

# The Shack

## Confronting the Tragedy

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Kathie Lee Gifford, co-host of NBC's Today Show comments, "*The Shack* will change the way you think about God forever." Gifford is correct, and this is the tragedy that thoughtful Christians must confront. The first parishioner to recommend this book to me revealed, "I never knew the Trinity incarnated." Case in point! As a New York Times best seller and possible future film, *The Shack* has the influence potential to shape and change the way people think about God. With over three million copies sold, Young leaves much to be questioned. The following paper provides ample evidence that despite author Wm. Paul Young's good intentions, *The Shack* is bad theology that grows increasingly worse. Some scholars have already attempted to "find God" in *The Shack*. I will not. I intend to articulate which "god" a reader (like our character, Mackenzie) will find in *The Shack*. In doing so, Kathie Lee's statement will become our hermeneutical quest, "How does *The Shack* change the way you think about God?"

Examine Young's portrayal of God. At best, one finds a deity that has fallen short of the glory defined by Christian orthodoxy. Worst case scenario—one finds a different god altogether. It is tempting for Christians to read-in meaning and read-over errors found in *The Shack*. It is also helpful to remember that many lay Christians will not have the biblical, theological and historical framework whereby they may evaluate statements made by Young about God. *The Shack*, therefore, becomes a theological narrative, teaching and illustrating the nature and work of the Trinity. Christian teachers and pastors should not allow Young's work to escape scrutiny by dismissing objections by others and explicit statements by Young himself with the harmless disclaimer, "It was never meant to be a book on theology." Nonsense! It is a book about a man meeting God. In fact, the major thrust of the novel is Mackenzie discovering how God works in the world to bring healing in his life. A book about God is by definition, regardless of genre, a book with theology and an agenda.

### Was It All Just A Dream?

Before we examine what Young says about God, we should consider whether or not Young intends *The Shack* to be read as an icon, diagram or something else. In the world of the book, is this story a real encounter (either physical or metaphysical)? Did Mackenzie dream about meeting God or did God visit Mackenzie in and through his subconscious?

A good example of an icon of the Trinity would be Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Trinity. Rublev, a Russian Orthodox Christian, painted this famous icon in 1410, capturing Abraham's encounter of the three visitors at the Oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18:1-10. The text reads that "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre" (v1, NIV). Scholars see at least three other possible examples of "Christophanies" (pre-incarnate Old Testament appearances of Jesus) in the stories relating to Abraham's meeting with King Melchizedek of Salem (Genesis 14:18; cf Hebrews 4:14-5:10), Jacob's wrestling match with God (Genesis 32:30) and the figure with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Daniel 3:25). Rublev's Icon has been used for hundreds of years, but it is not without problems of its own. Putting a face or image to the faceless and unimaginable

automatically stains the canvass. However, when correctly interpreted, the icon itself can be a very helpful tool in articulating the interpersonal relationship of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

A second classic icon for teaching the doctrine of the Trinity would be the diagram known as the Trinity Shield, dating back to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century. I often use the Trinity Shield when explaining this doctrine to lay people. It diagrams the relationship—nothing more. So, is *The Shack* an icon or diagram in the form of iconic narratology? Rather than using icons in picture form, is Young's book an icon in narrative form for the purpose of theological reflection? Is Young following the example of Rublev or Petrus Alfonsi's Trinity diagram from the 12<sup>th</sup> century? If it is just an icon or illustration, then we can dismiss it as that—a bad illustration. Rublev and Alfonsi, in my opinion, created helpful tools that point the worshipper beyond their limited existences to the Mystery now apprehendable through a picture window for the soul. The function and nature of *The Shack* is intentionally harder to diagnose. It is a fictional world existing to describe for readers what God is really like. This becomes more dangerous, for, unlike classical icons that act as a tools to enable limited worshippers to better understand what Scripture points toward, Young's elaborations are attempts to describe and understand the Indescribable and Incomprehensible One. The beginning of the problem is the initial interpreter, being the author, who takes a story and invests his own theology into the story (the tool). More on this in the upcoming sections, but, for now, if the interpretive author skews the content, would that not make the interpretation of others problematic?

Pastor Brooks, "I never knew the Trinity incarnated?" Again, case in point!

Questions: Is Mackenzie's encounter a "this world" physical experience, or an equally real subconscious encounter from the floor of the shack or the Joseph Emergency Room? More importantly, is *The Shack* a real encounter or an imagined encounter? My answer: *The Shack* portrays a real encounter with an incarnated Trinity through Mackenzie's subconscious that Young intentionally smudges to make the reader question "What happened?"

