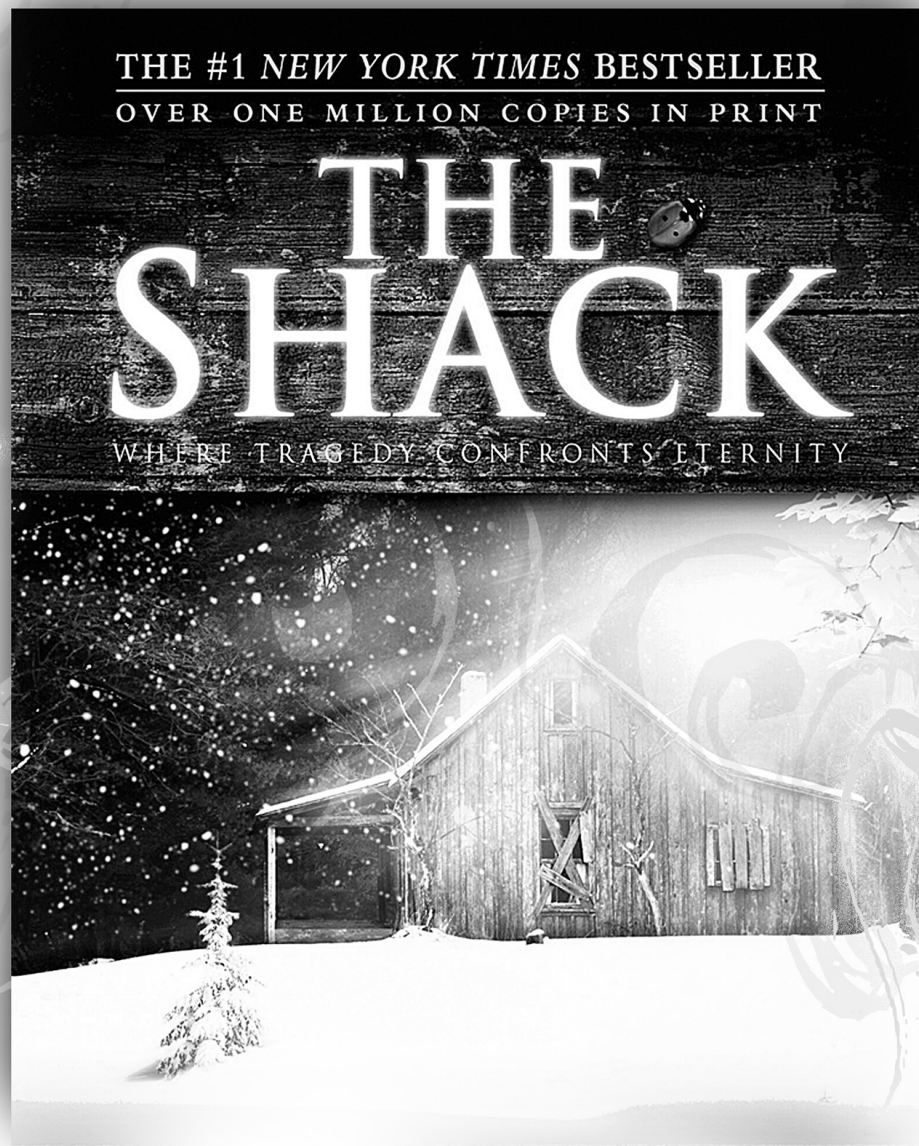


RE-IMAGINING, RE-INVENTING, RE-NOVATING, RE-PAINTING, RE-CREATING GOD

BIBLICALLY HANDLING



*“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy.... They will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be **turned unto fables**.” —1 TIMOTHY 4:1-2, 2 TIMOTHY 4:3-4*

"[The Bereans] . . . searched the scriptures daily,

[to see] whether those things were so." —Acts 17:11

The "Jesus" the World Loves

T. A. McMahon — First published in December 2008

WHAT DO YOU THINK of Jesus? That's a question I've asked at times to engage non-Christians in conversation about Him for the purpose of witnessing. A fairly typical response used to be that He was a religious teacher who did a lot of good, said many good things, and they usually concluded with a belief that He was a very good man. I then could ask, "Did you know that He claimed to be God?" When looks of puzzlement followed, I would explain that He couldn't be a "very good man." In claiming to be God, He was either self-deluded or an outright fraud—that is, unless He was telling the truth. More often than not, that thought, raising the issue of being accountable to God, would bring our conversation to an awkward end. At least it had provided the opportunity to plant some seeds that I hoped would grow into conviction. Most people aren't comfortable with the truth about Jesus.

