

Reflections on The Shack

The Shack by William P. Young has been on the New York Times “Best Seller List” for almost two years. Unable to find an established publisher in 2007, Young and two friends, both former pastors, launched a website and self published this book. Millions of copies have been sold mainly by word of mouth.

It deals with an age old question; “If God is good and all powerful, why is there so much evil in the world?”

Young wrestles with the question in the fictional journey of “Mack”, the father of a little girl, “Missy”, who is abducted and killed by a serial murderer while the family is on a camping trip. Mack is paralyzed by anger and guilt....“The Great Sadness”....when he is mysteriously invited to “The Shack”, the very spot where his daughter was brutalized. There, he enters into a mystical, dream-like dialogue with the Trinity. In this fiction God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit appear in the form of a large Black woman who loves to cook, a robust young man and a shape-sifting apparition named “Sarayu”. In their time together they enjoy meals, walks and conversations eventually leading to Mack’s healing and new life.

The book has been widely criticized by the Evangelical press and ‘blogisphere’ who find Young’s imagery, loose interpretation of scripture and universalism offensive:

“Those who love me [Jesus] come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptist 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 [God], into my brothers and sisters, into my beloved.” (p.182)

The fastest growing segment of North American religious life identify themselves as “spiritual not religious” (Pew Survey). These folks may have made The Shack such a huge best-seller:

“I [Mack] find the way you [Jesus] are so different from all the well-intentioned religious stuff I’m familiar with.” “As well-intentioned as it might be, you know that religious machinery can chew up people!” Jesus said with a bite of his own. “An awful lot of what is done in my name has nothing to do with me and is often, even if unintentional, very contrary to my purposes.” “You’re not too fond of religion and institutions?” Mack said, not sure if he was asking a question or making an observation. “I don’t create institutions, never have, never will.” (p. 179)

“To reveal myself [God] 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.” (p. 93)

Yet Young’s answer to the presenting question on the nature of evil is quite orthodox and traditional. For example, Young’s description of the nature of sin is straight out of the story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve;

“The choice to eat of that tree [Tree of Knowledge Genesis 3:6] tore the universe apart divorcing the spiritual from the physical. They died, expelling in the breath of their choice the very breath of God.” (p. 135)

“The world is broken because in Eden you abandoned relationship with us to assert your own independence.” (p. 146)

Young defaults with a strong assertion of a doctrine of free will. Although “all powerful” God is so loving that although capable of stopping our evil, God “allows” evil that humans might embrace their God-given freedom to love God and discover the goodness within them;

“We [The Trinity] carefully respect your choices, so we work within your systems even while we seek to free you from them...” (p. 123)

“I [God] have never taken control of your choices or forced you to do anything, even when what you were about to do was destructive or hurtful to yourself and others....To force my will on you,” Jesus replied, “is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission even when your choices are not helpful or healthy.” (p.145)

“Mack, just because I [God] work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don’t ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes...grace doesn’t depend on suffering to exist but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors.” (p. 185)

It was Augustine in the 5th century CE that described this classical answer to the problem of evil; whatever we may be experiencing as evil God will ultimately use for a greater good that will only be revealed to us at the end of time, thus believers are called to have faith in that greater, unknown good even in the face of terrible circumstance. And we hear it again in The Shack:

“Mack,” said Papa [God] ...we [The Trinity] want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourself. We created you, the human, to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love. As difficult as it will be for you to understand, everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will....”

Mack asks, “and what is the value in a little girl being murdered by some twisted deviant?...You may not cause those things, but you certainly don’t stop them.” To which God responds, “...there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person’s story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and right so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome....if you could only see how all of this ends and what we will achieve without the violation of one human will, then you would understand. One day you will.” (pp. 124-125)

Mack asks, “But I still don’t understand why [my daughter] Missy had to die.” Sophia the embodiment of God’s Wisdom responds, “She didn’t have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa’s [God’s]. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa has responded with goodness....” (p. 165)

“The real underlying flaw in your life, Mackenzie, is that you don’t think that I am good. If you knew I was good and that everything, the means, the ends and all the processes of individual live, is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me.” (p. 126)

Imagery of the afterlife is compelling and attractive in The Shack. Missy laughs and plays in the heavenly afterlife of the book, forgiving her murderer and in loving interaction with the Trinity. Mack is allowed a peak at her in this heavenly state and it brings him great comfort and release. There are flowers and trees, waterfalls and lakes.