There are two parts to this conclusion. Least important is that I believe it was a subconscious encounter with God preceded by a real physical letter from God. The first 237 pages are unclear, whether this was a real physical bodily experience or not, until the reader learns of Mackenzie's crash with a drunk driver on page 238, the destroyed jeep, his "Life-Flight to Emmanuel Hospital in Portland, Oregon," and his waking experience of his son Josh, squeezing his finger (239). Up until this point, it could have all been a dream.<sup>2</sup> However, the most natural implication is that these are chronological events. The following story is meant to be understood as happening in real world time. I think that Young's comments regarding a possible "hallucination" by "some damaged or otherwise wayward neurons and the drugs coursing through his veins" are meant to be rabbit trails (240). They are meant to cause the reader to think, "Did this really happen?" Furthermore, the reader is left to question if this was just a "dream" or a subconscious encounter, because according to Mackenzie, the wreck happened

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Steve A. Seamands uses Rublev's Icon in his book, *Wounds That Heal: Bringing Our Hurts to the Cross* (IntervarsityPress, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in chapter three, "The Tipping Point," Mackenzie befriends a neighboring family at the campsite the day before Missy's abduction, named of all things, "Jesse" and "Sarah." Jesse was an expert story teller, and Sarah is a continuous help to Mackenzie on the trip. Clearly, Young wants the reader to think that his choice of names for Papa, which is ironically Nan's pet name for God the Father due to her close and intimate relationship (37), his interactions with Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Sarayu) are all projections from his past. This, atleast, explains the odd choice of names for the three Persons of the Trinity.

on Sunday on his return from the shack. But in actuality, it was Friday night, according to his wife (243). The events of Mackenzie's weekend never happened in the real physical world, for we have to believe that Nan and the other six billion humans of planet Earth are all in sync with the normal space-time continuum. Mackenzie might be dreaming, but no one else is. Mackenzie never met God in the flesh, so to speak, in the physical shack. That is, unless, as Mackenzie jests, "it was one of those Sarayu time-warp displacement thingys" (243). This is a tad too Star Treky for me, personally, but I would not put it past Young to want his readers to consider if Sarayu did bend time and space just for him.

Most importantly, regardless of the form, it is meant to be a *real* encounter with God. Willie, Mackenzie's friend who loaned him the jeep, corroborates this view by asking him if he had met with God in the shack, "Seriously, was *he* there" (241)? Willie also reminds Mackenzie of the initial letter from "Papa" (16) and his slip on the ice and how the letter got to his mailbox without the mail man (21). Willie is an important witness because he testifies to prior events to the weekend in question by one week. The greatest evidence that this is not just an illustration, or a dream, but a real encounter with and communication from God is that God tells Mackenzie where to find Missy's body by following the Little Lady Killer's trail. On his recovery (which means the note from God was real because he traveled from his home prior to the wreck) he directed his friend Willie, his wife Nan and Joseph's deputy sheriff, Tommy Dalton to the trail and the decaying remains of his daughter, using the "red arcs" made by the killer and arriving at the marked rock left by "Papa."

This is not just an icon or diagram. This is a fictional story of God entering our space and time for the purpose of helping one individual and changing history. Therefore, in the world of the book, this is a real, subconscious experience of Mackenzie encountering a fully incarnated Trinity most likely, when he fell asleep from exhaustion on the floor of the shack on Friday evening. This is very different indeed to Rublev's Icon, who would never desire a Christian to contemplate heretical make believe experiences. A subconscious (but very much real encounter) with God does not afford the doctrinal and theological freedom to import anti-orthodox, anti-Trinitarian teaching. If Young thought that creating a subconscious experience for Mackenzie would allow him to escape criticism as a heretic, he is badly mistaken. No matter how much he may want to blur Mackenzie's experience for readers, Jesus is Lord over our subconscious, just as much as our physicality. Orthodoxy is orthodoxy in every world, real or fictional, in every type of experience, physical or not, if it is orthodoxy in any world, real or fictional, in any experience, physical or not!

## Did He Write That?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to chase down the following quotes. Simply ask yourself, Did He really write that and what does he mean? Ask yourself, does this quote change the way I think about God?

