

## *The Shack* Review

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I have had a number of people ask me what my thoughts were about William Young's book, *The Shack*. It is a book that has gained much popularity. Any time a book sells over one million copies and becomes a #1 New York Times Bestseller, it is a popular book. This attention is even more amazing when one considers that it is written by a Christian and has biblical themes. Wow! This is something to consider.

I read the book in a couple of days. It is an easy read and quite entertaining. It's a work of fiction, an allegory, so obviously the author is not writing to disclose to us all his personal doctrinal beliefs. In fact, I will endeavor in my critique not to label his beliefs. It is not my intent to shoot any arrows at another believer. Jesus said whoever is not against Him is for Him. I imagine Mr. Young is for Him and so I will be gracious in my review of his book.

There are a number of things I appreciate about the work. First of all, I believe it reflects God's heart that we be intimate with Him. This plea from God is made clear at the outset of the book when God leaves Mack, the main character, with a note in his mailbox, "It's been a while. I've missed you." I believe God would have that same message be given to any number of His followers. God doesn't need us, but because of His grace and love beyond our ability to grasp, He desires us. I appreciate that about the book throughout – it reveals the heart of God to be intimate with His people. I believe that some of these interactions between Mack and Jesus mirror well how the disciples interacted with the Savior while He was on earth. The book will stir the hearts of the readers to be intimate with God.

Second, I believe many times God-followers limit God and try to put Him in boxes of their own making. He is way bigger than any box we could construct. Young makes a passionate appeal to us to reconsider our man-made theologies. God is not a white male or a bearded grandfather type. On this, I can wholeheartedly agree.

Third, I appreciate his attempt to answer an age-old and very difficult question – why does God allow us to suffer. Young does not dismiss this question with some pat and simplistic answer. He deals with the question as he allows Mack to struggle with why God would allow his daughter to be brutally murdered. This is a tough question and not a few honest seekers have been turned off from God by believers who refused to get in the coffin and struggle through the answers with them. I especially liked Sarayu's interaction with Mack on who determines good and evil (chapter 9). He is right. If we don't like the way things occur in our world and blame God for getting it wrong, we become the judge instead of God. That was powerfully articulated.

Four, I believe he is right on when he claims our fear originates from not knowing how much God loves us (page 142). We imagine the future but we rarely if ever picture God there with us in it. No wonder we are such fearful creatures. We don't know how much

we are loved by the Almighty God of the Universe. If we did, we would live in trust and hope and not fear.

Fifth, I love his words on pages 200-201, “you can offer us (the Trinity) nothing...We are already fully fulfilled within ourself.” Amen and amen!

Sixth, Young’s emphasis on page 207 that God not be first among our priorities, but that He be the center of every priority is well-stated. I couldn’t agree more with him on that point. God is everything to us. All that we do is affected by our love and devotion to Him. In fact, we do all that we do for one reason: Him!

Let me say again that I do not believe Young intended this book to replace the systematic theology reference book on our shelf. This is a work of fiction and should be treated as such. However, whenever you put words into God’s mouth, you do, whether you intend to or not, portray a theology of who He is. In my critique I will not pretend to know whether Mr. Young believes this or that or intended to communicate this or that. Rather, I will point out a number of times where the words he chose or the words he failed to use leave the reader open to inaccurate theology.

He is right that God cannot be contained in our boxes. But, while that is true, we must also recognize that there are parameters of revelation that God Himself has given us in His Word. The Word is not a box that contains God or limits Him, but at the same time, it is an inspired Word that communicates specific things about God, from which we should be very careful not to deviate. God Himself, it seems, has put limits not on Himself but on our imagination and we will do well to operate within those limits. As Tozer so aptly wrote, “If we insist on trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.” As I said, my goal is not to suggest that Young meant these offensive thoughts about God, but rather to suggest his work leaves us open to idolatrous thoughts of God. It is my aim to clarify doctrinally what might not have been so clear in the book.