Those who *profess* to be Christians quite often have ideas about Jesus that are just as wrong as those people who are not Christians. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is a created god and that He is also Michael the Archangel. Mormons believe Jesus is the spirit brother of Lucifer and that He was married and had children. The followers of Christian Science and the Religious Science religions believe that Jesus was simply a man upon whom the "Christ empowerment" came. Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist can be transubstantiated, or changed, into the literal body and blood of Jesus, who is then ingested into one's stomach. Lutherans believe that Jesus is *consubstantiated*, or present, "in, with, and under" the bread and wine of communion. Such unbiblical beliefs are a mere handful among hundreds promoted by various Christian denominations and cults. Yet what is even more appalling is that an inquiry about Jesus today among those who call themselves evangelicals (Bible-believing Christians!) too often reveals "another Jesus" and a "false Christ." How does that happen?

Let's start with how one comes to a true knowledge of, and relationship with, Jesus Christ. It begins with a simple understanding of the gospel (Rm 1:16) that Jesus is God (Jn 10:30-33), who became a Man (1 Ti 2:5) in order to save mankind from everlasting separation from God (Jn 14:6, Jn 3:16-17) that resulted from man's sin (Is 59:2). Jesus satisfied the perfect justice of God (1 Jn 2:2) by His once-and-for-all payment for the sins of humanity (Heb 10:10-12) through His death on the Cross (Heb 12:2). His resurrection from the dead (Rm 1:3-4) assures the salvation of all those who acknowledge before God their sin (2 Co 7:10) and their hopelessness in saving themselves (Rm 5:6), and who by grace through faith (Eph 2:8) accept Christ's sacrifice on their behalf (Jn 3:15) and His free gift of eternal life (Rm 5:18). This is how one is reconciled to God (Jn 3:3) and born again spiritually (Ga 2:20, 1 Pt 1:23). This is how one's relationship with the biblical Jesus Christ (Col 1:27) begins.

Although that relationship is supernatural in that every true believer in Christ is indwelt by God (1 Co 6:19), it nevertheless progresses, as any good relationship does, by getting to know the person with whom one has a relationship.

The primary way a relationship with Jesus develops is by reading the revelation of Himself given in His Word. This is the only way

to obtain specific information about Him that is objective and absolutely true. In addition, not only is the content of Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Ti 3:16-17), but that same Spirit of Truth is given to believers to understand that content (Jn 16:13). How then could those who profess to follow God's Word come up with erroneous ideas about Jesus? Regrettably, many are getting their information about Jesus from sources outside the Bible or second hand from those who claim to be teaching what the Bible says about our Lord.

To demonstrate how ludicrous a relationship dependent upon such sources of knowledge is, consider what might happen to a husband and wife who try to form an intimate relationship with each other by relying on the insights of other people who claim to know them. That's a sure recipe for failure, yet Christians often run to extrabiblical sources for their knowledge of Jesus.

The amazing popularity of the book *The Shack* (TBC Q&A, 9/08) among evangelicals is just a recent example of someone depicting a Jesus who is foreign to the Bible and worse. What does the author think about Jesus? He characterizes Him in a way that may make some people feel more comfortable with Him, yet the Jesus of *The Shack* is clearly a false Christ. He's a "good old boy," who likes to fix things and takes "pleasure in cooking and gardening." He laughs at crude jokes, is a bit of a klutz, engages in trout fishing by chasing one down as He runs on water, carves a coffin for the body of a little girl, and enjoys kissing, hugging, and laughing with the two other members of the "Trinity." The book is filled with dialogue from the characters of God the Father (portrayed as an overweight Afro-American woman), the Holy Spirit (a petite Asian woman), and Jesus. All three speak as the "oracles of God," giving insights and explanations neither found in nor consistent with Scripture. Some enthusiastic readers say the words and interactions with the Godhead have comforted them, answered difficult questions about their faith, and made the person of the Lord seem all the more real to them.

The reality is that out of his own imagination the author has put *his* words into the mouths of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are then perceived by multitudes as "thus saith the Lord." This is not only a bogus secondhand source but the arrogance of false prophecy at least and blasphemy and idolatry at worst. It is man, making God in his own *fallen* image.

More influential among evangelicals than *The Shack* is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which became a huge box-office success, thanks mostly to evangelical support. Available now as a "definitive edition DVD," it features, for those who want the official Catholic theology of the film explained, a discussion with director Mel Gibson, along with a Catholic apologist and two Catholic priests who were the film's theological consultants. The movie has a false gospel, a false Christ, and is loaded with supposedly biblical scenes from the minds of Gibson and a Catholic nun given to mystical hallucinations (See *Showtime for the Sheep?*). Yet it continues to be used extensively by evangelical churches, especially during Lent and Easter week.

In response to "What do you think of Jesus?" millions who saw the movie now mistakenly believe that: He was confronted by Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane; He was thrown from a bridge by His captors and dangled from a chain; His image was captured for posterity on the veil of a woman named Veronica; as His cross began to fall, it levitated to keep Him from hitting the ground, and,

most contradictory to the gospel, it was the merciless scourging He suffered that paid for the sins of humanity.

