

The Shack

For a self-published book (May 2007), it is phenomenally popular. By February 2008, the book had sold over 200,000 copies, with a marketing budget of about \$200. But three months later, a year after its release, it had sold over 700,000 copies. By the time you read this it will have sold over a million, and that could be just the beginning. It is now the best-selling Christian book in America. It is already being discussed widely, and eventually it will be a topic in most churches.

If you aren't familiar with *The Shack*, here's a place to get acquainted:

[The Shack on Amazon](#)

If you check this link, take a look at the book's Amazon rating. As of today, it ranks #3 for all book sales at Amazon! Also check out the reviews – there are almost 1,500 of them. You would be hard pressed to find a higher percentage of 5 star reviews for any other book. The level of devotion of readers of *The Shack* is stunning. People buy it by the case and pass it out to their friends. It's word-of-mouth at the highest level. There is beginning to be some backlash due to theological problems in the book, but so far the backlash has been minimal compared to the acclaim.

There is Good in The Shack

First, let me say that I think there is good in *The Shack*. It has helped many people see the warmth within the triune God, and God's warmth toward them as well. For that I am grateful.

John Owen portrayed the personal nature of the triune God hundreds of years ago, and John Piper does it in the *Pleasures of God*. Those studies are biblically oriented and I could wish that people would draw more from them and from Scripture than from a novel. But novels capture people's imagination in way no other literary form can. I certainly would not dismiss *The Shack* on the basis that it's "just a novel!" Novels can be a powerful vehicle for not only telling a story, but conveying concepts—both right and wrong ones.

The Shack raises the problem of evil and offers hope to those who have been overwhelmed by tragedies they can't reconcile with God's sovereignty and goodness. I appreciate the fact that Paul Young doesn't resort to openness theology, to arguing that God doesn't know about the evils that are going to happen and therefore can't prevent them. He sees God as all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good. And he certainly gets in touch with human need, weakness, and grief. One of the most memorable phrases from the book is "The Great Sadness," an expression that connects to many people's deepest hurts, regrets, and longings.

More than any other book I recall, I find myself in the curious position of attempting to balance the reactions of each person who asks about it. When people say they can't stand it, I point out the good stuff and say people are seeing God's warmth and grace and forgiveness in fresh ways. When the response to the book is unqualified praise I caution readers about the theological weaknesses.

Eugene Peterson (a man I deeply respect) says that *The Shack* may be *The Pilgrim's Progress* of our generation. I think that's an overstatement. Perhaps if he had read it more slowly and with attention to some of the theological details, his praise might have been less unbridled and more balanced.

In my experience, most Christians who have read the book adore it. There are people I respect greatly who *love* this book, without qualification, and consider it a great gift of God to thirsty people. There are others I respect as much who are deeply concerned about the book's messages, both overt and subtle, and their impact on people. In a sense, both might be right, but both need to understand the other point of view and that many books that are good for some people are not good for others.

I believe that those who are well-grounded in the Word won't be harmed by the weaknesses and deficiencies of the book. ***Unfortunately, few people these days are well-grounded in the Word.***

I think this book would have better served the church thirty years ago, when there was so much more legalism and too little talk of God's grace and forgiveness. Ironically, though there is still some legalism, there is also significantly less knowledge of Scripture and spiritual discernment and concern for orthodoxy. Which means that some people, perhaps many, will fail to recognize and filter out the book's theological errors, and therefore be vulnerable to embracing them, even if unconsciously.

The Danger of Putting Words in God's Mouth

Most of the dialogue in the book comes out of the mouths of four characters. One is Mack, who has faced a horrible tragedy with his daughter. The other three primary characters happen to be, in human forms, the three members of the triune God. (This novel gets points for boldness!)

In conventional novels, when characters, Christian or not, say things, we can always explain "that doesn't mean he's right." While I have said to some people, "remember this is fiction, so don't try to hold it up to the standards of nonfiction," it rings a little hollow, because the obvious point of *The Shack* is to make numerous theological statements.