My first concern of this type occurs on page 31 where the story is told of an Indian tribe whose men are dying. The legend holds that the only way to save the men of the tribe is for a pure daughter of the chief to give up her life for the men. Anyone with a cursory understanding of tribal religion knows that the belief of the average tribe of this sort would include many gods or spirits. They tend to be extremely polytheistic. As the story unfolds, the daughter does give up her life and the men are miraculously healed. Mack has been telling this story to his daughter and she naturally wants to know two things. One, is this story true? Mack’s first answer was accurate, “Sometimes legends are built upon real stories, things that really happen.” Understood, sometimes they are not. Missy, then, asks a natural follow up question, “So, is Jesus’ dying a legend?” I love his answer, at least the first part of it, “No, honey, that’s a true story.” But then, his second answer is of grave concern, “I think the princess story is probably true too.” What does that statement do? It makes the cross story equivalent to the tribal story in likelihood. Well, let’s think here. If the daughter giving her life saved the lives of the men, then one of two beings is behind that. Possibly, God saved their lives by the sacrifice. But, that’s a scary scenario. God wouldn’t require an innocent woman to give her life to spare the men of

her village, would He? Definitely not! So, maybe Satan spared the men's lives by her sacrifice. But should we think that the enemy has that much power? I think not. Neither suggestion fits, which leads me to the very clear conclusion that the story was not true. If Mack had denied that story, it would have given him a great platform to show how the story of Jesus rings true in a way that the Indian myth does not. But, my concern over this story does not end there. It gets worse. Missy asks, "Is the Great Spirit another name for God – you know, Jesus' papa?" The obvious answer to that is "No! God would never require a woman to give up her life for men to be saved. This is what Jesus did on the cross. God gave His life for us so we wouldn't have to give up our lives for others. That Great Spirit is one of many false gods ancient tribes tended to worship." But this is not the answer Mack gives. Instead, we get, "I would suppose so. It's a good name for God because he is a Spirit and he is Great!" It's at this point that Missy, the six year- old, is more logical and wise than her dad. She retorts, "Then how come he's so mean...the Great Spirit makes the princess jump off the cliff and makes Jesus die on the cross." Mack doesn't know how to answer, but the answer seems clear, "Missy, God didn't make the princess jump off the bridge. False religion did that. The people rejected the Creator God and ended up worshipping idols. Superstition and disbelief killed the innocent daughter, if the story is even true. Either way, her death did not save those men. That part of the story just isn't true. And, as for God putting His Son to death. God made that sacrifice for us and the Son agreed to do it. He paid for our salvation with His life so that we might live. And don't forget, God had a larger plan where He would raise His Son back to life again. That's the true story. The other is a gross misrepresentation of truth and who God is." I'm not saying that Young believes the God of the Bible by any other name is just as much God, but I am saying that this story leaves the reader wide open to accepting false gods and equating them with the True One. It's dangerous ground.

My second concern and, I suppose, many might look at this as a minor one, is found on page 34. It's an editorial comment from the author that some would say the glacier is 'nine million years old.' I can't say he is inaccurate. Some, perhaps, many would say that. But, in this is another missed opportunity. Why not say, "Some would say this glacier is five or six thousand years old." The latter statement would fit much better with biblical records and genealogies. Obviously, many modern day scientists would laugh at such a young earth. But, our concern is not to look wise by worldly standards, but to be accurate to God's Word. I see Genesis being undermined day by day in both the world and the church. The author misses a chance to affirm the biblical record here.

My third concern happens on page 65. The author writes, "In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects." If I closed my eyes for a moment, I could believe that I was reading the DaVinci Code or some writing by Bart Ehrman. Certainly, I know that God can communicate to us in many ways. The theologians teach He communicates by special and general revelation. This is not the time to go into the modes He has used. But comments like 'reduced to paper' and 'moderated and deciphered,' while they do not overtly claim the Bible is erroneous like Brown or Ehrman do, they do not hold the Scriptures high as the Word of God does for

itself. Our Bibles are hardly God's Words reduced to paper. They are the very words God breathed out for us (1 Timothy 3:16). I think liberal scholars would say 'amen' if they read Young's words here and that should cause us grave concern. I'm not saying that Young meant to undermine the Word, but he did little to uphold it. And, in this day with such a strong attack from the enemy against the Word, we cannot be too careful with our words in defense of His Truth, inspired, and communicated to us in the very words of God, and praise His name, on paper. Martin Luther and others gave up their lives that we might have it on paper. It's a wonderful thing for which we must always give praise.

