

# Questions and Answers about *The Shack*

A Supplement to the IVP Booklet  
*God, the Bible and the Shack*

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## Introduction

Many objections have been lodged against *The Shack*, claiming that on certain points the book is incorrect, not orthodox or, in some cases, actually heretical. Cathy and I didn't have space in our booklet, *God, the Bible and the Shack*, to deal with many of these questions. So that's what I am doing here.

It is important to remember that *The Shack* was never intended nor should it be considered a substitute for the Bible. Rather it represents one author's, William Paul Young's, understanding of the biblical revelation about God. Like all gospel summaries on the one hand or systematic theologies on the other, it represents a human attempt to present in words, concepts and ideas a faithful witness to the God of the Bible.

So no theology can substitute for the Bible, and *The Shack* is no exception. While its fictional form must be given some consideration, the explicit teaching of *The Shack* should be measured finally by its ability to point to the truth and reality of the God of the Bible, just like any theological understanding.

But we shouldn't expect Young's understanding to be consistent at every point with every other theological understanding currently taught even within the wider Christian church. So some, in certain theological traditions, do not agree with all of Young's theological points. But that doesn't necessarily mean that his understanding doesn't square with the biblical reality to which he intends to point. It may just mean that his explanation is at odds with another's understanding.

While we don't agree with everything found in *The Shack*, we think many of the most common questions raised can be answered satisfactorily. Let's take a look at a few.

### Questions about God and the Trinity

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## Questions about God and the Trinity

### Is Young’s Understanding of the Trinity Wrong?

Some have questioned William Young’s understanding of the Trinity, even to the point of saying it borders on or is heretical. Is Young’s understanding of the biblical revelation of the Triune God full of error? Young’s view actually falls well within the historic biblically grounded teaching of the church down through the ages.

We must admit, however, that Young’s theological understanding does indeed significantly diverge from some, but not nearly all or even most, contemporary understandings being promoted today within the church. The difference in this dispute is not one of true doctrine versus heretical teaching, but of one theological understanding compared to another recent understanding.

Those most strongly objecting to Young’s understanding are contemporary theologians who have their own very different theology of the Trinity. But this difference does not mean that Young is not faithful to the biblical revelation. It means he merely disagrees with some other theologians’ understanding of the Bible as they disagree with him. This leads to the possibility that either or both views may be less than fully faithful.

My own study many years before this controversy broke out leads me to conclude that if one position or the other might be mostly wrong or misleading, it’s most likely to be those who object to Young. In any case only one particular limited group of theologians calls Young’s teaching heretical and their position has been strongly challenged by a relatively large and significant group of theologians both from within evangelical theology and across denominational lines. The onus is on the objectors to make their case, not on Young.

### Is There a Hierarchy in the Trinity?

So what’s the main issue? The charge is that Young teaches that there is no hierarchy among the Persons of the Trinity and that Young is wrong.

First, we should say that *The Shack* does indeed explicitly deny that the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit are hierarchical. Young believes that saying that there is an eternal difference of power, authority or will between the Father and the Son is a gross misrepresentation of the nature of those relationships. The Father and Son must be of equal power, authority and will or one or the other is not fully divine, not perfectly God. One would be less divine than the other. Or, another way to say this is that if they so differ, the Father and Son would not be united, would not be one God. Instead God would be divided,

at odds within himself. Such teaching runs the risk, if not actually committing the error, of denying the equality of the Persons of the Trinity. This error is called subordinationism.

Young's view aligns with nearly 1700 years of teaching, since the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 that the whole church (Protestant and evangelical, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches) has accepted and taught. It was explicitly taught that the Father and Son are not and cannot be essentially distinguished by any differences in attributes (like being uncreated or almighty), in external actions (like creating the cosmos), or in roles or rank. The Father, Son and Spirit are identical, sharing in these things equally. If they did not, they would not each be truly divine or God would not be truly one.

The consensus of the early church was that what distinguished the Persons were their personal names (Father, Son and Spirit) and the personal relations that went with those names: that is, the Father begets, the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds. The early church was stringent on this, summarizing their understanding by saying that the Son is everything the Father is (except the Son is not the Father, not the begetter). Likewise the Father is everything the Son is (except the Father is not the Son, not the begotten). And the Spirit is everything the Father and Son are except the Spirit is not the Father or the Son and so is not the begetter or the begotten. Rather the Spirit alone proceeds.