1. "Then," Mack struggled to ask, "which one of you is God?"  
"I am," said all three in unison." (87)
2. [Papa] "When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose 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." (99)
3. Speaking of the crucifixion, [Papa], "Love always leaves a significant mark," she stated softly and gently. "We were there *together*" (96). Referring to Papa, "Nodding in agreement, he [Mackenzie] looked up and noticed again the scars on her wrists" (102), and again, [Jesus,

referring to a moment of inner-Trinitarian devotion] “Instead, Jesus reached across the table and took Papa’s hands in his, scars now clearly visible on his wrists.” (107).

4. [Jesus] “God, who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things—ultimately emerging as the real—and any appearances that mask that reality will fall away.” (111)
5. [Jesus explaining the inner-Trinitarian relationship] “That’s the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, of Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.” (145)
6. [Jesus, speaking about “Sophia,” otherwise known as Wisdom in the Wisdom Literature, answering Mack’s question, “Is She God too?”] “No Mack. There are only three of us. Sophia is a personification of Papa’s wisdom.”  
[Mack] “But . . . she seemed so real.”  
[Jesus] “Oh, she’s quite real” . . . He then looked around as if to see if anyone was watching and whispered, “She’s part of the mystery surrounding of Sarayu.” (171)
7. [Jesus] “Remember, the people who know me are the ones who are free to live and love without any agenda. . . . [Jesus] “Who said anything about being a Christian? I’m not a Christian. . . . 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.” (182)

In these seven short excerpts, there are signs of Patra-Passionism or Father-Suffering (#3), pantheism (#4), hints of universalism (#7), tri-theism (#1), fully incarnated Trinitarianism (#2), and confusing and inadequately defined references to inter-personal trinitarian submission (#5) and an odd relationship between “Sophia” and Sarayu (#6). What is Young trying to tell us about God?

## On the Other Side of the Fence

*The Shack*, by authorial design, grounds itself beyond the safe boundaries of historic Christian doctrine by presenting and illustrating a fully incarnated Trinity (albeit, through a subconscious experience).<sup>3</sup> According to the biblical witness, the Trinity did not incarnate, only the Second Person of the God-head. Therefore, from the beginning, all interactions between God and man illustrated by

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<sup>3</sup> Papa disarms Mack from his pistol (84), cries (92), bakes pies (101) and shows signs of stigmata(102). The Holy Spirit (Sarayu) takes Mack’s face in her hands (85) and Jesus “embraces him strongly. Jesus makes a mess in the kitchen (104)! The Trinity is limited by incarnation (106). Jesus kisses Sarayu (108), after helping her with the dishes. Papa has a great singing voice and can keep up with Bruce Cockburn (118). It is disgusting to think about God the Father talking about “the trots” (121). The entire weekend is an illustration.

Young cannot escape heresy. The fount is tainted. Beginning with error, no matter the good intention, leaves one erroneously working flawed illustrations.<sup>4</sup>

The biblical story portrays the God of the universe calling and making a distinct people with a specific moral and theological culture as a historical backdrop, for the purpose of, serving to prepare the world to understand the pre-ordained plan of the incarnating of the Son of God in the fullness of time. Consequently, we are limited by Scripture, orthodox tradition and reason when we talk about the nature and work of God. Those boundaries serve as a protective fence so that we may venture as far as scripture will allow us to go. We are free to climb over, under or to even tear down those orthodox planks at any time. However, in doing so, we venture at our own peril, with the certain likelihood of perishing in the dark land of heresy. On the contrary, when we allow those orthodox boundaries to shape our imagination, we have classics that weather the test of time, like for example, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy's encounter with Aslan, the King of the Beasts (notice, no character ever met "The Emperor Beyond the Sea"—Lewis' illustration of God the Father), Mackenzie's weekend with three divine persons all present in the same room eating supper together is so far out that it does not make sense from an orthodox Christian perspective. Young does not re-communicate the Christian message. He reinvents it. Therefore, as a result, it is confusing, misleading and heretical. *The Shack* is a story located beyond the protective fence of biblical truth and sound doctrine. Beware as you approach its door. The deity imagined and found by Mackenzie in that shack cannot be the Trinity.