Next, I want to address the presentation of the trinity as an African-American woman, a Middle Eastern man and an Asian woman. What is Young trying to communicate to us here. If his goal is to obliterate our distortion of God as a white male, I applaud him for that effort. Certainly, man is often guilty of making man in our image. God is not a white-bearded male or a Gandalf-type as Young correctly reminds us. I want also to show grace here to the author in realizing this is an allegory and he is giving us only an image of who God is. But it is the very pursuit of giving an image of God to us that I must find fault with. Doesn't God clearly forbid us from doing this in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)? Do not make an image of Him. I believe this is why Jesus in the fullness of time came during an age where his picture could not be taken. And I believe it is why both the Father and the Spirit did not take on permanent human status. God cannot be contained in any image we might form of Him and we would do well to avoid trying to picture Him too clearly. Young falls into the very trap that he wishes to demolish. He makes an image of God to correct an image of God.

And what shall I say of the image he creates? The trinity depicted by two women and a man. Certainly, his motive behind the choice is clear. He wants us to rid ourselves of the white male God. But in his attempt to do that, what has he done to the trinity? He has given us a picture that cannot be supported by the Word of God. We agree that God is neither male nor female. Yet, the Bible is abundantly clear throughout that we must think of God in masculine terms. Young has God defend His appearance to Mack as a woman with these words, "Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as 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." Wow. What wisdom. It makes me wonder why the real God didn't think of that in the first place. Surely, we can't think that God overlooked such a wise mixing of metaphors. Nor can the answer be that the world of the Bible wasn't as anti-women as our depraved world is.

The truth is – our thinking of God in masculine terms is not due to our religious conditioning but rather is dependent upon the very clear revelation of the inspired Word of God. God is Father. Period. This truth is written into the very fabric of scripture. Jesus taught us to pray without apology, "Our Father." Time will not permit me to go into the many, many passages from God's Word that depict the first person of the trinity as Father. Any reader familiar with the Bible will not deny God is addressed as Father throughout. Young is ready for this attack and gives his explanation as to why God would reveal Himself to us as Father. "There are many reasons for that and some of them go

very deep. Let me say for now that we knew once the Creation was broken, true fathering would be much more lacking than mothering. Don't misunderstand me, both are needed – but an emphasis on fathering is necessary because of the enormity of its absence.” So, God isn't really a Father. He simply revealed Himself to us that way because of the lack of fathering in our world.

This explanation simply will not do and it clearly does not square with orthodox theology throughout the church age. The Nicene Creed claimed that the Son was ‘begotten of the Father before all ages’ (AD 325). This creed correctly understood what scripture itself teaches. God doesn't change (Mal 3:6). He is immutable so it is impossible that the roles of God within the trinity have changed. Ephesians 1:3-4 tell us the Father chose us in the Son before the world was ever created. Even one of the most fundamental verses we know teaches us this truth – John 3:16 the Father sent the Son (understood: they had this relationship before the sending).

I've heard a number of people tell me after reading the Shack, they now understand so much better how the trinity relates to one another. How can this be? Seeing how a woman and her son relate – what can that possibly teach us about how the Father and Son relate to one another? Of course, again, those who support it will point out the times in the Bible where He compares Himself to a woman. Let me say a couple of things about that. First, the times where God's dealings with us are described in feminine terms are extremely rare, particularly in comparison to the preponderance of masculine descriptions for God. But, secondly, the feminine examples are of a vastly different kind. Let's consider some of them.

**Psalm 123:2** *As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.* Is this passage justification for identifying God as female? No. Instead, this passage is about us. How should we look to God? We should look to God as a slave looks to his master or a maid to his mistress – we should look with respect recognizing His authority over this. This passage isn't trying to identify God with a woman, but to put us in our place.

**Isaiah 42:13-14** *The LORD will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.*<sup>14</sup> *“For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.* Is this passage telling us to think of God in female imagery? No. Rather, God is describing for us the anguish He feels within Himself over our sins. Any temptation on our part to conjure up a God with a belly who is about to give birth is shattered by the previous verse where God is coming out like a warrior. The image we should have is of ‘tender Warrior.’ He is riding out in conquest, but there is a pain within Him over this warfare that is best visualized in our world through childbirth. Paul does a similar thing when he tries to communicate his love to his people in terms they'll understand. **Galatians 4:19** *My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,* **1 Thessalonians 2:7** *but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.* We understand what Paul is doing in these verses. He is comparing his love for them to that of a woman's love

for her children. But we also know that Paul is not asking us to think of him in any way as female. He is simply asking us to understand the way he loves.