These are only a few of the unbiblical images that the world and many in the church have added to their perception of Jesus. Movies are today's most popular form of disseminating superficial information and misinformation. Feature films about Jesus and God have put erroneous ideas about them into the hearts and minds of the masses: *Jesus Christ Superstar*; *The Last Temptation of Christ*; *Bruce Almighty*; *The Da Vinci Code*; *Judas*; *Oh God!*; *Oh God, Book II*; *Jesus of Nazareth*, to name but a few.

What about "more biblically accurate" Bible movies—those that take the words directly from Scripture, for example? When you have an actor portraying Jesus who says only the words of Jesus that are found in the Bible, does that make the portrayal more accurate? More accurate than what? Does the actor actually *look* like Jesus, or *talk* like Jesus, or *reflect the godly demeanor* of Jesus? More critically, can he accurately imitate the God-Man, the Creator of the Universe, the One in whom all things consist? Even if he could, which is impossible, it would still be an imitation! Furthermore, he will leave millions, including believers, with an image of a false "Christ."

A few such movies are sincere attempts at communicating the content and stories of the Scriptures through *visual media*. Although sincere, they are doomed to failure regarding truth. Why? In addition to what was noted above, the Bible is an objective revelation from God given in words. All attempts at visually translating those words abandon objective revelation in favor of subjective interpretation. Take a passage of Scripture, for instance, and have five people give their understanding of the verse based upon the context, the grammatical structure, and the normal meaning of the words. More often than not, the interpretations will be quite similar. Should one of the five come up with something very different, it can be corrected by simply checking it out objectively against the context, grammar, and accepted definitions of the words in the passage. On the other hand, what if five artists were to translate the passage visually? The result would be five very subjective and quite different renderings. Even if only one artist visually translated the verse and four people tried to interpret the image, you would likely have four different views because the medium has no objective criteria comparable to that of words. Are you getting the "picture" here? Imagery is not the way to communicate objective truth.

God did not draw pictures on the tablets He gave to Moses. His continual command to him and to His other prophets was to *write down His instructions*. Visual imagery was at the heart of pagan worship used by people whose lives centered around idols—the chief by-product being unbridled superstition. The same was true of the medieval Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, who fed their followers images rather than teaching them to read and write (as the Jews had done successfully from the time of Abraham). Even today, superstition continues to be rampant within those visually oriented religious systems.

Where does the world get its ideas about Jesus? Most non-Christians only know what they've picked up from sources they regard as Christian, although rarely is the content biblical. More than a billion Muslims, for example, hold a view of Jesus that Muhammad gleaned from questionable Christians. The Qur'an states that Isa (Jesus) is not the Son of God because Allah has no son. Isa's birth took place under a palm tree, and, while still a babe, he cried out from his cradle that he was a servant of Allah, who had given him a revelation and made him a prophet. He did not die upon the cross; someone took his place—all in contradiction to the Bible.

Many Jews put stock in the alleged Talmudic stories that oppose the gospel accounts. They have been taught that Jesus was an illegitimate child who was born to a harlot and a scoundrel. Declaring himself to be the Messiah, he performed healings by sorcery and consequently was stoned and then hung on a tree for his magic and blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God.

Hindus have added Jesus as one more avatar, or god, among their 330 million gods. All of their gurus who have become popular in the West—from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to Rajneesh—preach their own "Jesus." Buddhists, such as the 14th Dalai Lama, regard Jesus as a *bodhisattva*, or enlightened god, among multitudes of gods reincarnated for the service of humanity.

Incredibly, the above erroneous beliefs about Jesus are fostered within professing Christianity by a popular practice among Emerging Church fellowships. Some invite the followers of the world religions for "conversation" in order to learn more about Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The goal seems to be to establish a Jesus who is acceptable to people of all faiths—or no faith. A common refrain heard from the Emergent communities is "We love Jesus but not His church." Certainly, as the church has compromised with the world, there is much not to like. Yet sadly, for many, it is neither the biblical Jesus whom they love nor the biblical church that they support. Some are under the delusion that Jesus is becoming more respected in our culture. That has never been the case for the Jesus revealed in Scripture.

It is hard for anyone who has a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ to accept that the world hates Him, this One whom we love so much. It was difficult for me, and I still struggle with that. How could anyone reject the One who loves us more than we could ever comprehend, and whose sacrifice for those He created is so wonderfully unfathomable? Such hatred is often masked and develops progressively and by stealth. It is found in Satan's strategy that began with "Yea, hath God said...?" His dialogue with Eve provided a ripe opportunity to subvert the truth about God and His command. Eve bought the Adversary's lying alteration of God's character and his denial of the consequence of disobedience. Her offspring down through the ages have done likewise.