## The Essence of the Question

In *The Shack*, are the three separate Persons of the Trinity portrayed as of one/or same substance? Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus and the Father (and the Spirit) are of the same substance—they are homo [one] ousias [substance]. Jesus is not "like" God the Father—homoi [like] ousias. Rather, Father, Son and Holy Spirit coexist simultaneously as One God, in Three Persons, in unity with distinction. I feel that Young knows this, but I question if his illustrations depict it. For example, why portray Sarayu (The Holy Spirit) so radically different from Papa (God the Father)? Neither Persons of the Trinity are visually described in the Bible. However, in *The Shack*, Papa hugs and kisses, while Sarayu hugs without touching and seems "to shimmer in the light" as "her hair blew in all directions even though there was hardly a breeze" (84). In the Bible, the Father is just as much a non-physical Spirit Being as the Holy Spirit, not to mention Jesus' pre-existent, pre-incarnate eternal form. So, why can we look directly at Papa, but with Sarayu "it is easier to see her out of the corner of his eye than it was to look at her directly" (84)? Furthermore, in *The Shack*, Jesus is portrayed as fully incarnate as well as the

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<sup>4</sup> For example, teaching children the "vapor, ice, liquid (but all water) illustration of the Trinity is heresy, and no matter how you attempt to define correctly the doctrine, you cannot avoid the fact that the illustration employed teaches that "God" is like water in three forms (vapor, ice, liquid), which is incorrect. For, water cannot be vapor, ice and liquid simultaneously with distinction. It can at best change forms or modes. Ancient Christians rejected this understanding of God as modalism. God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit simultaneously as one God in three Persons.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis wrote a "supposal." Suppose Jesus incarnated in a parallel world to ours and four children entered that world for the purpose of learning how to follow Jesus in their own world . . . ? His genre is fantasy. Young is attempting to illustrate how God is experienced in *this* world.

Father. So, why make the Spirit wraith-like? Question: Is Sarayu of the same substance as Papa and Jesus? I am confused.

## Shock and No Awe in

A common criticism fired at *The Shack* is Young's extreme anthropomorphism of God. When asked about this approach, Young responds in an interview, "I say, good on it! It becomes part of the conversation. I think it's very healthy. It allows people to bring to the surface their own bondages"<sup>6</sup> With shock value as his purpose, God is portrayed as a southern, jive talking, soul-food cooking black woman, a sweaty middle-eastern tradesman and a cute Asian wraith-like babe. So, what is the real value of this illustration? How does it help suffering humanity to read about God making scones? In contrast, consider the biblical witness never mentioning Jesus making a table or chair, which he most certainly would have been capable of doing, since his foster father (Joseph) was a carpenter by trade. I venture, that such omissions of Jesus' life were superfluous to the main objective of retelling the grand story of redemption. Hint, hint, Mr. Young!

Furthermore, how does envisioning God as a loud black woman help one to bypass the childhood pain of sexual abuse from a man? According to Young,

To use imagery that violated the paradigm was important for Mackenzie, who is me [Young], [sic] has a real father issue. So, God comes to him in a way that bypasses some of that resistance.<sup>7</sup>

However, in doing so, Young creates a parallel barrier to those men who are victims of abuse from their mothers. Shock value can only help so much until it becomes a new source of trauma. The true shock of meeting God is found in the glorious Mystery of the Divine Otherness. We will fall at our knees because we are not God and God is even more awesome than we could ever have imagined. We will be in awe because that One wants to be in a relationship with us. It is my opinion that sticking with scripture and defining how God the Father is not like flawed human fathers (even the best of fathers) is in the end a more worthy pursuit than using metaphorical language to introduce extreme humanistic attributes to the Holy One (like Papa loving to cook and eat and making bewildering references to Mackenzie's pants/libido/and or penis, p88).

Young began the ball rolling with his extreme anthropomorphic illustration of the Trinity, so it is not illogical in *The Shack* that God is a cosmic Mamme speaking jive to a confused white boy, who no doubt represents the western protestant church (in my opinion). It is all about shock. Unfortunately, it is void of Holy awe and reverent fear of God. It does not honor God to write about God in such a crude manner. The world is already full of humanistic and idolatrous projections of man and woman into the nature of God. *The Shack* is nothing more than the construction of an idol in paperback form. Moreover, there is a danger in making God overly accessible. Moses was commanded to remove his sandals (Exodus 3:5). Jesus' glory was clothed behind a curtain of flesh, except for one brief instance (Luke 9:29). In an attempt to lift high the incarnation of God, Young has in turn denigrated the Holy, dragging heaven down to the playground and leaving God's character in the gutter.