The story is largely the wrapper; the "truths" are what's inside it. It's hard to fall back on "yeah, but it was just one of the characters saying that" when the character happens to be God. You can't really say "he was having a bad day," or "he wasn't familiar with that Scripture."

When *The Shack* puts words in God's mouth, words other than God's as revealed in Scripture, he subjects himself to a higher standard. Mack can and does say all kinds of wrong things and the author shouldn't be held accountable for them, because Mack is only a flawed human character. But when a member of the triune God says something that is contradicted by Scripture or known fact, it's another matter.

Some criticize the book for what it leaves out, or fails to emphasize. This is not always valid. A book—particularly a novel—doesn't have to be completely balanced. Young's primary subject is God's grace, not God's holiness. So holiness is given little attention, if any. That's okay *if*—but

only if—the reader already has that concept clearly in mind. But if the reader doesn't have a concept of God's holiness, then I think the exclusion tends to propagate a serious error, a wrong view of God. Scripture speaks of the "kindness and severity of God," and that it is a fearful thing for the sinner to fall into the hands of the living God. If the book portrays the triune God page after page but never shows that side of Him, I think it's regrettable.

Things that Concern Me

"You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours", says Sarayu, the Holy Spirit (195). "You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa's goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us" (198).

At times I felt the book doesn't teach the sufficiency of Scripture as God's primary revelation. Yes, I agree that God speaks through flowers and animals and people and art. But I wish the Bible was, even in the above quote from the book, not simply put alongside them, but clearly put on a higher level. I wish the Holy Spirit (Sarayu) showed more enthusiasm for the Book that is Holy Spirit-inspired.

I wish *The Shack* had an Acts 17:11 tone: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

With the book's repeated message that the Bible has been twisted by churches and pastors and seminaries (and yes, sometimes it has), I wonder whether readers will walk away from *The Shack* with a greater love for Scripture and more of a desire to study it, and more of a desire to get involved in their churches and submit to their leaders, as Hebrews 13 commands us to. Sadly, I'm afraid some readers will feel justified in further distancing themselves from both the Scriptures and the church. And some may read meanings into Scripture that the biblical text itself contradicts.

While any book that portrays the Trinity in physical form is going to be subject to criticism, given the premise, I thought it was fine that the Holy Spirit was portrayed as female. I was somewhat concerned that "Papa" was also a female; but the reason for this is later explained in the text, in terms of Mack not being able to accept God as Father because of his bad relationship with his human father. Later Papa is depicted as a male.

In real life, though God certainly reveals himself through any number of godly women, I don't see biblical examples of God the Father portraying himself as female to people simply because their fathers are absent or aren't good role models. Because I had a very poor relationship with my earthly father when I came to Christ (later that was redeemed), the Fatherhood of God meant all the more to me.

I certainly believe that God transcends human gender, and I would not discredit the book on this basis. Still, in a New Age culture that is trying to elevate goddess-worship, portraying two of the

three members of the triune God in female form for most of the book may not be entirely healthy.

Is God as tolerant and easy-going as *The Shack* portrays Him? If He were, I'm not sure it would have been necessary for Christ to go to the cross for us. And if the response is that, since Christ did go to the cross, God is now tolerant and easy-going, I would suggest re-reading the New Testament where God calls us to a life of joyful yet serious holiness.

One reviewer said "Systematic theology was never this good." This concerns me. While to some readers God will seem bigger, in certain respects God seemed more amusing and friendly, but also somewhat smaller, more manageable, less threatening--someone not to be feared. If the picture of God in *The Shack* is radically different from the impression people get from just reading the Bible, this raises an obvious question.