**Matthew 23:37** *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.* This is another passage inclusivists use to argue for female language for God. But in this verse, Jesus is not calling us to think of him as a female anymore than he is calling us to think of him as a hen. This is another simile that helps us understand Jesus’ heart for those he loves.

**Deuteronomy 32:18** *You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.* Once again, God is not asking us to conjure up some image of God in the delivery room of the heavenly hospital. We shouldn’t picture God in stirrups, being coaxed by heavenly beings to find a peaceful thought. The point of this passage is that God is our Creator. Without Him, we would not be. How, then, could we make the blasphemous decision to walk away from Him?

Do these verses mean that it’s equally okay to refer to God in either a male or female image? No. God is Father and if we are to worship Him properly we must keep that image. Neither is the masculine terminology of God limited to the Father image. Consider that He is King and not queen in the Word. He is Shepherd and not shepherdess. He is Prophet and not prophetess. He is the Groom and not the bride. He is the Farmer and not the farmer’s wife. He is the Husband and not the wife. Why did God describe Himself to us in all these masculine images? Are we to believe our world had an inadequate view of kings more than it did of queens, so God used the former? No. God in some way is masculine. He isn’t just like a father. He is Father. And we must not imagine Him otherwise.

Here’s what one author wrote, and while I don’t agree with all his applications of the data, I believe he has accurately summarized the Bible’s use of female imagery for God, “Linguistically, all the clear and plausible instances of feminine references to God are imagery or figures of speech: similes, analogies, metaphors, and personification. Excluding the unlikely reading of Spirit in the Old Testament as a feminine personal reference to God, there are no cases in which feminine terms are used as names, titles, or invocations of God, and thus there are no feminine pronouns for God. There are no instances where God is directly identified by a feminine term, even a metaphorical predicate noun. In other words, God is never directly said to a mother, a mistress, or female bird in the way he is said to be a father, king, judge, or shepherd.” (Our Father in Heaven, John W. Cooper, page 89). In contrast, Cooper writes, “The sheer quantity of [masculine language for God] is as overwhelming as it is exceptionless. There are thousands and thousands of masculine words and phrases that refer to God. The additional grammatical and syntactical markers that reflect masculinity upon God are even more numerous. The only reasonable conclusion is that the intended practice of Scripture as a whole is to speak of God as though he is a masculine person. That is to say, the way in which Scripture uses gendered language for God is precisely parallel to how it does so for human males, with the crucial exception that it never speaks of God as a

sexual being. Without more information, in other words, it would be possible to conclude from how Scripture speaks of God that he is a non-bodily masculine person” (page 114).

Consider the times when God appeared in the Bible. The theologians call them theophanies. Did He ever appear as a woman? No. Even once? No. Perhaps the most telling of His appearances is in Genesis 18 where God appears as three humans. And what can we say about these three humans? They were all male. Now, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that God is a man. Not at all. But what I am saying is this – God has revealed Himself to us in clear and unmistakable masculine imagery and we had better be extremely careful we don't mess with that revelation. Young goes beyond the bounds of God's revelation in the Shack. It doesn't make it better that the Father reappears as a male at the end or that He is always called 'Papa' throughout. God never appears as a woman in the Bible and should not be represented as such either in our imagination or on paper. He is Father, King, Shepherd, Prophet, Groom, Husband. He is masculine and that is how we must worship Him.

I can appreciate Young's attempt to show the bond between the Father and the Son. Indeed, as Jesus said, He and the Father are one (John 10:30). Yet, there is clearly a distinction among the members of the trinity. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. There is one God but three persons. This is why we cannot accept that the Father has nail prints in His hands just as the Son does (page 95). Did the Father experience pain while Jesus was on the cross? Yes, it grieved Him deeply. Did the Father literally bear the pain of the nails or does He literally bear the marks on His body? No. Only the Son has nail scars. To suggest that the Father also bears these marks is to blur the clear distinction between the Person of the Father and the Person of the Son. They are equal but they are distinct. The same can be said of the Father speaking Himself into existence in the Son and the trinity taking on flesh and blood (page 99). This simply is not true. The Father did not become flesh in any sense. Only the Son did.