Now included in the difference in personal names and unique relationships with each other is the idea that they are eternally what they are and are never interchangeable. The Father was, is and eternally will be the Father. Likewise the Son, the Son, and the Spirit, the Spirit. The names are not arbitrary nor are the relations. The Persons are eternally distinguished and differentiated from one another.

Now the uniqueness of the names and relations, indicating the non-interchangeability of the Persons, means that we can properly speak of an order, or structure among the relationships. The Greek word used to describe this was *taxis*. (This is sometimes mistakenly or poorly translated into English as "rank.") This word indicates something like the order of letters in the alphabet or the structured arrangement of the colors on a color wheel.

Note that the letter *A* is not superior to the letters *B* and *C* but they "follow" one another in an alphabet. When letters are used in words they have to be ordered in a certain way to make sense together. Musical notes also have a certain place in the order of musical scales or in musical chords. Notice how they cannot be interchanged with each other and make the same sense or sound the same. They are not arranged nor do they work together hierarchically, but they are not arbitrarily related nor are they interchangeable. This is what the early church teaches noted about the trinitarian relations and said they possessed a *taxis*.

So, yes there is a permanent structure of relationships among the members of the Trinity. But the order of the relations is not constituted by a hierarchy of attributes, wills, power or authority. The personal names and relations constitute and maintain the divine differences of the Persons, and nothing else internal or external to God is necessary to distinguish them. Although there may be other differences (for example, the Son of God alone was incarnate), those differences are not what makes the Son the Son and not the Father. Were the Son

never incarnated he would still be the eternal Son and never be the Father. All of this historic, orthodox teaching on the Trinity is completely consistent with what is found in *The Shack*.

### **What's the Alternative to Young's View of the Trinity?**

Those who disagree with Young's view of the Trinity have promoted a different view. Briefly, their position is that if the relationship between the Father and Son is not understood hierarchically, then the difference between the Persons is being denied, at least to some degree, some claiming to a heretical degree! Without hierarchical differences among the Trinity, they say we'd end up with Modalism, that is, the denial of the eternal existence of the Three Persons. Hierarchical order is the only thing that counts (as far as they are concerned) as an essential difference between the Father and Son. And hierarchy is further described as a difference in authority, rank, and/or power, and sometimes will. In their view the names and relations, as the early church held, are not sufficient to distinguish the members of the Trinity.

The problem for them, however, is that if there is a difference of will, then the Father and Son have two wills, the Son having to subordinate his will to the Father, and so God is divided. If there is a difference of authority or power then the lesser one, the Son, must be less divine than the Father. So then the Son is not "everything the Father is except being the Father." This is exactly what Young disagrees with.

Now this group of theologians vigorously defends itself against the charge of subordinationism, and they are right to want to steer clear of this heresy. They should be commended for doing so. But the question is, Can they avoid doing so when they insist that the Persons must be distinguished by a hierarchy of will, power and authority? To do so they have coined a phrase that has no exact precedent in theological history. That doesn't make it wrong, but it puts the onus on them to justify its meaning, use and faithfulness.

Their formula is this: the Persons are equal in being but eternally different in function or role (sometimes called rank). So the affirmation of the Persons being one or equal in being is meant to counter the charge of subordinationism. But the question remains whether the first clause (about equality) guards against what the second clause affirms (about hierarchical difference).

Setting aside the idea of difference of rank, I think it is safe to say that the Father, Son and Spirit are not to be understood as essentially defined by their roles or functions (acts). They may have these (e.g., the Spirit indwells the members of the church), but that is not what makes them who or what they are. If these "roles" or "functions" that point to the external actions of God toward creation are claimed to be essential, that would seem to assume a split in God. God would be divided by separate acts. In that case, it would be necessary to define the Three Persons of God in relationship to something that is external to God (e.g., the creation or the church). That obviously can't be. That's especially so since the Trinity existed before either the creation or the church. So those roles can't be eternal and can't be essential to God's being.

If these roles and functions are said to indicate external relations and temporary actions toward creation, then this introduces both the notions of a disunity in God's various actions (the heresy of Tritheism; that is three Gods) and also a time when God was not Triune (the heresy of Modalism, denying the eternal reality of the three Persons).