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<sup>6</sup> Russell, Robin, "Q & A: Shack Helps Reconnect with God," *The United Methodist Reporter*, p2b.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Universal Reconciliation: Where Tragedy Finds Heresy

Dr. James De Young pinpoints the presiding error of *The Shack* as the heresy of Universal Reconciliation. A thorough examination is found on his website, [www.theshackreview.com](http://www.theshackreview.com). De Young is a family friend and “theological buddy” of Young for the past 12 years. He concludes that universalism is “at the foundation of this novel.”<sup>8</sup> Universalism is the belief that in the end all people will be saved. Universal reconciliation is an anti-institutional doctrine from the sixth century. In general, it teaches that all people and angels will be reconciled to God in this life or after death, with or without faith. Furthermore, hell is not a punishment for sin but necessary for correction and purification, because love is the primary attribute of God and God’s love limits God’s will to punish.<sup>9</sup> This theological backdrop allows a revealing review of *The Shack*.

For example, what does Young imply when Papa (God) says, “I don’t need to punish people for sin, sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it, it’s my joy to cure it” (120). It is true, in a sense, that the consequences of the choices of our sins that we commit in this life are temporal punishment now. For example, it is emotionally painful and punishing to lose your marriage because you committed adultery. However, when Paul writes that the “wages of sin is death,” he implies eternal death (Romans 6:23). We earn for ourselves damnation like an employee earns wages. The question is, as my colleague Brian points out, is Paul Young using this statement to reflect one of the tenants of universal reconciliation, which teaches that God has already punished Jesus on the cross for our sins and therefore, there is no more need for future judgment? Given Young’s writings and self acknowledgement as a determined universalist, this must be the case. Young implies that God does not judge people anymore [for their sins] for all sin has already been judged once and for all. He paints God as simply in the business of making things right in the world by working to “cure it.” *The Shack* is fictional, but a theological treatise at the same time. Discussions on grace, the nature of God, the dual natures of Christ, forgiveness, etc., fill the pages of each chapter. Its purpose is to offer to the emerging, disenfranchised North American Christian sub-culture an alternative view of God that their parents would not approve of. Unfortunately, Young trades truth and tested tradition for hipness and heresy. In the end, the tragedy of Mackenzie’s “great sadness” (and all those who share similar stories in real life) is that when they come to *The Shack* for healing and a fresh encounter with God, in the end, they meet the distorted views of a deceiving false teacher. We encourage those interested in a more thorough analysis to visit [www.theshackreview.com](http://www.theshackreview.com).

## The Trinity of Orthodoxy

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit coexist as One God in unity with distinction. How God exists as Trinity may be impossible to comprehend because we are finite human creatures. However, as humans guided by grace, persons are able to apprehend that God is Trinity. Dr. Steven Tsoukalas (Assistant Professor of Apologetics and Christian Thought at Wesley Biblical Seminary), offers a helpful method of annunciating the doctrine of the Trinity that so many Christians find confusing. Tsoukalas begins with three presuppositions that all orthodox Christians agree on.

1. The Bible is the Word of God.

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<sup>8</sup> De Young, James, “At the Back of the Shack: A Torrent of Universalism,” [www.theshackreview.com](http://www.theshackreview.com), p5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p4.

2. God is infinite in nature and understanding (knowledge).
3. Humans are finite in nature and understanding (knowledge).

Therefore, as finite humans (#1) who are limited in knowledge, we cannot fully comprehend how the infinite God (#2) is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, through the Bible (#1) we may apprehend that God is indeed Trinity (Deuteronomy 6:4; 2 Peter 1:17; John 20:28; Acts 5:3-4). In other words, enough of what we do not fully understand may be grasped (taken hold of) so that we may reason and determine that the whole is true, based on the Bible because it is God's inspired Scripture.

Christians do not believe that all three Persons of the Trinity incarnated or became human as Jesus did with separate (yet unmixed) divine and human natures within a unified person. Rather, we believe that the fullness of the nature of God incarnated in the person of Jesus (John 1.1, 14; Colossians 1:19). God the Father is eternally Spirit as is God the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

We pray that Wm. Paul Young repents and avoids the wrath to come, for he deviates from Christian orthodoxy in a host of errors too numerous to include in this paper. Yet, it is perplexing to me why so many people love this book so much. Christians should not overlook the obvious pain and suffering that so many connect with through this book. A lay person or pastor grounded in sound doctrine will quickly hear the invitation by other Christians and seekers to explain the mysteries of the faith. We implore lay persons, teachers and preachers to guide their flock to the safe home of orthodoxy, for *The Shack* is no Sanctus Sanctorum. It is the diluted imaginations of its author. Regardless of motive, it leaves the seeker confused, asking, "Which God did I meet over the weekend?"