Yet that reality in the guise of condescension and mockery nearly moved me to despair as I reviewed a particular episode of Fox TV's *The Family Guy*. The program (presented by the same network that created "Fox Faith" to market movies to Christian families) featured a Jesus character who left heaven to get away from his "nit-picking, overbearing father"; who proves his "deity" by changing meals into ice cream sundaes and enlarging a woman's breasts; who walks on water to fetch a five-dollar bill; who appears on *Jay Leno* and an MTV award show; who goes Hollywood, gets drunk at a party, and lands in jail, and who comes to the conclusion that he's not mature enough yet to help the world. I immediately searched for protests from Christendom against this Fox TV top-rated program. There were found neither cries of outrage nor weeping for those who blasphemed and ridiculed the only One who could save them. Some Christians offered uneasy rationalizations that Jesus certainly must have a sense of humor. That's the Jesus the world wants.

My mind raced to the Garden of Gethsemane, thinking about our Savior on His knees in prayer before the Father, where in His anguish He sweat as it were great drops of blood. He would become sin for us. Our Creator would take our sins upon Himself and experience the eternal penalty due every soul. Although He would be triumphant in paying for the sins of mankind, He nevertheless cried out to the Father that if there was any other way to save humanity, to let this cup of separation pass. But there was no other way.

I thought of the Lord of Glory hanging upon the cross on Calvary's hill, with the mockers about Him. Yet He died for them—and for those who mock Him still.

Pray that we who truly know Him would not drift from Him because of "another Jesus" conjured up by the world, our own flesh, or the devil. Pray also that the Lord will enable us to reflect the true character of Christ in our words and deeds; that He will help us to show the world the true Jesus, who, being God, came in the likeness of man, was treated as though He were sin itself, and satisfied the divine justice of God by dying upon the Cross, thus providing salvation for all of mankind.

TBC

"[The Bereans] . . . searched the scriptures daily,

[to see] whether those things were so." —Acts 17:11

Refashioning God

T. A. McMahon — First published in August 2009

Wherefore thou art great, O Lord God: for there is none like thee, neither is there any God beside thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears.

—2 SAMUEL 7:22

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

—JOHN 17:3

EVERY MAN, WOMAN, AND CHILD has the opportunity to spend eternity with God. That's mind-boggling! There is nothing imaginable that could possibly be more exciting and wonderful. Moreover, that possibility isn't something that man has invented. From Genesis through the book of Revelation, the Scriptures declare and explain how that becomes a reality. It's what the Bible is all about.

In God's revelation of Himself through His Word, we learn of His attributes and personal qualities in the only way that mankind can know Him accurately. Without His revelation, we are left with finite man's speculations and guesses about an infinite God. Such guesswork is often the basis of all the religions of the world. Their deities and their beliefs are the product of the imagination of fallen humanity (with the help of fallen angels). Biblical Christianity is the only exception. God has declared Himself in very specific terms to mankind. Without an accurate source of information, which only God Himself could and did provide, mankind would be left with nothing more than mythology, and most of the world is mired in this.

Tragically, a similar condition is infecting those who profess to be biblical Christians; they are slipping into the same swamp of delusion. That's one of the reasons why so few Christians seem truly excited about eternity and spending it with the Lord. They can't relate to it—or to Him—with real confidence. Many are tossed to and fro by their thoughts about God drawn from extra-biblical sources, from the latest best-selling Christian books, to Christian television programming, to what Oprah and her guests have conjured up. What's being communicated about God is usually pleasing (albeit to the flesh) but is rarely true to His holy character. Even the most appealing ideas about God, when they don't ring true to the Scriptures, contribute to a misleading and superficial relationship with the One we are to love in truth and with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

John, the beloved Apostle, tells us in his epistle that believers love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). That love for Him began with a basic understanding of who He is and what He has done for us. When we finally understood and believed the simple gospel (that God so loved us that He became a Man in order to reconcile us to Himself through His life, death, and resurrection), Jesus saved us. He did what only God could do—provided salvation for all mankind by paying the infinite penalty for sin that God's perfect justice required.

At our new birth in Christ, which begins each believer's personal relationship with Him, He gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of

Truth, to live within us, to teach us His Word, and to help us to grow in the knowledge of God our Savior. That's the only way we can truly know, and mature in our relationship with, Jesus. Anything that deviates from God's way of knowing Him is a delusion that leads down a slippery slope to destruction. In this day of quick fixes, running after instant gratification, and experiential catharses, we need to heed Isaiah's counsel regarding spiritual maturity: "Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isaiah 28:9-10). These precepts are God's instructions, His full counsel, which are completely sufficient for His children. As Peter declared, "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue" (2 Peter 1:3). That's God's way of developing maturity and fruitfulness (not to mention confidence in and a greater love for Him!) among His saints: "For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8).

There is nothing complicated about God's plan. So, what's the problem? Each one of us has to ask himself or herself that question, whether indeed, we have not taken to heart, or have willfully deviated from, God's instructions. As Isaiah pointed out, the learning/maturing process is quite simple ("precept upon precept"), but it does require learning what the precepts are and a willingness to do them. I'm speaking to my own heart as much as anyone else's when it comes to whether or not I fall short of what God desires in all of this.