What then if there is a role or function that is not essential but that is said to be eternal, such as the Son putting his will under the Father's? It's not clear at all why something nonessential would be eternal or why something eternal (subordination in role) would not be essential. What other attribute of God do we say is eternal but nonessential to God: Omnipotence? Holiness? Goodness? Righteousness? Eternity? It seems again there is a contradiction in the thinking of those who argue against Young: the nonessentials of role and function must actually be essential since they are eternal (like the being of God).

Further, if the essential differences are understood as will, authority or rank (and role and function are understood also as being necessary differences), then as noted above this would point to subordinationism since the differences distinguish that which is necessary or eternal to God.

In contrast, Young's way of theological understanding has been sufficient for most of the church for most of the time. The names and relations eternally and essentially distinguish the Triune Persons who are equal in being, will, authority and every divine attribute. (See for instance the Athanasian Creed on this.) If any position is open to question, it is that of Young's detractors on this important point.

### **Is Young Wrong to Depict God the Father as a Woman?**

Some have objected that God the Father is represented throughout most of the novel as a woman since in the Bible God is always identified with the masculine.

Several comments are in order. First, Young is clear that God is not said actually to be feminine, but that the Father only appears to Mack in that form (pp. 91, 93). And the reason this is the case is explicitly stated in the book. Mack, out of his past experiences and reactions to them, has developed a distorted view of the masculine. In appearing to Mack in a female form, God presents himself to Mack in a way that wouldn't be saddled for Mack with a load of misunderstanding. It's a temporary measure and an accommodation to help Mack begin to gain a proper understanding of God

Also Young makes clear that God's appearing to Mack first as a woman and then as a man was to break our stereotypes of God (our idols?) so that we come to see that God is neither male nor female (p. 93). Young's point is that God is not a creature at all, and is not a gendered being. Gender doesn't apply to God since God is not a human being (p. 201).

Neither of these two points is misleading nor unbiblical. God does adapt his revelation to us without misrepresenting himself. The incarnation is the strongest case in point. God is not a creature but he comes to us as a real creature. God meets us in time and space, in person, face to face that we might know him and have the actual benefits of his saving work for us.

God also is neither male nor female though we often end up thinking of God as being masculine in some sense. While we know God is not a physical being, we still think that most everything else about God is masculine and not feminine. However, masculinity and femininity are attributes of human creatures. God is not a creature at all. It would be wrong to say that God is masculine in every way men are except that he does not have male physiology. We cannot project upon God human masculinity, just without the body parts. That would be idolatrous, a mythological projection.

On the other hand, it should be noted that in the Bible God is compared to having characteristics of some creatures that are female. Jesus compares himself to a hen gathering her chicks. According to Mayer I. Gruber of Ben Gurion University in Israel there are four unequivocal human feminine images for God (Isaiah 42:14; 45:10; 49:15; 66:13).<sup>1</sup> In these passages God is compared to a human mother. There are three places where God is likened to a mother bird (Deuteronomy 32:11; Isaiah 31:5; Matthew 23:37)<sup>2</sup> God is also likened to a mother bear (Hosea 13:8).<sup>3</sup> Other references may have a feminine reference to God but do so in a way not nearly as directly or concretely as these.<sup>4</sup>

In the Bible God can be described as tender-hearted, compassionate, responsive to the cries of his people, and even as nursing them. So God and Jesus are not exclusively depicted in masculine terms. At the same time we shouldn't make the opposite mistake of thinking that God is female in some human sense. Young agrees. He says God is not feminine but can be described as having feminine characteristics. Admittedly his book is meant as a corrective, especially to benefit those like Mack, who think of God in terms of a human male. But it's clear that while a corrective is his agenda, the larger truth about God is clearly noted: God is neither male nor female.

What can be and should be noted is that while God is indirectly compared to the feminine, in the Bible, God is never addressed directly as She or Mother. Address to God does exclusively use the verbally masculine parts of speech. That pattern should serve as the normative pattern of our address to God. But our pattern need not, any more than the

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Roland M. Frey, "Language for God and Feminist Language" in *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 29. Isaiah 42:14, "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant." Isaiah 45:10, "Woe to anyone who says to a father, 'What are you begetting?' or to a woman, 'With what are you in labor?'" Isaiah 49:15 "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Isaiah 66:13, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy. 32:11, "As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions." Isaiah 31:5, "Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it." Matthew 23:37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup>But not in a stereotypically feminine role: "I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them" (Hosea 13:8, NRSV).