Young also does not grasp the relationship among the trinity. He says 'We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or 'great chain of being' as your ancestors termed it.' Where does he get this thought? Not from the Bible. **1 Corinthians 11:3** *Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.* **John 6:38** *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.* **John 8:28** *So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me."*

Wayne Grudem speaks for what theologians have agreed upon for centuries, "This truth about the Trinity has sometimes been summarized in the phrase 'ontological equality but economic subordination' ... 'equal in being but subordinate in role.' (page 251, Systematic Theology). A. H. Strong agrees, "We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father" (Ibid., 251). This in no way means that the Son is less than the Father. They are equal, but there is and has always been a voluntary subordination of the one to the other. To take away from this is to diminish their glory.

I'm not sure what Young is trying to communicate when he says this about God (page 126) "I'm not some bully, not some self-centered demanding little deity insisting on my own way. I am good, and I desire only what is best for you." If his point is that God wants us to love Him and not be coerced into formal obedience without a real relationship behind it, I can agree. But the statement he puts in the mouth of God might cause the reader to think that God is all about us. He is not. He is about Himself as He should be. No, He is not a self-centered demanding little deity, but He is a self-centered demanding big deity. For God to be motivated by anything other than His glory would be sinful, just as it would be for us to be motivated by anything other than His glory. The only sense in which it is righteous for God to be motivated by us is as that service to us brings Him glory. It's about Him and not me. This is righteous and it is who God is.

I think his dealing with God not forcing His will on us is insightful, but again my concerns are raised when he speaks of God submitting Himself to us (page 145). In what sense can we possibly think God is submitted to us? Surely, God's choice to give us a choice to believe and obey Him or not is not about God submitting to us. Rather, it is about an all-wise God doing what is necessary for His glory and for creatures to have a love relationship with Him that is intimate and not puppet-like. This was God's choice, but it was not a submission of Himself to me anymore than I might submit to my dog by allowing her to come to me when I call instead of dragging her over to me by a chain. A human cannot be in submission to a dog and God infinitely more cannot in any sense be in submission to a human.

I had concerns when I read his treatment of hell as well. Certainly, Young never comes out and denies hell and the justice of it. However, as I read it, I sensed a bit of criticism that God would actually be so cruel as to deport people to such a place of suffering. "You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from His presence and apart from His love" (page 162). "I just assumed God could do that" (162). "If you need someone to torture for eternity, I'll go in their place" (163). There is no resolution to this matter. Young doesn't explain why hell is a just place. Instead, we are left with these words to conclude the chapter, "Judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right" (page 169). How does that square with Paul's words in **Romans 9:22** *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?* Again, I'm not saying that Young denies hell or judgment, but this is just another example where he leaves the reader open and in fact, inclined toward faulty theology.

I am concerned about some of his assessments of church. At the same time, some of them I probably share. But, we must be careful when we present the church especially in this day when emergents are redefining it so drastically that it bears no resemblance to the ecclesiology of the Bible and when many so called Christians have walked away from formal church to do their own thing. Does the church have issues? Sure, it's full of people like you and me. But statements like 'not buildings and programs' and 'not the sitting in endless meetings staring at the backs of people's heads' (page 178) fosters a negative view of the church. Buildings aren't evil and neither or programs and for sure Heb 10:24-25 challenges us not to forsake meeting together. Can these things be substitutes for

being with Jesus? Yes. But if Young wants to foster healing, he would do better to point out the need to do ministry and programs and meetings while keeping Christ the center.

I found another concern on page 182 where Mack asks “Does that mean that all roads lead to you?” To his credit, Jesus answered ‘not at all.’ So, we can rule out universalism. But what we don’t hear from Young is alarming. Would this not have been a great place for Jesus to reassert His claim to be the only way? This is especially true in light of the religions listed in this dialog – Buddhists, Mormons and Muslims. It is quite concerning that they are listed right next to Baptists. Again, I’m not saying that Young believes these are all equally valid paths to God, but he does nothing to close the door on the cults he lists and in fact, quite the opposite, gives them validity by listing them with a sound Christian denomination like Baptists. I also take issue with the claim that he puts on Jesus’ lips, “I will travel any road to find you.” Are we to believe that Jesus will travel the Muslim road to find lost people? I think not. For sure, we can find Jesus when we repent, regardless of the road we are on, but to say that Jesus searches for people on cult roads is to validate these roads rather than condemn them, the latter of which the author should have, but failed to do.