For thirty years prior to accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior by faith alone, I had many beliefs about Him that were without support from the Scriptures—even contradictory. Some of the ideas came from the nuns and priests who, in many ways, were a wonderful part of my life growing up Catholic, whether in elementary school, private school, or high school. What they taught me was mostly unbiblical, including many things that were not even accepted as official Church dogma. The most notable example was the common belief that Jesus, for all practical and even eternal purposes, was subject to His mother, Mary. Her position as *Mater Dei*, the Mother of God (we were told), made her the most advantageous source of obtaining favors from Jesus. That certainly made sense to me and to the friends of my youth. After all, what good son would refuse his mom anything? Imagery of Christ as a small child with the Madonna was seemingly everywhere Catholic, from classic art and statuary to the many apparitions of Mary holding a baby—from the 1600s right up to the present, including Medjugorje and Egypt. No one I knew who had collected holy cards (a popular practice of Catholics of my generation) of the Infant Jesus of Prague, or St. Anthony, or St. Joseph holding the infant Jesus, gave any thought to the biblical fact that Jesus was in His early thirties when He ascended into heaven. Such things created an impression about Jesus that was endearing yet deadly in its straying from the truth about our all-knowing and all-powerful sovereign God.

The erroneous Catholic ideas about Jesus (that a piece of bread is changed into the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, that

He did not pay the full penalty for our sins, etc.) may not seem too surprising to evangelicals because, as most know, the Church of Rome doesn't strictly adhere to the Bible. To that she has added Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Magisterium, through which the bishops claim to infallibly interpret Tradition and the Bible. What is tragic is that evangelicals, who traditionally have regarded the Bible alone as their authority in all matters of faith and practice, are increasingly turning to extrabiblical sources for their instruction regarding spiritual matters. That's not exactly new; popular Christian books have displaced the books of the Bible in many so-called Bible studies throughout the land. Multitudes seem to prefer the insights of Beth Moore, John Eldredge, and Max Lucado over the Holy Spirit-inspired prophets of Scripture. Sadly, man's opinions and subtle and not-so-subtle psychobabble have become the oracles of wisdom for most of Christianity.

For decades, because of the influence of psychology on the church, professing Christians have integrated psychotherapeutic concepts into the way they view themselves, as opposed to what the Bible teaches about humanity. For example, many if not most Christians, believe the humanistic concepts of self-esteem and self-love to be consistent with Scripture, although they are absolutely contrary to the Word of God. Why, then, are those concepts accepted by evangelicals? Primarily because Dr. James Dobson and a host of other influential Christian psychologists promote them. Man's ideas and pseudo-scientific speculations have become the so-called guiding light of increasing numbers of Christian families. Yet there is something even more ominous than the leaven of man's ways mixed with God's way in the life of a Christian. It amounts to refashioning one's view of God from a human perspective.

All of us, from time to time, have had thoughts about God that did not square exactly with what He himself has declared in the Scriptures, but that generation of misinformation has reached appalling levels among evangelical Christians today. This development has been stimulated primarily by the Church Growth and Emerging Church movements in their approach to allegedly reaching our culture for Christ. Reinventing Christ and Christianity, in order to make them more acceptable to the unsaved masses, is both the method and the goal. It amounts to recreating God in the fallen image of man. As delusionary as that approach may seem in attempting to reach the lost, astonishingly, it has millions of professing Christians caught in its web of deception.

Though many examples could be cited, the most popular vehicle of this tactic is a fictional book that has been atop the *New York Times* best-seller list for about 60 weeks, is available in 35 languages, and has sold more than seven million copies. I'm referring to *The Shack*, by William Paul Young. Multitudes have claimed that the book has transformed their lives by giving them a "new and wonderful awareness about God that they never understood from the Bible." The story centers upon a man, Mack Philips, whose young daughter was abducted during a family vacation. Although her body hadn't been found, evidence pointing to her murder was discovered in an abandoned shack in the wilderness of Eastern Oregon; hence the title.

After several years, which have played emotional havoc with Mack and his family (he calls this time "The Great Sadness"), he receives a note in his mailbox inviting him back to the shack. The note is signed, "Papa," a very private and intimate name that Mack's wife affectionately uses for God. Mack apprehensively follows through with the invitation and encounters the godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in ways, means, and manifestations that are both unbiblical and bizarre. God the Father appears as a stereotyped, overweight black woman, who, nevertheless, is called Papa. She's a bit crude at times, likes to boogie to funk music, and some of her dialogue makes you wonder if she got past the third grade: "Well, Mackenzie, don't just stand there gawkin' with your mouth open like your pants are full"; "Take it easy on those greens, young man. Those things can give you the trots if you ain't care-

ful." And when asked if there was anyone in the world of whom she was *not* especially fond, she replies, "Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is."