<sup>4</sup>We have in mind here especially references to God personified as Wisdom, in the feminine gender in Hebrew.

biblical use, exclude our using feminine descriptive language for God's character, attitude, actions or inclination. That is what Young has done. In fact, the name he gives the Father the whole time the Father appears in female form in *The Shack* is Papa.

We can only speculate why the biblical pattern consistently uses the masculine in address to God. It could be that the grammatical structure points to a proper ordering, structuring of relationship (*taxis*) between us and God. By comparison we are all feminine in relationship to God, and so we are all to address God in the masculine. But this is speculation. It is a mystery, but one that calls for a certain pattern we have been given for properly addressing God. We have no authority to alter that pattern.

But regarding our language for God, we should also recognize that grammatical gender does not indicate human creaturely gender. So, for example, in some languages mountains are grammatically feminine! But that doesn't mean they are in some essential way female. God is the good and faithful author and creator of both masculine and feminine. The duality of our creaturely reality reflects something that is true of God—who is not a creature. But we must still conclude that God is neither masculine nor feminine in the ways that his creatures are even if our patterns of address ought to use the masculine pronoun.

### **Has Young Mistakenly Depicted the Father as an Incarnate Human?**

Young has provoked criticism that he teaches that the Father was incarnate as was the Son. If he did so, he would be mistaken and obviously so. Only the Son was incarnate in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Now Young does explicitly say that the Father (Papa) was not a human being (p. 201) and that the Son is actually human and not just an appearance. That Mack encounters Papa in a human form, Papa explains, is merely an appearance for Mack's sake. Papa just appears in human form, but only Jesus is human. The same can be said for the even more ethereal appearance of Sarayu, the representation of the Holy Spirit. Young specifically says that the Father is not human but only appears so.

Now in this connection there is one problematic clause in *The Shack* which is somewhat unfortunate and could be misleading. It has to be read so carefully in context so as not to misunderstand it that it likely should be amended. Here's the quotation: "But instead of scrapping the whole Creation we rolled up our sleeves and entered into the middle of the mess—that's what we have done in Jesus . . . . When we three spoke ourself in to human existence as the Son of God, *we became fully human*" (p. 99, my italics added). That last clause taken by itself could indeed mean that both the Father and the Spirit also became human along with the Son. But the fact that Young denies this is the case elsewhere should clue us in that that is not what he means or believes.

Looking back and reading very carefully the context in which this phrase appears also confirms Young's actual meaning. Note that Young says, "what we have done *in* Jesus," and that "we spoke ourself . . . *as* the Son of God." Young is saying that the three were acting together when only the Son of God, Jesus, was incarnate. The incarnation of the Son was the joint effort of all three, and so are all involved together with the Son's incarnation, but not all three are incarnate.

Indeed we see in Scripture that all three were involved in the incarnation. The Father prepares for and sends the Son, the Spirit overshadows Mary, and Jesus is conceived in her womb. The conception of Jesus is indeed a triune act. But, yes, only the Son becomes incarnate. OK, so what about that last phrase, “we became fully human”? Yes, putting it that way seems to me problematic. But when carefully read, even in its immediate context, it would be inconsistent for him to be claiming that the Father was also incarnate.

So what might he mean? I’m not sure, but perhaps it’s something like this: Since the incarnation of the Son involves all the persons of the Trinity, all the Persons are affected by the incarnation, through the Son. All Three Persons of God, each in their own way, are related to humanity since the Son of God is now united to humanity. Since the Son of God is united to humanity and the Son of God is united to the Father and the Spirit, humanity is really united to the Father and Spirit too. And so, they became fully united to humanity in the incarnation of the Son.

