

6 Major Problems With 'The Shack'

This spring, the *New York Times* bestselling book *The Shack* by William P. Young will come to the big screen.

The emotionally charged story seems to offer a resolution to the problem of pain—those who are struggling with the question, “Where is God when the world is full of brokenness?” Though many readers have labeled Young’s story a compelling work of Christian fiction, discerning believers must ask themselves: Are *The Shack*’s underlying teachings biblically sound or a far reach from the teachings of God’s Word?

Though you might be swayed into thinking the god of *The Shack* is the same as the God of the Bible, there are several problems that arise if we take a close look at *The Shack*. Here are six concerns that develop as Mack converses with Young’s caricatures of the Trinity.

Love vs. Justice

Problem #1: According to Young, justice and love are at odds and cannot be reconciled. He reasons that God will never judge people for their sins because He is limited by His love. Neither will He enact eternal judgment upon those who reject Him or send anyone to torment in hell.

But why would Jesus Christ die a criminal’s death on the cross if not to save us from something? What a wasteful and pointless act it would be if Christ did not take on our just punishment, the wrath of God, for our sin.

We cannot remove the wrath of God from Scripture. It is as surely a part of His character as His love and mercy are. But God’s wrath is not a human anger that flares up because of wounded pride or envy. His wrath is not self-indulgent, but

rather, as theologian J.I. Packer says in his book *Knowing God*, “a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry where anger is called for. ... all God’s indignation is righteous.”

The Bible is very clear about why Jesus came to earth, humbly taking on the very nature of a servant (see John 3:16-18, Phil. 2:6-7). Jesus Himself warned about the coming judgment and hell, commissioning His followers to proclaim the gospel that the lost might be saved—that they might choose life (see Matt. 25:31-46, Rev. 21:6-8). Ultimately, that is what every person must do: Either choose salvation through the atoning blood of Jesus or choose the wrath of the righteous God.

Would Mack really want a God who would not punish evil? Would he be OK with a God who would not exert justice for the evil done to his daughter? Would God be good and loving if He said to Mack, “We’ll just let this slide”?

Of course not. He shows us His love by both punishing sin and providing us with an escape: “But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). He is “the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:6b-7a).

Universalism: A Perilous Pardon

Problem #2: Another theme in *The Shack* that doesn’t square with the Word of God is the idea that God forgives all of humanity, regardless of whether or not they repent and believe in the redeeming work of Jesus. It is an idea rooted in universalism—the belief that all roads lead to God and that Jesus is walking with all people in their different journeys to God, whether they call Him Jesus or Buddha or Allah. In

fact, Young asserts that there is no need for faith or reconciliation with God, because all people will make it to heaven.

The Bible is very clear that only those who call on the name of Jesus will be saved: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12. See also 1 Tim. 2:5, Rom. 10:9). Universalism is a dangerous and malicious lie. It leads people to think that it doesn’t matter what you believe, sin is not really a problem, and there is really no need for a Savior. Universalism single-handedly destroyed Christianity in much of Europe, and universalism is working hard to destroy the faith of remnant believers in the American church today.

Jesus is not the same as Buddha or Krishna; He does not hide behind such false and impotent gods. He became flesh and dwelt among us that we might know Him. He wants us to know the one true God. He wants the glory that He deserves, for He alone is God: “I am the Lord; that is my name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to graven images” (Is. 42:8).

Are you willing to risk your eternal future on feel-good fluff? Sin is real. It is rebellion against God, and it requires justice. God’s justice and wrath were poured out on Jesus Christ to reconcile us to the holy God (see 1 Pet. 2:24-25). But we must have faith in Jesus, confessing His lordship and believing in His resurrection.

Jesus calls out to us, “Enter at the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who are going through it, because small is the gate and narrow is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14). Beware of the “broad road” theology of *The Shack*.

Who Is the Potter?

Problem #3: In *The Shack*, the god character tells Mack that

“submission is not about authority or obedience” and that the Trinity is even submitted to Mack (p. 145). Young is suggesting that God submits to human wishes and choices.

