

The Shack - Don't Waste Your Time

A review of the feature film based on the novel of the same name by William P. Young

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<Warning: The following article contains spoilers for the film. We don't recommend you see it, but if you were planning to you should stop reading now.>



Bill recently republished his review of the 2007 novel, *The Shack*, and he dealt with many of the theological errors contained therein. This March, a feature film was released based on the novel. By and large, the film is a reliable recreation of its forerunner, with all its faults and problems.

It might help to think of it as *The Shack Light*, as a feature-length film doesn't have room for the high-caloric intake of endless dialogue its namesake droned on with for page after page. Never fear, though, those familiar with the book will be comforted to know the movie crawls along with the familiar pace of a snail moving uphill through molasses in the dead of an Idaho winter - roughly about the same speed it's taking Congress to repeal Obamacare.

But without the endless exposition, many moviegoers may miss some of the theologically sketchy moments from the book that found their way to the silver screen. No worries. I've got you covered. That said, it will be faster to rundown the list of what *The Shack* isn't than to describe in detail what *The Shack* is.

First and foremost: *The Shack* ISN'T for unbelievers.

Why you ask? Because *The Shack* ISN'T a clear presentation of the Christian Gospel - even if it purports to be a Christian film. Granted, Christ's sacrifice is spoken of, alluded to, and hinted at during various moments of the film, but at no point is the Gospel story clearly delineated for the unbeliever to identify and recognize.

Instead, the primary issue the film deals with is the deep sadness of Mackenzie Phillips, whose daughter Missy was kidnapped and murdered, and his subsequent anger at God for allowing such a horrible thing to happen.

The film attempts to help the viewer understand God's true nature as good and loving, critical issues about sovereignty and free-will, religion versus relationship, and the power of forgiveness to heal our inner wounds. Virtuous topics to be sure.

But we must step back and consider what the viewer ACTUALLY sees.

During the first act, Mac and his children are headed into the woods to camp for the weekend when they pass a scenic overlook of Multnomah Falls. He tells his young daughter Missy about a legend of an Indian princess who, based on a prophecy, leapt from the cliffs as a sacrificial act to save her land and her people from a blight that had come upon the land. The "Great Spirit" remembered the princess' sacrifice by causing water to spring up and fall down the cliff to memorialize her gift.

Missy connects the girl's sacrifice to that of Jesus. She asks if the "Great Spirit" is another name for "Papa" - a nickname used for Father God by her mother. Mac's only answer in the film is that "God is a spirit." The

viewer, especially the unbelieving one, is left with an odd amalgamation between native American legend and the Gospel.

After the film tells the story of Missy's abduction and portrays Mac's loss and pain, Mac receives a mysterious letter in his mailbox from "Papa" to come visit him at the titular shack, wherein Mac and the FBI had found Missy's blood-soaked red dress four years earlier.

Venturing out to see who is behind this cruel ruse to lure him back to the site of his greatest tragedy, winter miraculously transforms into spring and Mac is greeted by three unique characters:

A plump, elderly black woman named Ellousia or "Papa." Interestingly she says, *"I have many names, but Ellousia is one of my favorite names."* "Ellousia" translates as "sun," so this seems a carryover of Constantinian confusion of the God of the Bible and the pagan sun god. Our heavenly father isn't a woman and isn't the Roman's Sol Invictus.

Next up, Mac meets a sparkly Asian woman who goes by Sarayu (a word meaning breath or wind), and a Hebrew laborer named Jesus. When Mac asks if one of them is God, they all in unison affirm, "I am."

This personification of the Trinity leads us to one of most conservative Christian's primary issues with *The Shack*.

God is represented very differently than He is in the scriptures. Of course, this is handled by Papa explaining that she/he doesn't want to feed into Mac's religious stereotypes, and that due to Mac's history with an abusive father, a God in the form of a bearded old man simply wouldn't help him relate to her.

Politically correct or not, while scripture may give indication that God can manifest what some see as feminine attributes, the scriptures never portray him as feminine in nature. All the pre-incarnate manifestations of Christ in the Old Testament represent Him as a man. All the prophetic visions of the Father in books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and elsewhere portray the Ancient of Days as a man. The only time the Holy Spirit is given bodily form in the Scriptures is when He descends on Christ in the form of a dove. But never ever a woman.

Mac's pain about God's abandonment

The balance of the film consists of a series of conversations with the racially balanced Godhead. Mac reintroduces Missy's comments about whether or not God was meant to cause the Indian princess and Jesus to have to give their lives. Why would God abandon them like that?

Papa corrects Mac's attitude, saying that Jesus' sacrifice cost her everything, revealing to him the same nail scars on her wrists that Jesus bears on his.

This is indeed a theological conundrum.

Jesus Himself asks the Father "*why have you forsaken me?*" in the Gospels (Mark 15:34), and the answer is simple: Jesus became sin for us. Jesus bore the price of our sins, took our punishment. But again, The Shack doesn't describe or explain this.