So later on in the novel Papa says: “We are all in him” (p. 186). When the Son became incarnate, the Father and Spirit were also joined to humanity—in him. The three triune persons act together in everything God does, including the incarnation. The early church spoke of the mutual indwelling (a *perichoresis*) of the Father, Son and Spirit, of the inexistence (*enousia*) of the three Persons and taught that the whole God was present in each of the Persons. These theologians were following the teaching of the Gospel of John which speaks in three different places of the Father and Son being “in” one another. (See John 10:39, 14:11 and 14:20.)

And that is a very important point to make since it is often overlooked. Theologian James B. Torrance writes that through the Son we are united to the Father and the Spirit. We share in the Son’s union and communion with the Father and the Spirit. In Christ, we are loved with the same love that the Son receives from his Father. (See his *Worship, Communion and the Triune God of Grace* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996].)

Yes, Young doesn’t put it exactly that way. And I think, if he was getting at something like that, it would have been better for him to be a bit clearer. So, perhaps there is a misphrasing here, or an inaccurate or infelicitous way of putting it when he says “we became human.” But taken in context, although the wording is subtle, he does provide us a way to avoid misunderstanding.

Putting this together with those several places where he explicitly denies a possible misunderstanding of that problematic phrase and where he is later somewhat clearer I think that the charge of false teaching (of patripassianism, meaning “God the Father suffering”) cannot be sustained. Putting all the pieces together there’s no reason he should not be regarded as faithful to the biblical revelation which speaks of the Father and Son being in one another and in harmony with early Christian teaching on the Trinity. Only the Son is incarnate, but being one in being and act with the Father and Spirit, humanity is related to the whole Trinity in the Son, its federal head (see 1 Corinthians 15:45 and Romans 5:19).

### Is God a Verb?

In *The Shack* Papa explains that it's better to think of God as a "being verb," rather than a noun. In context Papa is explaining that God's purposes have much more to do with a relationship of love in freedom rather than an impersonal conformity to laws. This seems to echo the apostle Paul's statement that the law kills but the spirit makes alive (2 Corinthians 3:6). More specifically the identification of God as a verb is directly connected to the Old Testament revelation of God to Moses as both "I am" and also "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14) and Young quotes this verse. Jesus also identifies himself as "I am" (John 8:58). The Old Testament personal name for God, *Yahweh*, that God gives to Moses, also seems to be derived from the Hebrew verb "to be."<sup>5</sup>

So Young isn't just pulling this out of the air. There is a profound biblical basis for what he is saying. God specially names and identifies himself in verbal ways. It certainly should not be presumed, as one critic has done, that Young relies on the authority of Buckminster Fuller for this identification! Young is further charged with implying that God then is presented as "a force." It would be virtually impossible to come away from *The Shack* thinking God is an impersonal force since God is portrayed throughout the book in such striking personal and relational ways. And if Young can be so charged the Bible is not too far away in passages such as Exodus 3:14-15 and 6:2-3.

Now strictly to have God say "I am a verb" (p. 204) is probably going too far and when taken out of context possibly could be misunderstood. God is not exclusively and exhaustively an action (verb) without being. But just after this, Sarayu says (indicating that she is including Papa and Jesus in her statement), "I am a *being* verb." That's a bit better. With some play on words, Young indicates that there is a being, a God that exists, that is active. So a bit of the "noun," the subject, the person, creeps back in with this slightly expanded explanation.

Taking into consideration the context provided by these two statements, we find that Sarayu explains a bit more what is meant: "I am alive, dynamic, ever active and moving." (p. 204). Clearly, then, Young regards God as a subject or personal agent and not a force. But he wants to bring out that God is not static, fixed, rigid, stayed, immovable or abstract. Given that context I don't see how anyone would come away thinking God is an impersonal force, even with that one adventuresome statement about God as a verb. Perhaps we can grant Young some poetic license in trying to express here something of what we find in the Bible.

### Does *The Shack* Debase the Majesty of God?

Young has been charged with a failure to honor the majesty of God since Mack interacts with Papa, Sarayu and Jesus in such familiar, very informal terms. Is the God of *The Shack* not worthy of worship?

Critics have pointed out that when Isaiah is in the presence of God as depicted in Isaiah (6:5), he is shaken to the core and declares himself a sinner unworthy to be in God's

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<sup>5</sup> See Peter Toon, *Our Triune God, A Biblical Portrayal* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint, 1996).

presence. Measured by this example Young's depiction is found wanting since Mack's experience is not the same.

