

First Presbyterian Church
LaGrange, GA
Questions and Answers
The Shack
William Paul Young
January 14, 2009

1. Without giving away the story, what is The Shack about?

The Shack is a readable and exciting story of how a grieving and significantly broken man comes to inner healing through an encounter with God. The encounter is what is unique and what contributes to the book's power. The man encounters the Trinity—a neglected doctrine in today's world. As the man comes to know God better, both his relationship with God is deepened and his personal brokenness is healed. Encountering, knowing, and healing merge and present the reader with a fresh exploration of Christian salvation.

2. Why is the book controversial?

It's controversial because the author has undertaken a difficult task. He has embedded essential elements of the Christian experience and God's nature as Trinity in a lively and satisfying story. The Doctrine of the Trinity by itself is intrinsically controversial. The Christian church argued with itself for hundreds of years working to get the idea of the Trinity straight. To update and popularize Trinitarian ideas and then place them in a plotline and succeed in fascinating jaded 21st century readers is an amazing feat. Young has succeeded magnificently. It is vastly easier to nitpick such an effort than to appreciate it. Accordingly, it should not surprise the reader that some church leaders would find some things to complain about in the book.

Further, the author takes much risk by putting words and conversation in the mouth of God. The reader simply must acknowledge the difficulty and the gravity of what William Paul Young is trying to do. "Christianity Today," a conservative Christian magazine, invites readers to read The Shack generously, taking from it what is enlightening and forgiving what is not. My own assessment is that The Shack does not lapse into any heresy that I can detect, which is to say that Young has really given us an amazing and helpful--not to mention exciting and inspiring--book.

3. What do the experts say?

The general response to the book is overwhelmingly positive. Negative reaction and warnings are coming mostly from the hard theological right. Significantly, criticism of The Shack appears not to have congealed into a consistent theme. To use the popular image, people are throwing lots of mud but nothing is really sticking. Some criticism backfires and reveals the critic's own faulty reasoning (the Papa character promotes (!) goddess worship) or ineptitude in dealing with theological jargon (modalism). Much criticism consists of re-using all-purpose charges that have proven apt in the past but miss this time. Instances of this include labeling the book as New Age, Postmodern, Liberal, Humanistic, Pagan, and the like.

I've not yet encountered an academic theologian who has weighed in on The Shack. I've noticed that Presbyterian Eugene Peterson (Author of The Message), singer, Michael W. Smith, broadcaster, Steve Brown, and the evangelical magazine "Christianity Today" are positive about the book. Further, I've not encountered a single Presbyterian who has read the book who is negative about its core ideas. When Presbyterians are negative, their objections focus on the book's esthetics or readability.

4. What does the book say about God?

The Shack is wonderfully Trinitarian. And the degree to which it is Trinitarian is also the degree to which it is Christian. The distinctive essence of Christianity is its Trinitarian understanding of God. Because the Trinity has not enjoyed much attention in mainstream Christianity beyond the superficial acknowledgement that God is three-in-one, some of the ideas in The Shack, while orthodox, seem radical to contemporary readers.

One bracing idea in The Shack is that God is as loving as the threesome (Elousia, Sarayu, and Jesus) are in the story. The Papa character is especially warm and approachable—a quality of God the Father that churches may have significantly failed to convey.

The love of God also flows between each of the members of the Trinity—a quality nicely conveyed by The Shack. Further, the functioning of each of the persons of the Trinity is shared by each of the other two persons. In biblical understanding, the Father is identified with the creation of the world. But creation is not solely the activity of the First Person. Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit have creative roles.

These ideas are resident in the theological idea of *perichoresis*. Meaning "to dance around as in three persons holding hands dancing in a circle," *perichoresis* is an ancient doctrine associated with Eastern Orthodoxy. It basically says that the three persons of the Trinity love one another, share duties, and co-exist as equals like a family. The Shack's presentation of God is strikingly *perichoretic*.

I mention the perichoretic tone of Young's presentation of the Trinity as one example of his clear effort to be faithful to orthodox Christian understanding of God's threefold nature. Young does an equally good job in

avoiding other misunderstandings of the Trinity such as the idea that there are three gods, or that the First Person is really the Big God while the son and spirit are deputies, or that God assumes different roles or guises at different times, or that the three persons have differing outlooks, notably that the Father may be angry with sinful people while the Son is compassionate. Young's efforts to avoid heresy are obvious.

5. What is the value of The Shack?

We'll deal with this question on each of the four Wednesday nights. For this session, the answer is this: The idea of the Trinity attempts to capture something that no human categories can comprehend, namely that God is both one and somehow composed of three persons. Early Christians struggled to express this mystery. They developed a technical vocabulary and fought over many inadequate ways of looking at it. The development of the Trinity was a long time ago, yet it remains enormously important that every Christian encounter this mystery, just as Mack encountered it. To this end it is important that Christianity find ways to restate and re-present the Trinity so that every generation may be transformed by it. This is the very service that The Shack accomplishes so well. The Shack is an exciting and controversial phenomenon because Christianity—when really encountered—is enormously exciting and yes, controversial.

Questions for Reflection

1. Did you experience any ideas in The Shack as distortions of God's nature? Do you experience any ideas in Church or while growing up that distort God's nature?
2. Readers of The Shack often want to discuss the book or hear from their minister or church about it. What precisely do they want from such discussions?
3. Do you agree that the Trinity is a neglected element in Christian churches today?
4. Do you know of anyone who ought not read The Shack? Why?