Read Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 and ask yourself if this is the "Papa" of *The Shack*. Chuck Colson suggests that this book fails to portray God's person in his awesome greatness <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=7830> Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, also expressed this same concern, and pointed out what he considers "undiluted heresy" in *The Shack*, on his April 11, 2008 radio program: http://www.albertmohler.com/radio_show.php?cdate=2008-04-11

Where is the Great God of Holiness and Transcendence?

In Tim Challies' booklet on the Shack http://www.challies.com/media/The_Shack.pdf he says,

One of the most disturbing aspects of *The Shack* is the behavior of Mack when he is in the presence of God. When we read in the Bible about those who were given glimpses of God, these people were overwhelmed by His glory. In Isaiah 6 the prophet is allowed to see "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah reacts by crying out "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5)! Isaiah declares a curse upon himself for being a man whose lips are willing to utter unclean words even in a world created by a God of such glory and perfection.

When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God's glory (Exodus 3:6). In Exodus 33 Moses is given just a glimpse of God's glory, but God will show only His back, saying, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Examples abound. When we look to the Bible's descriptions of heaven we find that any creatures who are in the presence of God are overwhelmed and overjoyed, crying out about God's glory day and night. But in *The Shack* we find a man who stands in the very presence of God and uses foul language ("damn" (140) and "son of a bitch" (224)), who expresses anger to God (which in turn makes God cry) (92), and who snaps at God in his anger (96). This is not a man who is in the presence of One who is far superior to Him, but a man who is in the presence of a peer. This portrayal of the relationship of man to God and God to man is a far cry from the Bible's portrayal.

And indeed it must be because the God of *The Shack* is only a vague resemblance to the God of the Bible. There is no sense of awe as we, through Mack, come into the presence of God. Gone is the majesty of God when men stand in His holy presence and profane His name. Should God allow in His presence the very sins for which He sent His Son to die? Would a man stand before the Creator of the Universe and curse? What kind of God is the God of *The Shack*?

I do think that the name Papa is appropriate, as in Romans 8, “Abba, Father.” The paradox of God’s nature involves both transcendence and immanence. But only immanence is apparent in *The Shack*.

True, it could be argued that only God’s transcendence has been taught in some churches and families, and we can’t expect a book swinging the pendulum back to the middle to avoid going too far to the other extreme. Okay, but imbalance in one place doesn’t justify the opposite imbalance. It’s not just about the Father. Read the life and words of Jesus and ask if this is the Son portrayed in *The Shack*. Since Jesus spoke more about hell than anyone in Scripture, wouldn’t you have expected him to say something or even hint at its reality in this story?

Miscellaneous doctrinal issues

Paul Young, through his purposeful use of words, (sometimes for shock value) speaks in such a way as to imply or suggest some unbiblical teachings, and doesn't make sufficient efforts to distance himself from false doctrine.

In *The Shack*, God the father says of Jesus on the cross, ““Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him” (96).

But Mark 15 says, “At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It is an historic doctrine of the Christian faith that Jesus didn’t just feel forsaken (as did David who spoke the words in Psalm 22) but that he actually *was* forsaken by the Father. David never became sin for humanity, but Jesus actually did (2 Corinthians 5:21). And in becoming sin for us, he had to be punished, and the Father had to turn away from Him, forsaking Him on the cross as the darkness descended in mid-day. This is why Isaiah 53:10 says those harrowing words, “But the LORD was pleased to crush Him [Messiah], putting Him to grief.”

On another subject, *The Shack* has God say, “I don’t create institutions—never have, never will.”

But Romans 13 says, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”

Similarly, God created the institution of marriage and family, and the institution of the church, which is his bride.

God is portrayed in the book as saying, “Guilt will never help you find freedom in me.”

In contrast, Christ says of the Holy Spirit, “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8).

Paul writes, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor. 7:10).

Guilt alone will not bring freedom, of course, but responding in repentance to God-inspired guilt will bring us great freedom.

No Hierarchy in the Triune God?