The charge assumes that anyone in the presence of God would always have the exact experience Isaiah did. The question raised by the charge is whether the experience of Isaiah serves as the only example for rightly indicating someone being in the presence of the holy God. I think the Bible itself answers this question. Isaiah's experience is not the sole norm or standard of experience for someone being in the presence of God. Persons in the very presence of the holiness of God do not always react as Isaiah did.

In Genesis 3 God walks in the Garden, something Adam and Eve were apparently used to since they recognized the sound of him walking before they saw him. True, Adam and Eve hide out of fear, but this is because they now, having disobeyed God, realize they are naked, not because that is their usual reaction.

Abraham enjoys a visit from the Lord (apparently in human form) in Genesis 18 and, while he is very respectful, he nonetheless engages in very direct negotiations with the Lord about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, presuming he has the ability to persuade him.

Moses has an encounter with the holy God at the burning bush in Exodus 3. While the holiness of the encounter is made clear, by the end of the dialogue in Exodus 4, Moses was not so intimidated by the encounter that he couldn't offer objection after objection to what God wanted.

God also appeared to Samuel in the middle of the night in 1 Samuel 3. Rather than being afraid of God, Samuel's main fear seemed to be telling Eli the next morning what the Lord had said to him.

But the primary collection of counter examples to Isaiah are those who meet Jesus himself. We must remember that Jesus is the very presence of God. He is full of God's grace and truth. He alone bears the very stamp of God's character. He is the image of the invisible God. He is, Immanuel, God with us. Wherever he is the Father is and the Spirit is, each in their own way. To see Jesus is to see the Father. Jesus only does what he sees the Father doing. He only says what he hears the Father saying. He and the Father are one. We can't forget that or we are denying the divinity of the Son.

So what do we find in the New Testament when people meet God in Christ? Well there are Isaiah-like moments—most notably when Jesus is transfigured on the mount (Mark 9:5-6). Peter also recognizes the holy presence in a way that overwhelms him when Jesus arranges a massive catch of fish (Luke 5:8). The disciples respond in fear and amazement when Jesus stills the storm (Luke 8:25). Thomas recognizes him in his divinity when Jesus allows him to put his hand into the wound in Jesus' side in the upper room (John 20:26-28). But these are the exceptions in the New Testament. Most of the time the fullness of Jesus majesty is not recognized, even though he has not changed into something less than being the divine Son of God. Why?

God sees fit to conceal the presence of his majesty. And he does this, it seems, so that we might draw near and interact with him. The humanity of Jesus concealed the divinity, most of the time. But God was no less present. In *The Shack*, Young indicates that something similar is going on in his novel. Papa is said to take the form of a certain appearance (pp. 91, 93). It is the Father, but the Father's presence is also veiled in the form in which he appears. So Mack doesn't react to the Father's presence like Isaiah does. He reacts more like Nicodemus, Andrew, James and John, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Zachaeus and Matthew the tax collector, the woman who washes his feet and the Samaritan who speaks with him at the well at midday.

But there are moments in *The Shack*, just as in the New Testament, that a greater awareness of the majesty and glory of who this is breaks through partially and momentarily. When Mack first meets Papa, Jesus and Sarayu, he "stood dumbfounded and mute . . . Suddenly he felt faint. Emotion swept over him as his mind attempted desperately to catch up with all the information. Just as he was about to crumple to his knees" (p. 87).

But more significant than that, in chapter fifteen, just after Mack is reunited with his father, something of the full reality of who this God is shines through. Mack sees Jesus in regal splendor.

A hush descended. The anticipation was palpable. Suddenly to their right, from out of the darkness emerged Jesus, and pandemonium broke out. He was dressed in a simple brilliant white garment and wore on his head a simple gold crown, but he was every inch the king of the universe. He walked the path that opened before him into the center—the center of all Creation, the man who is God and the God who is man. Light and color danced and wove a tapestry of love for him to step on. Some were crying out words of love, while others simply stood with hands lifted up. (pp. 215-216)

Glimpses of the majestic glory of God are indeed presented in the novel, but like the New Testament encounters with Jesus, these are exceptional events.