I was also left empty by the answer to the greatest question raised in the book, “What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?” (page 191). Here is the answer, “Through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world.” Mack correctly asks, “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?” “The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part...” Young makes a similar claim on page 225, “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me.” What concerns me here is two-fold. One, those who don’t believe are not reconciled to God and therefore not forgiven. The cross is not effectual, reconciliation is not applied, and forgiveness is not given unless Jesus is received. The vast majority of our world is not reconciled to God and not forgiven and will not be. Two, the statement God has done His part leaves us open to fill in the blank that we must now do our part. Salvation is about God doing His part – period. We don’t have any part in it. We believe He did His part and it is our faith in what He did that saves us.

Along the lines of what I wrote earlier about the church, his statements on page 198 concern me. “You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow...Just don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship – a way of coming to be with us.” There is no question that God communicates through general revelation in the things He has made. But we believe that His greatest communication of Himself to us is through Jesus and we know that revelation from the Word. **Hebrews 1:1-2** *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.* The writer of Hebrews is clearly laying out a new dispensation whereby the primary place I look to see God is the Word of God, the Testimony of who Jesus is. Young makes it seem like we can see God in any sort of equal venues and then as if to add injury to insult, he warns against looking for rules and principles – the very

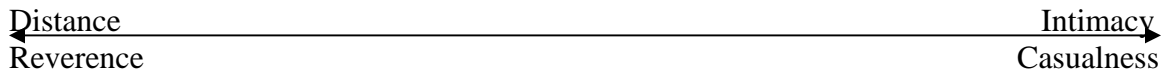
things one would find in the primary place of God's special revelation – His Word. The Bible isn't one of many venues to see God, it is the primary place where we see God.

His disdain for rules comes out again on page 203, "Are you saying I don't have to follow the rules?" "Yes. In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful." What does that mean? Surely, Young cannot mean that we don't have to obey God when the Bible clearly shows that obedience is the way we love Him. I am not under the OT Law, but I am under the commands of the Word and all the principles contained therein. These are laws that I want to obey so I can show God my love for Him and so I can image Him by living a holy life that reflects His glory. I can appreciate Young's differentiation between 'responsibility' and 'expectancy' in our walks with God (page 205), but the truth is we are responsible to God. He expects us to walk lives worthy of His Gospel. In fact, it is as we walk responsibly in obedience to Him that we can expect to see Him. If we aren't responsible, we may have expectancy, but we won't see Him.

I am not sure what Young is trying to communicate when he says God is a verb and not a noun (page 204). It causes me concern. Why? First, God is clearly a noun. He is a person. He is a being. Since He is personal, He acts (verbs), but at His core, He is not an action, He is a Person (a noun) and is worshipped as such. Besides, Jesus repeatedly takes the verb "I am" and supplies nouns after it. I am the Light of the Word. I am the Bread of Life. Clearly, God is a noun. He is not an action. He is a Person and praise His name, He is a Being I can know personally.

Last, but by no means least, let me address what I would call an overall lack of reverence for God throughout. Just why it is that Mack gets to joke, exchange sarcasms, and use profanity in the presence of Almighty God and come away all the better for it whereas people in Scripture who encounter God are so fearful of His Holiness that they come away from the encounter awfully glad that they lived to tell about it. Isaiah said 'woe is me' (6:5). Jacob saw God and was amazed that his life was spared (Gen 32:30). Samson's parents exclaimed, "We are doomed to die. We have seen God" (Judges 13:22). Job cried out, "I despise myself and repent" (42:5-6). Daniel summarized his encounter with God with these words, "My strength is gone. I can hardly breathe" (10:17).

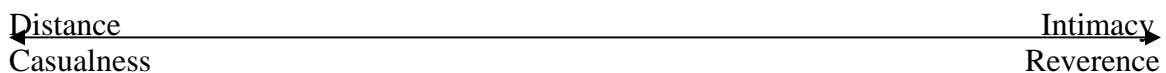
What makes Mack's encounter so different? How is it that he is able to have such a casual time with the trinity, hanging out with the godhead as one might chill with his buds for a weekend getaway? Again, I do not know Young's theology and am not attempting to classify it. Perhaps one way to look at it is this. Young is presenting to us what we might call the other side of the balance in approaching God. Think of it as a seesaw. On one end of the balance we have 'intimacy' with God and on the other end we have 'distance.' When we get close to God enjoying intimacy with Him, we experience a casualness in our relationship, much like we would enjoy with our spouse (God is our Groom, after all). But on the other end of the balance where we are distant from God, we experience a reverence for Him (God is Holy, after all). Perhaps what Young is saying is that the church has gone too far in the distance and reverence direction and we need to move back toward the intimacy and casualness direction.