There are several problematic statements about the Trinity. For instance, Papa says, “When we three spoke ourselves into human existence as the Son of God we became painfully human.” He goes on to say, “We became flesh and blood.”

But in the historic Christian understanding of Scripture, the Trinity did not become human. Only Jesus the Son became human. Scripture reveals that the Father sent the Son, but the Father did not leave Heaven and become human.

Papa says that Jesus is fully human and “has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything.” But don’t we see repeated examples in the gospels of Jesus doing this very thing, showing his divine nature through his miracles, including raising the dead?

The Shack has God the Father say,

“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.” He also says, “Papa is as much submitted to me as I am to Him.”

In contrast, Scripture says, “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

In John 6:38 Jesus says “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.”

In John 8:28 he says, “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”

Consider Christ in Gethsemane. Scripture says:

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

And Christ was not just subject to the Father when he walked the earth. He will be subject to Him forever:

“When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The book portrays all hierarchy as a result of sin, but the Bible shows there is an eternal benevolent hierarchy within the triune God. *The Shack* depicts Jesus as saying, “In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way [as we are to each other].”

Where does Scripture ever say that the Father submits to the Son or the Spirit? Even if Scripture did say that, *in what sense does God submit to us?* Yes, He *serves* us, washes our feet, but that is not submission, which in its normal sense is a placement under the authority of another, to do their will.

Jesus came to serve, but God does *not* place himself under our authority and will. That is a false doctrine that some health and wealth preachers advocate, that when we speak a word God is obligated to fulfill it. Now, I don't believe that is Paul Young's *intention*, but his statement that God submits to us is not true to Scripture.

Universalism? Are All Forgiven?

God says in *The Shack* that He has already reconciled the whole world. He quotes 2 Cor. 5, “God was in Christ reconciling the world.” Paul Young's position is that the world has been redeemed from God's side, but we must embrace it from ours. Okay, in a sense that might be true, but if taken too far it sounds like everybody's going to Heaven.

The fuller context of 2 Corinthians 5 says this:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

Notice that the apostle Paul is imploring people to be reconciled to God, which means *they are not yet reconciled to God*. You would not call upon a saved person to become saved, since he already is. So, yes, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, but in another sense this reconciliation is *not* and never will be experienced by the whole world. If it were, then contrary to Christ's words in Matthew 7, the way would *not* be narrow and there would *not* be few who find it. Most or *all* would find it. And the road to eternal death would *not* be broad or even narrow--it would be nonexistent, since everyone is already reconciled to God.

In *The Shack*, Mack is understandably confused by the notion that the whole world is already reconciled. He asks, “The whole world—you mean those who believe in you right?”

God replies, correcting him, “The whole world Mack.”

It would be nice if the whole world were saved, that all were going to Heaven, and that there was no hell. But according to the Bible, that’s not the case.

Papa says in *The Shack*: “In Jesus I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me.”

If we were already forgiven, Scripture would not say things like this:

“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

God says that not all have been forgiven or will be:

“Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart” (Acts 8:22).

“I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Luke 12:8-10).

Universalist Tone

There are at least two kinds of universalism. One maintains that people can be saved apart from the person and work of Christ. Another claims that people can only be saved on the basis of what Christ has done, and eventually must come to recognize that, *but* that recognition may come after they die and are given a second chance. Then, when given that second chance, all people will choose Christ and be saved.

What is Paul Young’s position here? Does he believe all people will be saved or at least have the opportunity to be saved after death? Paul wrote an interesting article that may give some insight on this question called “The Beauty of Ambiguity (Mystery).”

<http://www.windrumors.com/43/the-beauty-of-ambiguity-mystery/>

James DeYoung, a professor from Western seminary, has written a lengthy critique of *The Shack* in which he argues that Paul Young is a universalist, and that *The Shack* reflects this. See <http://theshackreview.com/content/ReviewofTheShack.pdf> Dr. DeYoung, who knows Paul Young personally, shares other concerns too.