But I wonder if there isn't something else contained in the charge that the God of *The Shack* is not the glorious God of Isaiah. The complaints center around God being too familiar, too casual, too informal, not exalted enough, distant enough, high enough, mighty enough. Indeed, this is not how God appears and relates to Mack most often. But does this really go against the character of God revealed in Jesus? Remember, Jesus is Immanuel. In him we see the Father and come to know the Spirit. He is one with the Father and Spirit. To know Jesus is to know the character of God.

So, yes, in a way his divinity is hidden in his humanity in the New Testament. But does his human form entirely hide, obscure and cover up the truth about God's character? No, I don't think so. Even the form of God's hiddenness in Jesus reveals something entirely astounding about God. Jesus says he has come to serve and not to be served (Mark 10:45). He washes his disciples' feet. He feeds the hungry. He stops to explain himself to those who inquire more than once. He has no earthly wealth of his own. He asks a Samaritan woman

to draw him water from a well. He weeps over the death of Lazarus. He weeps over Jerusalem concerning those who are resisting his call. He rides a donkey, not a stallion, as he enters Jerusalem. He allows his executors to lash him, mock him, crown him with thorns, strip him and spit on him—and finally crucify him among criminals. He refused to return evil for evil. And a final humiliation, he is buried outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem, rejected as a false prophet.

Remember, Jesus only does what he sees the Father doing. If we see the Father when we see Jesus, then what do we learn of the Father through the Son? If “like Father like Son” is truest of Jesus and his heavenly Father, then the Father is just as humble as the Son. When Jesus serves the Father serves. When Jesus washes feet, so does the Father. The tears Jesus wept were not just his own, but those that welled up in his Father’s heart. The rejection of Jesus was the rejection of the Father. The sacrifice of Jesus was one with the non-incarnate sacrifice of the Father. The forbearance of Jesus toward his enemies was shared with his Father’s. The breakfast of fish cooked for those fishermen at dawn was prepared by the Father just as much as the Son.

The Father has the same servant spirit as the Son. The Son shows us the longsuffering heart of the Father who gives himself for us and our salvation every bit as much as the Son. Jesus, the servant King, shows us the compassionate heart of his Servant Father. The humiliating cost of crucifixion was shared alike by Father, Son and Spirit each in their own way.

Consider furthermore that Jesus invites us to relate to the Father as his children even in prayer (Matthew 5: 45 and 6:9). He encourages us to think of ourselves as friends of God and not servants (John 15:15). The apostle Paul notes that when the Spirit of sonship comes upon us we cry out Abba, Father (Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6), addressing God as a child might. We are encouraged to approach the throne of God boldly (Hebrews 4:16). Are these improper, too informal, irreverent?

Such a recognition of the revelation of the Father in the Son is likely to demand that we reconfigure how we think about the glory and majesty of God. For the glory revealed in Jesus is the majesty of a God so high that there’s no depth to which he will not stoop to raise us up in love to be with him forever as his beloved children. There is a divine humility made known in Jesus that all the more glorifies God, a glory that perhaps even Isaiah did not quite see. But we do, in the Son of the Father and in the holy sanctifying power of the Spirit.

Some will find that offensive, beneath the dignity of God. And perhaps that explains the offence taken by some to Young’s depiction of God in *The Shack*. But it can only be that very revelation of the Father in the Son’s glorious humility that explains God’s relationship to Mack in *The Shack*.

### **Is Young Being Idolatrous to Create Verbal Images of God in *The Shack*?**

*The Shack* provides a verbal picture of the Three Persons of the Trinity. Is this a violation of the command not to create images of God? Some think so, and raise this complaint about *The Shack*.

There is a long controversy about this matter that reaches far back into the history of the church. We can't rehearse that now. But suffice it to say that a complete ban on imaging Father, Son or Spirit in any way represents one segment of the Christian church. But that's not how most Christians view the matter. Those that condemn Young for this error do differ from Young in their interpretation of the command. But Young's interpretation, which allows for at least certain forms of depiction, is consistent with many other branches of the church. Making it seem as if Young is out on his own against the whole of the church misrepresents the actual case. He holds a different interpretation of Scripture than others do, but that does not necessarily make him a heretic. It only means he disagrees theologically with some of his fellow Christians.

