, biblical Christianity has gotten it all wrong. Well maybe not all wrong. Yes there is a God. That God is a God of unconditional love. God may not be as angry with sin as the Bible describes. There probably is a kind of universal forgiveness that results in the ultimate redemption of all mankind. The Bible has a lot of great stories, characters, beliefs, concepts, and doctrines; but hey, human experience is at least as important. Yes, the Bible’s God reveals Himself (or Herself) in Trinity, but that Trinity is perhaps a modified form of modalism (like what Oneness Pentacostals or T.D. Jakes believes).

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If you want healing from trauma, abuse, and answers to life's deepest questions, *The Shack* offers more psycho-babble than hope.

Young has created a fictional vehicle to re-imagine and experience a god (because this god is not the God of revelation, but rather Young's imagination) who:

“. . . is the ground of all being, dwells in, around and through all things" (Young, 112).

Young confuses a transcendent God with a panentheistic god.

What does the author really believe about God? What does the author really believe about Universalism? Over and over again we are presented with Young's characters saying the most outrageous things. Papa to Mack, "We (the Trinity) have limited ourselves out of respect for you" (Young, 106).

Really--God limiting Himself out of respect; a God who limits Himself in order to entertain and engage; but the God of the Bible refuses to limit Himself, choosing rather to say, "My ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts."

Sarayu to Mack, "Both evil and darkness can only be understood in relation to Light and Good; they do not have actual existence . . ." (Young, 136).

Is that what the Bible teaches? How did the Jesus in the Bible get it so wrong in His temptations in the desert with the Devil?

Papa: "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It is not my purpose to punish it; but to cure it" (Young, 119).

We know there are consequences of sin, both temporal and eternal. How does the God of the Bible cure sin? Jesus dies on the cross. How does the god of *The Shack* cure sin? Papa's statement is that the punishment for sin is the punishment we receive in this life. The punishment in the Bible for the unredeemed is a Christless eternity in Hell.

*The Shack* neither visits nor explains nor expands the Biblical view of the Cross.

The God of *The Shack* doesn't seem to hate sin (only in so much as it hurts someone in the here and the now); doesn't require sinners to repent; and fails to explain the nature of conversion or what constitutes Biblical conversion or salvation.

*The Shack* is not a precious gem, but a broken piece of glass that should be labeled:

**HARMFUL IF SWALLOWED**

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Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version.