When I read it without any preconceived notions, I noticed things in *The Shack* that hint at universalism. E.g., in the passage where “Papa,” God the Father, says—speaking of Buddhists and Muslims—that he doesn’t desire to make them “Christian.” What the author means by Christian is obviously critical. Some could argue that “Christian” is a cultural designation, that all Americans are Christian, Saudis are Muslim, etc., and that Christian is not a helpful term.

There is some truth to that, but Acts 11 says the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. That wasn't cultural; it referred to true followers of Christ. So since this is in the Word of God, I don't think it's wise to portray God as disregarding the term Christian to the point that he would say he doesn't want to make people Christian.

Some understand Papa to be saying that He makes Muslims his children without them needing to become Christians. This is one reason why a number of readers believe the book teaches universalism. Dan Lockwood, president of Multnomah Bible College, in his review of *The Shack* in a recent school publication, commended some aspects of the book, while expressing his regret that it advocates universalism.

The problem is compounded because Paul Young has God quoting a phrase coined by Buckminster Fuller, a Unitarian-Universalist who wrote a book entitled *I Am a Verb*. In *The Shack*, Papa says to Mack, "I am a verb. I am that I am. I will be who I will be. I am a verb! I am alive, dynamic, ever active, and moving. I am a verb." It's hard not to link this emphatic statement, put in God's mouth, to the heretical theological persuasions of the man who coined the term.

Jesus says to Mack that he is the "best way" any human can relate to Papa. But this has a different feel from John 14:6, in which Jesus says "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." I would probably not make anything of that if I didn't feel the tones of universalism in a number of the book's statements.

The other day I saw someone who calls himself a "Christian universalist" defending his position that all will be saved. This universalist recommended a book that everybody should read: *The Shack*. Now, I don't believe in guilt by association. I'm just saying that since this guy was defending universalism when he recommended *The Shack*, he, at least, presumably understood it to be on his side.

It would have been very easy for Paul Young, by changing the wording of a few sentences here and there, to shut the door on universalism. He could have had God articulate the biblical and orthodox viewpoint of historic Christianity, that salvation comes in believing in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross on our behalf, and that to not accept God's gift of eternal life in Christ is to invite an eternity in Hell. Paul didn't choose to make that clear.

Accuracy and Precision in Language

God tells Mack that he never disappoints him.

Scripture tells a different story, for instance about Jesus and his response to others: "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts...." (Mark 3:5).

To believers Scripture says "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30).

1 John 2:28 encourages believers not to do anything to make Christ ashamed of us (meaning it is possible to do so): “Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.”

In *The Shack*, God says “the word responsibility isn’t in the Bible.” Of course, no other English word appears in the Bible either, but he is obviously talking about “responsibility” not being in English translations. But this is inaccurate, as I found “responsibility” in five major English translations, which is every one I checked except the KJV. This is the danger of putting words in God’s mouth—when you can show they’re not true it doesn’t look good.

But even apart from having God make this misstatement, what impression is left? *That responsibility isn’t a biblical concept*. Yet isn’t it hard to find something that is *more* of a biblical concept than responsibility?

A hundred passages demonstrating responsibility could be cited. Here’s one:

“That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

You sense in *The Shack* that the author is against man-imposed rules and regulations and legalism. Well, okay. But is this what the word “responsibility” means? Do we have the freedom to turn a good word into a bad one without explaining what we mean?

In context there is a possible explanation, because God says, “I’m omniscient—so I have no expectations.”

Well, God *is* omniscient, but He nonetheless has expectations of us in the normal sense of the word. For instance, look at these passages:

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (1 Cor. 4:2).

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken (Matt. 12:36).