The book may be fiction, but God is not. If God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit say and do things in this novel that are out of character with how they are revealed in Scripture, they are obviously false representations. Insights and explanations about God constitute doctrine. They are either true to God's Word, reflecting sound doctrine, or they are lies or fables that men concoct. Paul's prophetic words of warning in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 are evident in the popularity of *The Shack*: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

The Jesus character is a giggling "good ol' boy" who is enamored by His creation. A bit of a klutz, he drops a bowl of sauce that splatters all over Papa's skirt, giving the three persons of the "Trinity" a good laugh. When questioned by Mack about his less-than-good looks, Jesus blames it on his "big Jewish nose," which he says he got from Mary's side of the family, specifically his grandfather. We learn that Jesus likes to fish for trout by trying to chase them down as he runs on water. He has yet to be successful but thoroughly enjoys the sport. Referring to the female Papa's unexpected crudeness, he declares, "She's a riot." Throughout the story, Jesus can't seem to restrain his giggles and chuckles. He and the other persons of the Trinity are so like us that many readers claim they are now "more comfortable" with God. It's astonishing that what amounts to slandering the character of our holy God could make a professing Christian *comfortable*.

Nearly all of the literary devices in the book are either emotional or psychological hooks. The bait is "meeting felt needs." For example, Jesus the Carpenter constructs a coffin for the now-found body of Mack's daughter, although she makes her daddy feel better by communicating to him from heaven (necromancy?) that she's quite happy. As another example, the reason that God the Father appears as a woman to Mack is because he had a bad attitude toward his own dysfunctional father (who made it to heaven anyway, in keeping with the universalism [everyone is finally reconciled to God] implied in the novel). Heresies and distortions of biblical truth are found in page after page of *The Shack* (see Extra Page).

Thinking of Jesus' words in Matthew 24 that false Christs would arise and lead many astray, the Jesus of *The Shack* readily qualifies as a fulfillment of that prophecy. Again, more than seven million people have thus far been presented a bogus Jesus, and, for some, that may be their one and only introduction to him. That grieves me deeply. A false Jesus can save no one. Erroneous ideas about Jesus will destroy any hope of a *truly fruitful* relationship with Him. Jesus was, and is, certainly human. But He is also God, and His humanity was and is perfect in every aspect. In that light, all attempts to make Him seem more like us—sinful humanity—either in a book or in our minds, is an act of blasphemy. Blasphemy isn't just bad-mouthing God or Jesus; it's attributing characteristics to Him that are not true—*any* false characteristics. It is conjuring up "another Jesus," which Scripture condemns.

"This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Ephesians 4:17-18). The success of *The Shack* among those who profess to be evangelicals is as shameful as it is destructive, yet it also indicates that "vanity" of mind and "ignorance" are not the exclusive domain of unbelievers. Only a love for the truth and a willingness to do what the Word of God says will preserve us from the apostasy that Scripture tells us will overtake the world.

Lord, help us to remain steadfast in the faith, submitting to You in all things, and worshiping You in Spirit and in truth. Maranatha!

TBC

SHOULD “THE SHACK” BE ATTACKED?

A transcript from Search the Scriptures Daily radio — first aired August 2008

IN THIS REGULAR FEATURE, Dave and Tom address questions from listeners and readers of *The Berean Call*, here is this week’s question: “Dear Dave and TA, Frankly I am confused by a book that is very popular among my circle of Christian friends, it’s titled, *The Shack*, and although it is endorsed by some leading evangelicals, I was freaked out by it, and couldn’t actually finish it. I don’t understand how anyone thinks he can put God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a fictional situation, and then have them speak the words out of his own imagination. Isn’t this dead wrong?”

TOM: Now Dave, I know you haven’t read *The Shack*, you’ve been working night and day on your book, *Cosmos, Creator and Human Destiny*.

DAVE: I’ve heard about it, Tom, probably know quite a bit about it.

TOM: I’ve read it, I struggled through it, but in case you haven’t read it, I just want to run some things by you, and just kind of get your comments. Well, first of all, it’s a book that claims to be fiction, although you can’t really tell. It’s like mixing theology and some concepts, some beliefs that we might agree with, with some fiction. But basically what you have is a man in the story; he gets a note from God. He’s gone through great trauma in his life; he’s lost his daughter to a heinous kind of murder, so he’s carried this guilt and concern because maybe he could have saved his daughter, and so on. So he’s got this real burden that he’s been carrying, and he’s sort of been blaming God for this. But then, supposedly he gets a note from God, to come back to the place where the murder took place, and God is meeting him there, but not just God the Father, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, but all three. So you have in this story this man interacting with the Trinity and you have the Trinity. I’ll just give you my synopsis of those that he meets with. He conjures up God the Father as a hip talking now and then crude black woman referred to as Papa. And Jesus as a sometimes inept stone skipping good ole boy enamored with his humanity and creation, and the Holy Spirit as a wisp of a woman from Asia who gardens and collects tears. Now, anybody reading the book would say, Well, that’s your evaluation, but that in reality we have the Holy Trinity, okay, God the Father and the Holy Spirit as women, dressed in women’s clothes, interacting with this guy. What do you say to that?