The Bible in its entirety points us to the need to submit to God. Submitting is by definition yielding to the authority of another. God created man, and man cannot dictate terms to God. As Isaiah 29:16 says, “Surely you turn things upside down! Shall the potter be esteemed as the potter’s clay? Shall what is made say to its maker, ‘He did not make me’? Or shall the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”

God does not answer to us; we answer to God. In this way we remain in His love: “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, even as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have spoken these things to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:10-11). Submission is about obedience, and that’s because obedience is ultimately about love. Jesus Himself said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching” (John 14:23). To minimize obedience is to minimize love for God.

The Living Word

Problem #4: Young alleges that the Bible limits God, implying that it was man who reduced God’s voice to paper: “Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book” (p. 66). Thus the Bible is portrayed as inadequate to know God.

If the Bible were simply a book written by man, then it would be about as useful as *The Shack*. However, the Bible was written over the course of about 1,800 years with many different authors, all inspired by the Holy Spirit. They all through various time periods and life experiences tell the same story, pointing us to the Messiah—Jesus, who is the very Word of God made flesh (John 1:1-4, 14).

It is through Scripture that God chose to reveal Himself to us. The Bible is a divine product. Jesus Himself trusted the Scriptures and used them to teach about Himself (see Luke 24:44-47). If the risen Lord values, trusts and feeds on the Bible (see Matt. 4:1-11), should we not also look to it as the saving gospel it is? Let us therefore heed Paul's words:

"But continue in the things that you have learned and have been assured of, knowing those from whom you have learned them, and that since childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through the faith that is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:14-17, MEV).

Encountering the Sovereign, Holy God

Problem #5: The God portrayed in *The Shack* seems casual and unconcerned with holiness, which is inconsistent with what we see in the Bible. Mack's troubling disrespect and disregard for the Trinity would be impossible if he had encountered the sovereign, holy God.

By presenting a god wholly different from the true God revealed in the Bible, Young mocks the importance and uniqueness of the Word of God. He makes the Bible equal to or less than whatever personal imagination anyone might have of God. Mack did not encounter the Holy God of heaven and earth in the shack, but a created god who is controlled and manipulated by man—like an idol that is put away in a closet and brought out when needed. *The Shack* exchanges "the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man" (Rom. 1:23).

Although it's a righteous desire to want to know God, Mack's fictional experience of encountering God is demonstrably

inconsistent with what we see in Scripture. It's also a poor sequel to the true story we already have of God's interactions on earth through Jesus Christ. When Moses asks God to show him His glory, God warns, "You cannot see my face, for no one man can see Me and live" (Ex. 33:20)—such is the dangerous magnificence of the Father's glory. We must be careful of assigning any image to Him that diminishes His holiness.

In Scripture, when people face the Lord, they fall down in repentance and worship. Isaiah's response was: "Woe is me! ... For I am undone because 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" (Is. 6:5). When John is swept up to heaven in a revelation from God and sees the glorified Jesus, he falls at His feet "as though ... dead" (Rev. 1:17). When Job was confronted by the Lord as He laid out His majesty, Job replies, "I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). God is awesome, and we simply cannot stand in His presence. Neither can we live without Him.

The Ultimate Question

Problem #6: In *The Shack*, Young tries to answer the important personal question of suffering—and he thinks the answer is to change who God is. But God has already answered this question perfectly according to His true and unchanging character. He answered it with the gospel. He answered it on the cross. He answered it through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we carefully consider the ideas presented in *The Shack*, the greater question we must ask ourselves is: Am I willing to accept God's gift of eternal life as it is revealed in Scripture? Am I willing to accept God's salvation the way He provided it—even if I want something else that accommodates my wishes, desires and emotions? Am I willing to accept truth over what makes me comfortable, realizing that truth is what I

need—for it alone leads to eternal life?

We must not allow ourselves to be swayed by emotionalism. We must instead be like the Bereans, “daily examining the Scriptures” rather than readily accepting what they heard as truth (Acts 17:22b). Because no story, no matter how compelling, can ever improve upon God’s story of redemption in the Bible.

Beloved, the best place to meet God is not at the shack, but at the cross. For the gospel is the greatest story ever told, and better still, it is true. {eo}

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