God’s transcendence, justice, holiness, and wrath

In theology there is a paradoxical mix of God’s attributes. There is God’s transcendence and his immanence, his Holy Otherness and his intimate Familiarity. God’s attributes are sometimes described as being of two kinds, *hard* and *soft*. Hard ones are holiness, justice, wrath. Soft ones

are grace, mercy and love. Whether or not you like the terminology, you get the point. A full and accurate picture of God requires both be included.

Well, *The Shack* is magnificent on the soft attributes of God. It is virtually silent on the hard attributes of God. So if you come to the book well-schooled in God's holiness, justice and wrath, you will benefit from the exposure to his grace, mercy and love. But if you come without a knowledge of and an appreciation for his "hard" attributes, you will end up seeing half of God, not the whole of God.

Is a half-picture of the true God a false picture of God? If that's all you have, I'd say yes. I don't mean it's fair to expect one book to be fifty/fifty on the hard and soft attributes of God. If I were reading a book on the holiness and justice of God and someone said "there's not much here on his grace," I'd say, "Of course not, it's a book on holiness." However, if there was virtually no mention of grace and mercy that would be problematic. Similarly, the fact that there is virtually no mention of God's holiness, justice, and wrath in *The Shack* is problematic to me.

I'm not expecting complete balance. But I do think it's fair to expect some clear affirmation of the transcendence of God. If the book is about his immanence, I can understand why 90% of it is on that. But if 10% affirmed his transcendence, it would make for a far more biblically accurate picture of God.

Holiness and fearing God warrant at least a few sentences.

When Mack says something about "I thought you would have more wrath," what an opportunity to briefly but clearly affirm God's holiness and wrath. Papa could say, "Mack, I am holy beyond your comprehension, and wrathful against sin to the degree that I will separate all sin from myself for eternity; that is hell." That's just one sentence. Then he could say, "But you've heard only about my holiness and wrath, and you need to see a different side of me." Then, great, he can go on for page after page and chapter after chapter about grace and forgiveness and acceptance, which is beautiful and right on.

Pastors who are obeying Scripture by teaching true doctrine and correcting false doctrine could then say, "The author affirms God's holiness and wrath, so I can trust that he's not distorting or rejecting Scripture, and resorting to a New Age feel-good redefine-God-however-I-want approach."

Paul originally wrote the book for his children, and perhaps they understand what he means, since they grew up in his home. But a million readers haven't, and many of them will believe that the words used in the book really mean what they appear to. True, some will misunderstand no matter what. But a lot of people would be greatly helped by more careful word usage, and not be put off by or sucked into biblically incorrect thinking.

In *The Shack* Papa says, in the context of Mack bringing up God pouring out bowls of wrath on people, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it" (120).

It is certainly His joy to cure it. But does that mean God does not actually punish sin? Of course he does, and not exclusively through its natural consequences. Scripture speaks of God's direct judgment via the flood, on Sodom and Gomorrah, on Dathan and the rebels. In New Testament, he strikes down Ananias and Sapphira for their sin, and judges the sin unto death. He says that some are weak and sick in Corinth because of their abuse of the Lord's Supper, meaning He has punished them. Countless Scriptures deal with God punishing sin, but here are just a few:

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done (Romans 2:5-6).

They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:16-17).

The Local Church

One major point of disagreement I have with Paul Young is on the importance of the local church. Without the church, there is no accountability to others, no context for confrontation and discipline among an assembly of God's people where there is submission to those in authority, as Hebrews 10 and 13 require of us.

Before I knew anything about the author, as I read the book I kept saying to myself, "Wow, he's had really bad church experiences." Organized religion, by which he means churches, is portrayed unfavorably.

Hebrews 10 says we are not to forsake the church assembly, and Hebrews 13:17 says this:

"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

We need to be in submission to church leaders and other authorities in our life; we shouldn't think we are qualified to hold ourselves accountable, or to pick and choose our spiritual guides. That structure implies I am my own authority.