In tension to the numerous examples I gave above for people encountering God at the Distance end of this balance, one could cite evidence from the Word that our relationship with God must be intimate. The image of us abiding in the Vine (John 15) would fall into that category. I alluded earlier to God being our Groom. Certainly, that implies intimacy. How about Jesus inviting us to open the door so He can come in and dine (Rev 3:21). Perhaps even one of his disciples, John, would testify to the Shack experience as he lay upon Jesus' breast at the last supper.

I believe God wants intimacy with us. There is no question that He loves us and delights in us. Jesus is preparing a place for us even now where we can live with Him forever. God is Father (Papa) and we are His children. He is our Spouse and we will enjoy our marriage with Him forever. He is our Friend.

Yet, can we believe and should we believe that the many people who experienced God in the Bible got it wrong to revere Him so deeply where they feared even for their lives? No, somehow their response was right and prescriptive for us as well. So, we must revere God from a distance and yet enjoy Him in intimacy. How can this be if intimacy and distance are polar opposites? Ah, that's just it. Perhaps, our relationship with God is different in this regard from all other relationships we enjoy. Maybe, just maybe, to be intimate with God is to revere Him. John, the disciple, did lean on Jesus. But, let's not forget John like the other disciples didn't fully realize who Jesus was and even if he did, Jesus had set His glory aside while He was on earth. If you want a more accurate picture of how to respond to the glorified Jesus, see how John did it in Revelation 1:17 – he fell at his feet as though he were dead. Ah, there's reverence, but perhaps there we also have intimacy. To be close to God is to revere Him. I don't need to joke with God to feel near Him. I need only to see His glory and be able to worship humbly in His presence. It is not distance to be on my face when it comes to knowing God. I might redraw the seesaw this way:



I think Job is a classic example of that. Mack feels a lot like Job to me. Job had a bunch of real aggressive things to say to God while he was in the shack of his suffering. He was distant from God and felt a certain casualness to express his concern before Him. But when God showed up and confronted Job, Job got to experience true intimacy with God and he fell on his face.

I honestly don't think the problem with the church today is too much reverence for God where we need to correct our image and move more towards the casual experience with Him. Quite the opposite I think the church is calloused toward Him and way too comfortable with how well we are doing. We are a church of compromise and

complacency and we have arrived at that stature simply because we are distant from God and way too casual over it. What we need is a fresh encounter with the living and holy God that drives us back to our knees in reverence of Him. Amazingly and seemingly paradoxically, when we get back on our knees, we'll come back to intimacy with Him.

I submit these thoughts to you for your consideration. Young has written a very popular book and I pray my criticism has nothing to do with my own sinfulness or jealousy or flesh. People should read this book and come away with a few important truths and perhaps this was all that Young wanted to convey: God loves us more than we'll ever know, brings whatever He does into our lives for His glory and our blessing, and wants us to walk in complete and joyful intimacy with Him all of our days. God is waiting at the Shack every day for us to walk closely with Him. May we all get that and live it out. But, when we form our theology of God, let's be careful to do that from Scripture and not fiction. Young's book should convince us that God waits at the Shack for us and Scripture should inform us Who this God is who waits at the Shack. May God use them both to move us to live lives for His glory alone.

After I had written this review, I watched an interview with Young via the Internet at Andy Stanley's church. Young shared his testimony, how he had committed adultery on his wife and had been living a life of secret addictions for most of his life. He told the story of his recovery from this mess and how God met Him at the Shack. I saw the man's humble heart and sincerity. Here's what I now believe. This brother is sharing his life. He's putting it out there for us to see. In his story, there is wonderful hope for all of us who are living a lie. We need to meet God at the Shack. If Young's book inspired you to that, it is a great success. However, once more I caution you, when you come to the Shack, make sure it is the God of scripture you meet.