

First Presbyterian Church
LaGrange, GA
The Shack
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Who is The Shack's God?

1. **General:** One of The Shack's striking polemics is its critique of the image of God as put forward by conventional religion. Mack's concept of God is shaped by the church and appears to be inadequate to draw Mack into healing and new life. Hence, Mack needs to know God more intimately. Say's Papa: "If I choose to appear to you as a man or a woman, it's because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning...To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes."
2. **God the Father: Elousia.** Mack's first encounter with Elousia is both reminiscent of the Father in the Prodigal Son Parable and startling to Mack. "With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child. And all the while she was shouting his name—"Mackenzie Allen Phillips"—with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply-loved relative." Significantly, Elousia bears the fragrance of Mack's mother's perfume, which awakens a deep sense of homecoming in Mack who finds himself present with his ultimate parent, a fact that he experiences emotionally before he understands intellectually.
3. **God the Holy Spirit: Sarayu.** This character is generally present but only peripherally, the author's way of reminding the reader that the Holy Spirit is the shy member of the Trinity. Famously called the "go-between God" the Spirit facilitates the believer's relationship with the Son, the Bible,

other Christians, and the sacraments, to name a few. The longest dialogue between Mack and Sarayu takes place in a garden where Mack and Sarayu work together. The garden setting is suggestive of the earth itself and the themes in this chapter belong to the theology of creation. Mack's work in the garden is guided by the Spirit-figure. He imitates her and performs less complicated and strenuous versions of her tasks. In the course of the work they discuss goodness and evil in the garden, purpose in the created order, and the folly of humans attempting to live and work in the garden outside their relationship with the Spirit.

4. **God the Son: Jesus.** One of the chapters featuring a lengthy conversation between Mack and Jesus has Mack following Jesus across a lake walking on the water's surface. Much of this conversation concerns submission and gender differences. The chapter begins with a brief exchange about the present reality of the resurrected Christ who guides people in "real time" rather than as an historical memory. Says Jesus to Mack: "When I dwell with you, I do so in the present—I live in the present. Not the past, although much can be remembered and learned by looking back, but only for a visit, not an extended stay." In a touching scene in the next chapter, Mack learns from Jesus that he accompanied and comforted Missy after she was abducted. The fact, coupled with Jesus' ongoing companionship with the child in her life after life, provides significant reassurance to Mack. The believer's experience of God the Son is as ongoing companion and confidant. "If you try to live this without me, without the ongoing dialogue of us sharing this journey together, it will be like trying to walk on the water by yourself. You can't! And when you try, however well-intentioned, you're going to sink."
5. **The Trinity:** The vision of the Trinity as a community of loving equals is one of Mack's most surprising and engaging discoveries. Mack stumbles into the significance of this community with his question about which of the three is the boss. He further wonders about the "chain of command." The divine threesome explain that the love and equality among themselves judges and reforms human hierarchies. "Once you have a hierarchy you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you

need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship apart from power. Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you." The Shack's vision of God as a circle of relationship provides the paradigm for all of creation to follow. After the manner the mutual submission practiced by the persons of the Trinity, people are given the ideal of love that they are to show to one another: "Because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship, I don't want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me." Mack responds: "And that's how you want us to love each other, I suppose? I mean between husbands and wives, parents and children. I guess in any relationship?" God's response: "Exactly! When I am your life, submission is the most natural expression of my character and nature and it will be the most natural expression of your new nature within relationships."

6. Discussion Questions:

- a. Which member of the Trinity or aspect of God's being was the most surprising to you? Implausible for you? Did you change your mind about some aspect of God's being?
- b. The Shack is hard on conventional church-based Christianity mostly because it perpetuates limited ideas of God's nature. Is this fair? Is there an element in God's nature that you've misunderstood in the past and have had to relearn?