I have been on both sides of the fence – a church leader and a member of a congregation, and I've seen plenty of regrettable things in churches, but I've also seen the presence of God's Holy Spirit in powerful ways. God most definitely has a specific purpose for his church and it's regrettable that Paul didn't portray the side of the church that reaches out and loves and gives people a home, where pastors love and graciously guide and don't abuse power to exploit and subjugate people, and where God is deeply loved and glorified.

People's Defense of the Book

Titus 1:9 gives a mandate for pastors: "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."

I think it's good for pastors to discuss with their people this book or any other that is being widely read in the church. It's important that the discussion be balanced, and not be just a "Shack Attack." If they offer criticism, pastors should anticipate the question, "why are my pastors opposing a book that God used to bring such joy and healing to my life?" I suggest pastors affirm the joy and healing, and say that they think people would benefit even more from the book if they were careful to recognize the parts that don't match up with Scripture.

I truly rejoice for the many people who feel a greater closeness to God from reading *The Shack*. In that sense, I think God's hand is on the book. I only wish His holiness and our need to come to him in awe, and a high regard for the local community of believers were as apparent in the book as God's grace and love and warmth. However, for those who need to sense more of the latter, and who can blow away the chaff and stick with the grain, I pray God will use the book to help them.

Honestly, *The Shack* wasn't life-changing for me in the way that Tozer's *Knowledge of the Holy* and Packer's *Knowing God* and Piper's *Desiring God* and Bridges' *The Joy of Fearing God* were. But those nonfiction books are full of Scripture, and stay true to it, and that is where they get their power. God promises in Isaiah 55:11, "my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Notice he doesn't promise that about our words, but His Word.

I don't want under any circumstances to discredit or oppose what God is doing through *The Shack*. I do believe this: if the book were revised to make it conform more closely to Scripture, God would be more honored by it.

I believe there are important issues of truth at stake, but they should be dealt with in a spirit of peace-making, to honor the Lord and avoid unnecessary division. Affirming the good aspects of the book should help in this process.

Conclusion

Someone told me *The Shack* contains "subtle but strong and systematic undermining of all—even healthy and godly—authority. The author does it brilliantly..." That may be so, but I think it's not deliberate on the author's part. In his attempts to battle legalism and power-abuse in churches, he overstates and sometimes misstates his case.

I think Paul is a well-meaning brother who should learn to be more precise with his language. The fact that Eugene Peterson and a number of other Christian leaders read and loved his book, apparently without raising these concerns, has been unfortunate. If he'd had editors who paid more attention to some of the unbiblical statements put in God's mouth, the book could have been much stronger. (It still could be, if it were revised.)

Many say there is a lot of truth in the book – more truth than error. If *The Shack* is 90% truth and 10% error, the question is, how important is that 10%?

To reiterate, if you start with a proper view of God and his transcendence--that he is to be feared and that he is our Master first, and secondly our friend--then this book could be very helpful. If you come to the book with a strong foundation of God's holiness and our need to fear God, then what it says about forgiveness and love can really help you. Unfortunately, fewer people than ever have that foundational concept of God's holiness and the proper fear of God. In my opinion, those who don't will not come to a realization of God's holiness in the book, nor will they walk away with any sense of why they should fear God.

I know wonderful people who say they have been drawn closer to God through reading the Shack. When people feel closer to God, I wholeheartedly rejoice. But I fear some readers (not all, by any means) may feel closer to a God who is different than the God revealed in Scripture. My concern is for those who think they are coming closer to God, when they may actually be altering the biblical revelation of God into a form that is more pleasant to them because he seems less holy and fearsome. If that's the case, then they are not closer to God at all, just closer to a false God, an idol constructed in the image of our contemporary need for acceptance and resistance to repentance and submission and accountability.

We, as we are, must bow our knees to Him, as He is. And we must fully trust His Word in order to understand who He is and who we are. Books are powerful tools and I would be the last one to say God can't use books to enrich us greatly. But in the end, there is only One Book by which all others must be judged.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)