“This life is only the anteroom of a greater reality to come. No one reaches their potential in your world. It’s only preparation for what Papa [God] had in mind all along.” (p. 167)

As Young sees it humans are the source of evil in the world, not God and although God *could* end evil and suffering this sovereign God allows and uses our evil for a greater good we cannot understand until we get to heaven because God loves us. This is not a new idea. It has been a comforting doctrine for millions of people. It has been around for centuries. It is still operative in most forms of Christianity.

Of course it is also the same theology preached in the conversion of the Bolivian indigenous people enslaved by the Spanish conquistadors and their missionary priests during the 18th century CE in order to plunder the silver mines and future of that nation. Its the same Christianity used by the Anglo church to resist the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. Whatever life throws your way, grin and bear it because God will use it for a greater good we cannot understand now but will ‘in the bye and bye’.

If God is “good” and “powerful” the only rational conclusion can be a deferred justification for the atrocities of history. Augustine argued that ultimately there is no

such thing as “evil” for what we experience as such will be used by God for that mysterious greater good. Mack slowly if reluctantly comes to the same conclusion:

“[God] I did not purpose Missy’s death but that doesn’t mean I can’t use it for good.” Mack shook his head sadly. “You’re right. I don’t grasp it very well...but I do trust you...” and suddenly, it was like a new thought, surprising and wonderful. “Papa, I do trust you!” (page 222)

Like Augustine, Young would have us trust our lives to a God with the power to stop evil but Who chooses not to do so out of love. Young suggests God doesn’t cause suffering but still has ultimate control of its outcome. Most people yearn for a sense of ‘divinity in control’ as we use it to justify the capricious suffering in our lives and in the world. For example, we thank God that we survived the car accident unscathed as if God saved us from harm. But in doing so it assume that the person/s that died in the accident or went to the hospital were not so blessed by the same God? Did God want, will or allow such suffering for a greater purpose?

If God is “good” and “ultimately in control”, choosing to allow the atrocities of history out of “love”, what can “love” possibly mean?

To those who question such logic in the murder of an innocent child, or in the preventable deaths of the thousands of children each day of hunger and malnutrition related disease (UNWHO), evil is no illusion and cannot be rationalized away by “pie-in-the-sky” theologies.

This commonly held definition of God as “all powerful” has direct Christological implications. Does Jesus’ death on the cross buy our way into heaven? The doctrine of substitutionary atonement makes this rationalization for a God who plans, allows and implements the death of “his only begotten son” for the ultimate greater good.

But what if God’s “power” is not the ability to control and determine? What if God’s power is that which lures us in each and every moment to the best possibility but does not control results? What if the future is open ended rather than determined? What if God’s love is in the power of inspiration, creativity, relationship and forgiveness...all powerful forces indeed...but not determinate?

Then the freedom into which we are created is really free. And the evil of the world is really evil. And the God of love that dies incarnate on the cross shares the lot in life of God’s creation in real love not the charade of a promised future into which believers must adhere in order to belong.

A God of goodness and controlling power could not proclaim “The Kingdom of God is at hand!” (Mark 1:15) in the present tense nor teach “...for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45) But such a God could look the father of a murder victim in the eye, admitting divine authority to stop the slaughter but choosing not to do so and say “just trust me...”

Young is at his best when confronting our set notions of what the God-head looks like:

“The problem is that many folks try to grasp some sense of who I am [God] by taking the best version of themselves, projecting that to the nth degree, factoring in all the goodness they can perceive, which often isn’t much and then call that God. And while it may seem like a noble effort, the truth is that it falls pitifully short of who I really am. I’m not merely the best version of you that you can think of, I am far more than that, above and beyond all that you can ask or think...even though you can’t finally grasp me, guess what? I still want to be known.” (98)

This is the God who lavishly repeats again and again, “I am especially fond of...” If such love makes any sense at all then such a God weeps for the Missyses and Macks of the world and will go to any extent to inspire creation to stop the killing, stop the madness and claim their place in God’s dream for peace, justice and love.

“Humans are not defined by their limitations. But by the intentions that I [God] have for them; not by what they seem to be, but by everything it means to be created in my [God’s] image.” (p. 100)

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