DAVE: Well, Tom, I refused to read it. I know you had to, to answer the question, but this is abomination from beginning to end, and it’s a sign of the times in which we live. Can you imagine a black woman, black or white, or whatever?

TOM: And Dave, it’s not even consistent with having God use a dialogue of a black woman. It’s just ludicrous, even from writing’s standpoint, but go ahead.

DAVE: Well, you’re not supposed to make an idol; you’re not supposed to make any representation of God. Now this is the worst kind of misrepresentation you could have. A living idol of someone who is, supposedly, they say God came in this form now? The Father came in this form? And the Holy Spirit in the form of an Asian woman? And Jesus is kind of inept? He is enamored with his humanity, and so forth? Tom, this is—I don’t have words to express it! This is blasphemy of the worst sort. And yet that evangelical supposedly, Christian bookstores and churches!

TOM: Well, Christians have pushed the sales, at this recording, over a million, and it’s really a hot item. I’ve talked to some people that said their friends keep passing it around, and they just love it. One of the attractions, Dave, I mean, you are repulsed by it and so was I, but one of the attractions of this book is that God explains himself. So there is a lot of theological dialogue of God

saying, well the reason I did this, and the reason I did that, none of which you find in the Bible.

DAVE: I’m sure it would not ring true to who God is.

TOM: Oh without a doubt.

DAVE: So, they are demeaning God, they are presenting a false picture of God. An author who writes that, he ought to tremble. He is going to stand before this God that he misrepresented, stand before Him in judgment, and the people who loves it, they will stand before God in judgment as well. They’ve got a false idea of God in their minds, they allowed—

TOM: Dave, I mean, it runs the whole gamut. Now this is a God who has been reduced to somebody that we can get along with. In our earlier segment, you talked about going down on your face before God. There is no sense of that reverence or awe, humility at all in this book. I mean, here’s a god you get comfortable with. You know, you get comfortable with Jesus, and then you know, they are very human. We have reduced them to our stature really in this book. Not we have, but the author has.

DAVE: Well, Tom, I tremble for this man, and I tremble for those who read it, for those who recommend it, those who—what could be going through a person’s head as they read this? This is a representation of God? It couldn’t be worse, and to even entertain that thought... you see, the problem is, Tom, it corrupts the mind, it corrupts the heart, it corrupts one’s idea, comprehension of God. We’re not to even make an image in our mind. We’re not to make any image of God, no representation of God. So this is blatant disobedience of the very first commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me.”

TOM: Now Dave, one last point about this book which is, I think, talk about no fear of God. Who would dare speak for God? Now we have a dialogue, we have God in dialogue with this other character in the book, whether it be God the Father or Jesus or the Holy Spirit, who would put words in their mouth? Who would dare to do that? But we see this trend. You have books out there now, Jesus in conversation with Confucius, or with Buddha, and so on. I mean, this is Ravi Zacharias, you know, who did that. We have Eugene Peterson, which we’ve dealt with over and over again, but that’s what his bible, *The Message* is all about. He puts his own words in God’s mouth, and then have the nerve to say, Thus sayeth the Lord. No, this is Eugene Peterson sayeth, not God.

DAVE: Tom, you couldn’t denounce it more strongly. I mean, there is no way you could denounce it strongly enough. This is blasphemy, this is apostasy and the fact that the church goes for it, or many in the church, that is just absolutely incredible!

TOM: Dave, evangelical leaders — we do a Q & A on this, which I name them, let’s just look to Eugene Peterson. His quote, his endorsement of the book is the featured endorsement right on the cover. And, he says, “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It is that good.” Wow!

IS WINDBLOWN MEDIA'S BESTSELLER "CARRIED ABOUT... WITH EVERY WIND OF DOCTRINE"? (EPH 4:14)

THE FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS OF A REVIEW BY JAMES B. DEYOUNG OF WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

RECENTLY *The Shack* has been approaching sales of [seven] million copies. There is even talk about making the book into a movie. But while the novel breaks sales records, it also breaks with the traditional understanding of God and Christian theology. And therein lies the rub. Does a work of Christian fiction have to be doctrinally correct?

Who is the author? William P. Young [Paul], a man I have known for over a dozen years. About four years ago, Paul embraced "Christian universalism" and has defended this view on several occasions. While he frequently disavows "general universalism," the idea that many roads lead to God, he has affirmed his hope that all will be reconciled to God either this side of death or after death. Christian universalism (also known as universal reconciliation) asserts that love is the supreme attribute of God that trumps all others. His love reaches beyond the grave to save all those who refuse Christ throughout their lifetimes. Even fallen angels, and the Devil himself, will one day repent, be delivered from hell, and enter heaven. There cannot be left in the universe any being whom the love of God does not conquer; hence the words, universal reconciliation.

