

Review of *The Shack* by William Paul Young

Presented like an “as told to” version of Mackenzie Allen Phillips’ story, the effect is similar to Orson Wells’ radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. It takes a “suspension of belief” to avoid Googling the latest information on the Ladykiller trial. The genre is akin to accounts of near-death experiences and because of that arouses suspicions. Often, because of our culture’s curiosity about ultimate reality and dissatisfaction with philosophical materialism, subtle deceptions can thus drift into our subconscious, uncritically accepted as complete pictures of reality. More mundanely, *The Shack* almost seems to be an imaginative fleshing out of a long-circulating jest, usually dropped – with a smirk – on believers by skeptics, “I met God, and she’s black.”

The protagonist’s pain is both a worst-case scenario and generalizable, in that we all carry hurts and guilts which, at least for us, are huge. Mack’s meeting with God brings about many powerful insights and changes. The vast majority are Biblically true, important and relevant for our present time. Yet in the mix are several elements that ought to cause concern. Although the strong believer can finish the book with an enhanced appreciation for the relationship we can have with God – as a faint reflection of the love within the Trinity – in unconsciously accepting a subtle universalism and relationship that has no expectations, he may have lost sight of the need for the Great Commission. And an unbeliever may walk away with a complacency that everything is going to be all right for everybody.

There are many well-taken points. God’s use of suffering, even though he is not the author if it, is well communicated as is the possibility of evil as an intrinsic consequence of free will. The power of forgiveness, on the forgiver as well as the forgiven, is an important insight. And the differentiation of forgiveness from trust and consequences is clear. Even the relationship of the Law and Grace, with perhaps a little oversimplification for the sake of modern minds that lack the subtlety of those to whom the Apostle Paul wrote, is a good-enough explanation for those who might otherwise fail to see the connection between the New and Old Testaments. In that vein, the God of wrath versus Gentle Jesus dichotomy is revealed as false and incomplete. And it is graphically demonstrated that we may have difficulty appreciating the fatherhood of God if our human experience of parenting is faulty.

But just in case someone thinks that the quotes from God, speaking as any of the three persons, are verbally inspired, one statement jumps out – at *me* anyway. Most people do not know this... but someday will. The page 95* comment by “Papa” (The Father) on “quantum stuff” refers to a flawed theory that persists only because of academic inertia and professional peer pressure. But just pass that by if you are not familiar with the much more scientific and logical model of Common Sense Science. Still it indicates that the author of those words is a creature of our time, not of eternity.

On a topic more familiar to Biblical Christians, the comments on Papa’s (God the Father’s) self-limiting of knowledge are hard to reconcile with Matthew 6:8b, “for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” That and the comment by Sarayu (The Spirit) “I have a great fondness for uncertainty,” may lead some to embrace the “openness of God” (that God does not know the future because it does not exist yet). Against that in the book is Papa’s listening to music by a group whose members have not been born yet. Perhaps a more legitimate analysis would conclude that the book pushes one in the direction of the Emergent Church, stressing relationship over theology.

Jesus (The Son, of course) is presented as more of a fishing buddy than a straight-laced Rabbi, actually a much more likely realistic picture. But it gets a little tangled up when he says on page 109 that although he created the world, he now sees it as a human, since there is no “now” or “then” in eternity. But that is minor compared to the answer to Mack’s question about the how to become part of the invisible church. Jesus tells him on page 178, “It’s simple, Mack. It’s all about relationships and simply sharing life.” This combined with the statement by “Papa” on page 192 in answer to the question of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, “Through his death, I am now fully reconciled to the world.” Of course, the typical evangelical will connect the dots and fill in the blanks, but nowhere in this telling is repentance and surrender mentioned, except the somewhat cryptic, “reconciliation is a two way street.”

Although it is true that over time institutions tend to lose of vitality, a sort of “spiritual entropy,” the page 179 characterization of religion, politics and economics as “the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth,” seems to leave the institutional church out of Jesus’ plan completely. To be sure, the church universal is both broader than any group and simultaneously more exclusive than the local church, in that some church members will be told by Jesus at the judgment, “I never knew you,” Yet the individual churches got letters from Paul and personalized messages from the Lord himself in Revelation where it also states that they even each have an angel assigned to them. And the individual churches are given gifts and gifted individuals for the benefit of the local body as well to equip the whole “Bride of Christ.” (See 1 Corinthians 1:7 as well as the familiar passages on gifts.)

Perhaps the most concerning passage in the book, and maybe the reason it has become a popular success, is Jesus’ statement on page 182, “Those who love me come from every system that exists. They are Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don’t vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous,. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved.” This is only partly rescued by the response to the question of whether all roads lead to Jesus, “Not at all. Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.”

Further, a Scriptural teaching is contradicted on page 223 when Papa says, “I don’t do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation.” Yet the Holy Spirit, according to John 16:8, “will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.” Of course we know from 2 Corinthians 7:10 that the negative emotions can go either way. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” Quite different is page 187’s quote by Papa, “Guilt’ll never help you find freedom in me.”

Next, although true in a sense, the distinction between expectations and expectancy on pages 206-207 leaves out something important. Yes, if instead of enjoying the presence of another, we have a checklist of words and deeds we expect and require to be performed, the joy of the relationship is lost. But God does have a plan for our lives, and he loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way. Ephesians 2:8 -10 often is truncated by evangelicals stressing grace, but the whole concept includes transformation of our entire lives. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith

– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

And Jesus was not telling his disciples that relationship with him is passive. Matthew 28:18-20, “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’” Further, he said in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In the context of forgiving the perpetrator of a horrendous crime, Papa comments on page 226 that, “should they finally confess and repent, you will discover a miracle in your own heart.” This is clearly referring to human forgiveness but is the closest thing to a mention of repentance towards God, that the Bible portrays as the initial step in receiving the grace purchased by Jesus with his blood on the cross.

Finally, I do not find any mention of the spiritual underworld. The existence of Satan and demons is not even hinted. Our spiritual adversary is both fierce and subtle. 1Peter 5:8, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” He can spin 180 degree lies or come up with counterfeits that only spiritual discernment can discover. 2 Corinthians 11:14, “And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” Any foray into the spiritual realm that fails to mention or minimizes the danger of spiritual evil ought to make us suspicious.

A Biblically literate Christian can be blessed by this book and will ignore the omissions as well as correct the ambiguities. But a child of our age, who is already “conformed to the world,” may be led astray. The most obvious ditches by the side of the road are universalism, and its logical consequence, abandonment of the great commission.

The book may indeed be a positive tool for many as was John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. But we must remember that Bunyan was also a creature of his time and included some unscriptural elements, such as the idea that those who commit suicide do not go to the Celestial City.

As we undoubtedly approach the end of the age, spiritual deceptions are even more subtle and all teachings must be tested against God’s Word. Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” 1 John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

In conclusion, *The Shack* is a mixture and can teach many truths but must be read with discernment.

Reviewed by Ross S. Olson

*Page numbers refer to the Windblown Media 2007 Paperback Edition