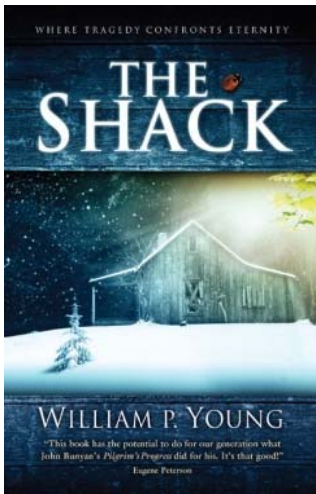


***The Shack* – a review by Paul Coulter**



When a Christian book sits at the top of the New York Times paperback fiction best-seller list for over 36 weeks and reaches number 18 in the sales rank for all books at Amazon.co.uk, it is surely worth noticing. Reactions to William Paul Young's *The Shack* among Christians have added to its intrigue. Many reviewers rave about the impact it has had on their lives and the freshness it has brought to their appreciation of God. On the other hand, some Christian leaders have warned people not to read it at all. How could the same book produce such disparate responses? Is this book a must-read message to refresh your heart or a source of dangerous heresy that should be avoided?



First published in May 2007, over six million copies of *The Shack*, which is Young's first publication, are now in print. The book's 248 pages tell the story of an encounter of a man named Mack with God at an abandoned shack where his daughter was killed by a serial murderer some time earlier. At its core is a series of conversations and shared experiences between Mack and the three persons of the trinity. God appears as Papa, a plump African American lady who loves to cook; Jesus as a Middle-Eastern carpenter; and the Holy Spirit as Sarayu, a slight Asian lady who likes gardening. The conversations take Mack on a journey of personal healing from the pain both of his daughter's murder and a troubled childhood relationship with his father. His fundamental question is how he can be expected to trust a God who couldn't protect his daughter.

According to interviews with the author, *The Shack* started life as a story written for Young's six grown-up children in response to his wife's request for him to explain his "out of the box" way of thinking about God. Like the book's central character, Young's own story is one of personal pain, and he describes the shack as a metaphor for the place inside ourselves where we hide our shame and pain beneath a veneer of performance. Young believes that everyone needs to deal with the contents of their shack in order to discover a new way of relating to God, living in the freedom of His grace rather than under the obligation of legalistic religion. *The Shack* is intended to introduce others to the confidence in God that Young claims to enjoy.



William Paul Young

Why, then, has *The Shack* proved so hugely popular? Although the story flows well, and is, at times, deeply moving, it is no literary masterpiece, and as a work of fiction it lacks originality. The real appeal of the book lies in its innovative and provocative approach to theological concepts. It has several strengths in this regard. It portrays a personal, Trinitarian, Creator God who is actively involved in His creation, and especially in the lives of people. It places Christ at the centre of God's historical purposes and emphasises a need for a personal relationship with God based on His grace. The book's success is, no doubt, partly because its readability and length make it accessible to people who don't have much time or inclination to read. The way in which the conversations unfold, and the images the author uses, increase its accessibility further, and the book succeeds in drawing the reader into deep theological waters

without feeling out of their depth. *The Shack's* central message will also resonate with many professing Christians in the West who have lived under a wrong perception of God as someone they must work hard to please and have, therefore, made their actions the measure of their spiritual life rather than living simply by faith in God. *The Shack* must be praised for its clarion call back to a focus on relationship with God and confidence in Him rather than in our own performance.

Despite the pertinence of the book's message, a note of warning must also be sounded. There are a number of weaknesses in *The Shack's* theology. Its portrayal of the trinity, while creative, is potentially misleading. There is a strong anti-authoritarian streak, and it does not emphasise Scripture as the basis for our belief. It presents an imbalanced view of God's character, with His love highlighted at the expense of His justice, and it lacks a clear understanding of the atonement. As a result, it is soft on human sin, seems to exclude the wrath of God and His righteous judgement, and is unclear about whether or not all people will ultimately be saved. These are not minor, peripheral issues – they strike at the very heart of the Christian faith. As such, *The Shack* is potentially dangerous, especially because it places ideas on the lips of God that are not consistent with Scripture and because it does not encourage the reader to examine the Scriptures to test its message (Acts 17:11). Its power to move the reader at a deep emotional level makes it more difficult, but all the more vital, for the reader to exercise discernment.

How, then, should we respond to this book? If you have read it already and it has rekindled your love for God I rejoice with you, but I urge you to be aware of the concerning trends in the book's message. If you haven't already read it, and intend to do so, please do not read it as if it were simply a fictional novel, which is what the book describes itself as. Rather, make notes as you read, and search the Bible where ideas strike you as fresh or unusual. Discuss it with others and be alert to the aspects of the book's message that distort biblical truth. God wants us to find strength in His love **and** His truth, and my prayer for those who read *The Shack*, is Paul's prayer for the Philippians:

that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ
(Philippians 1:9-10)

**Paul Coulter has produced a longer (21,000 word) review and analysis of *The Shack*.
To request a copy or to discuss this review with Paul please email him at
paul@paulcoulter.net**