Many others have pointed out the theological errors they find in the book. They fault Young's view of revelation and the Bible, his presentation of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus' death and the meaning of reconciliation, and the subversion of institutions that God has ordered, such as the government and the local church. But the common thread tying all these errors together is Christian universalism. A study of the history of universal reconciliation, which goes back to as early as the third century, shows that all of these doctrinal deviations, including opposition to the local church, are characteristic of universalism. In modern times, it has undermined evangelical faith in Europe and America. It has joined with Unitarianism to form the Unitarian-Universalist church.

By comparing the creeds of universalism with a careful reading of *The Shack*, one discovers how deeply universalism is embedded within the book. Here is the evidence in brief:

- 1) The universalist creed of 1899 affirmed that "there is one God whose nature is love." Young asserts that God "cannot act apart from love" (p. 102), and that God purposes what he does always as an expression of love (p. 191);
- 2) There is no eternal punishment for sin. The creed of 1899 again asserts that God "will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness." Similarly, Young denies that Papa (God) "pours out wrath and throws people" into hell. God does not punish sin; it's his "joy to cure it" (p. 120). Papa "redeems" final judgment (p. 127). God will not "condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love" (p. 162);
- 3) There is an incomplete picture of the enormity of sin and evil. Satan as the great deceiver and instigator of the temptation to sin goes unmentioned in Young's discussion of the fall (pp. 134-37);
- 4) There is a subjugation of God's justice to his love—a central tenet of universalism. The creed of 1878 asserts

that God's attribute of justice is "born of love and limited by love." Young affirms that God chose "the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love," and that this is a better way than that God should have exercised justice (pp. 164-65);

- 5) There is great error in the portrayal of the Trinity. Young asserts that the whole Trinity became incarnate as the Son of God, and the whole Trinity was crucified (p. 99). Both Jesus and Papa (God) bear the marks of crucifixion in their hands (contra. Isa. 53:4-10). Young's error leads to modalism, that God is singular and at different times assumes the different modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a heresy condemned by the early church. Young also makes God into a goddess; moreover, he breaks the second commandment by imaging God the Father as a person;
- 6) Reconciliation is effective for all without exercising faith. Papa asserts that he is reconciled to the whole world, not just to those who believe (p. 192). The creeds of universalism, both of 1878 and 1899, never mention faith;
- 7) There is no future judgment. God will never force his will on anyone, even in his capacity as judge, for this is contrary to love (p. 145). God submits to humans, and humans submit to God in a "circle of relationship";
- 8) All are equally children of God and loved equally by him (p. 155-56). In a future revolution of "love and kindness," all people, out of love, will confess Jesus as Lord (p. 248).
- 9) The institution of the church is rejected as diabolical. Jesus claims that he "never has, never will" create institutions (p. 178). Evangelical churches are an obstacle to universalism.
- 10) Finally, the Bible is discounted in this novel. It is a book of guilt rather than hope, encouragement, and revelation.

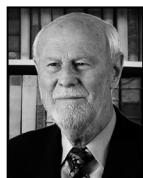
Near the beginning of this review I raised the question: "Does a work of fiction have to be doctrinally correct?" In this case, the answer is yes, for Young is deliberately theological. The fiction serves the theology, not vice-versa. Another question is: "Do not the good points of the novel outweigh the bad?" Again, if one uses doctrinal impurity to teach how to be restored to God, the end result is that one is not restored in a biblical way to the God of the Bible. Finally, one may ask: "Could not this book lay the foundation for seeking a growing relationship with God based in the Bible?" Of course, this may be possible. But, in light of the errors, the potential for going astray is as great as the potential for growth. Young offers no direction regarding spiritual growth. He discounts the Bible and the institutional church with its ordinances. If one finds a deeper relationship with God that reflects biblical fidelity it will be in spite of *The Shack* and not because of it.

*“[The Bereans]...searched the scriptures daily,
[to see] whether those things were so.” — ACTS 17:11*

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- **IMPACT** the church of Jesus Christ with the necessity of trusting the Scriptures as the only rule of faith, practice, and a life pleasing to God.



DAVE HUNT, founder of The Berean Call, ministered to millions worldwide for nearly 40 years. As a best-selling author, international lecturer, and Bible scholar, his writings have been translated into more than 50 languages.

More than four million copies of his books have been sold, including: *The Seduction of Christianity*, *Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist*, *A Woman Rides the Beast*, *In Defense of the Faith*, *Judgment Day!*, *Yoga and the Body of Christ*, and *Cosmos, Creator, and Human Destiny*. For nearly a decade, Dave also co-hosted a weekly radio program, *Search the Scriptures Daily*, aired on 400 stations worldwide.



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