Instead, when Mac confesses he always saw Papa God as the judgmental, angry God who punishes sin, Papa corrects his "misunderstandings" again. She says, "*I don't need to punish people. Sin is its own punishment.*"

This is a simplification of the same dialogue from the book. But it's a misleading understanding of God's nature, as the scriptures reveal the Father as a God of both mercy and justice. Sin faces God's wrath (Exodus 32:34, Romans 3:24-25), but God's wrath was poured out on Christ (1 Peter 2:24, 3:18, Romans 4:25). Again, these clear tenets of the Gospel are merely brushed aside in the film's treatment of God's nature.

In one of Mac's conversations with Jesus, Mac comments about how different he is from his religious upbringing. Jesus responds, *"Religion is way too much work. I don't want slaves. I want friends."*

Now while Jesus does call us friends in scripture (John 5:15), Paul clearly teaches that he has become a willing bondsman of Christ (Romans 1:1-15, Philippians 1:1), dying to self and following His way.

Jesus continues, *"I don't care what you call me. I just want to see people changed by Papa, to feel what it means to be truly loved."*

The novel may pursue this deeper, but the film's viewer only hears *this* Jesus' words. The Jesus of the Bible had His name prophetically proclaimed in prophecy hundreds of years before His birth (Isaiah 9:6), angels told His parents precisely what to call Him (Matthew 1:21), and scripture pronounces Him to be the one name under heaven by which man can be saved (Acts 4:12). Finally, we are told that every knee will bow before Him and every knee will call Him Lord (Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10-11).

Jesus is savior, master, redeemer. There is none like Him (Psalm 86:8) and He cannot be confused with any other religion on the planet, including the Great Spirit. Without going much deeper, it certainly seems like the real Jesus very much cares what we call Him to me. Whatever other

positive statements the film may make about Christ, this statement by the film's Jesus leaves a lot up for debate to the unbelieving ear.

Who sits in judgment?

Near the film's climax, Mac finds himself in a cave wherein sits a woman named Wisdom. She confronts him about the judgments he makes about other people, the judgments he would make about his daughter's killer, and even the judgments he made toward his own father - judgments which led to Mac poisoning his whiskey and taking his life.

When Lady Wisdom forces him to make a choice, one of his living children to go to hell and the other to go to heaven, Mac steps in and asks instead that he go to hell in their stead. Wisdom says this is the choice God made. But let us ask this question?

Where does *The Shack* get the idea that Lady Wisdom sits in judgment? According to John 12, the Father has given all judgment to Jesus (See also John 5:22,27). This great and merciful Jesus who doesn't care what we call Him is the only Judge the universe will ever know. All power to judge rests with Him, but again *The Shack* transpositions Jesus out of His true seat of authority and paints Him only as the fun-loving woodworker.

A nod to the author's true beliefs

We've discussed that *The Shack* is NOT a lot of things. Its film format leaves out a lot of the questionable theology discussed in detail in the book. Nevertheless, it nods to a denial of the hierarchy of the Trinity

when it claims that everything functions through relationship and not power (Acts 10:38).

It confuses the Gospel with native American legend and Jesus saying “*I don’t care what you call me.*” It misrepresents God when it portrays God as feminine in the name of bucking our preconceived religious ideologies. But perhaps worst of all is it pictures forgiveness WITHOUT repentance (Luke 24:46-47, Acts 20:21).

In the film’s very first scenes, a young Mac poisons his father’s whiskey in a desperate attempt to stop the abuse of him and his mother. In one of the last scenes of his time with the trinity, Sarayu - the Holy Spirit - touches Mac’s eyes so he can see as they see.

In this scene he sees a myriad of colorful lives, one steps from the crowd, and Mac recognizes it as his father. Going to meet him, the two men share an emotional moment. His father apologizes for his behavior and tells him he isn’t angry at what Mac did. This afterlife apparition of his father is at peace because of his true connection with Papa.

But all the film showed us was an unrepentant spouse and child abuser being murdered by his son. When did daddy dearest repent? When did he confess his sins and plead the blood of Christ over his life? When did he truly accept the Gospel?

Here we have a nod to William P. Young’s most deep seated beliefs, dating back to years before his authorship of *The Shack* - the heretical tenets of universal reconciliation. This is unbiblical belief that all men have a second chance after death to acknowledge Christ as their savior. The Bible, however, clearly teaches that it is appointed for a man once to die and then judgment (Hebrews 9:27). There is no second chance on the other side of eternity.

So as heartwarming and touching as the film may be, it is biblically inaccurate, theologically confusing, and its perhaps well intentioned attempts to clear away the cobwebs of religious tradition and connect the viewer with the true nature of a loving God fall short of that mark because they fall short of the true Gospel.

Many of *The Shack's* claims about God being good and us not understanding our situations because we don't truly realize He is good are true. But how this is illustrated is lackluster at best and misleading at worst. All of us believers would be better off simply preaching the simplicity of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

Because everything *The Shack* is not, the real Gospel most certainly is.