Charging some kind of idolatry of Young is indeed based on an especially stringent theological interpretation. Israel was under a ban of creating *physical* images of God as objects of worship or devotion in which the worshippers would believe they had special access to God through them. But Young has done nothing of this sort of thing.

Young offers us *verbal* descriptions. These are not physical objects. And these verbal descriptions are not meant as objects of worship or devotion. They are descriptions in a fictional novel to help us understand God. Furthermore these verbal depictions are not to be taken literally. Young is at pains to explain that these descriptions of Father and Spirit are indirect appearances even to his fictional character, Mack, much less to readers of the novel. The fictional form of the novel plus Young's explanation of the nonliteral descriptions of God put him at quite a far remove from the obvious intention of the command to not create idols as objects of worship.

Indeed if the Father, Son and Spirit can not be imaged in any conceivable way for any purpose, then it's hard to see how Scripture itself should not be considered idolatrous. There we have myriad verbal images, depictions, descriptions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is compared and sometimes depicted as a rock, a fortress, a shepherd, a tower, a bridegroom, a mother hen, a sower, a waiting father, a landowner and much, much more.

Furthermore Scripture tells us to bear witness in words to God in preaching and testimony, in worship and witness. If Scripture uses such means and directs us to use verbal means, it would seem that Young's work is well within the spirit of the teaching and example of Scripture on this matter. Such verbal depictions are not idolatrous.

### Questions about Redemption

#### **Does *The Shack* Diminish the Mediation of Christ?**

Young's novel has been derided by some for diminishing the mediation of Christ since Mack interacts with the Father and Spirit, speaking directly to them. Does Christ's mediation rule out any interaction of persons with the Father and the Spirit? I think not and again, the Bible itself by example indicates this is so.

At Jesus' baptism and transfiguration the Father's voice is heard in a way distinct from the human voice of Jesus. Is that a violation of the mediation of Jesus? Likewise the Spirit is seen

to be and act in some way distinct from Jesus. At his baptism the Spirit descends on him in a dovelike way. The Spirit is said to speak with our spirits and said to bring the conviction of sin and judgment. Jesus says that the Spirit is “another comforter” who will come upon his disciples. They are to wait for his appearance at Pentecost. So can we interact with the Father and Spirit in a way that can be distinguished from interacting with the Son? Is our whole relationship with God restricted to interacting only with the Son of God incarnate? If so, then the Bible is itself misleading in much the same way that *The Shack* is.

Now why doesn't this diminish the mediation of Christ? Because the mediation of Christ is the basis and foundation for our relating to the Father and Spirit. The reason God can and does relate to us and us to the Father and Spirit is because of who Jesus is and what he has done. If he wasn't the eternal Word of the Father, in whose image we are created, and if we weren't reconciled to God in him for all time, then we couldn't have a personal relationship with the Father or Spirit. So Christ's mediation does not keep us from interacting with the Father and Spirit but rather produces the fruit, the basis, the ontological foundation for our being able to interact with them. That fact that we can approach the very throne of God is not a denigration of the mediation of Christ, but the recognition of the vital effectiveness of his mediatorial ministry. Isn't this why Jesus instructs us to pray—“Our Father, in heaven . . .”?

### **Does *The Shack* Diminish the Meaning of the Cross?**

The church has for a long time wrestled with how best to understand the work of Christ as presented in Scripture. One of the many challenges involves the fact that the biblical witness to the reconciling and redeeming work of God is conveyed using a variety of words, concepts and images to point to one and the same reality, some reaching back to ancient Israel's life and worship. Some of the more prominent ways of describing the work of Christ are: sacrifice, victory over evil, ransom, exchange, substitution and penalty. The question arises as to how these and other biblical concepts and images are to be related to each other. Can they be coordinated to fill out a comprehensive picture? And of the various ways to relate and combine the various strands of the biblical witness, should one aspect be central and prominent?

As you might imagine there is some disagreement about how best to understanding Christ's work even among those who believe Scripture ought to be normative for any theological view. Young stands within a particular viewpoint and so disagrees with certain others who have taken a different perspective. The fact that Young disagrees with some other Christian teachers on how to understand Christ's atonement does not necessarily make him wrong, nor does it in particular make him a heretic, as some have claimed. It does mean that he and his critics disagree on this matter of how to best interpret the Bible on this matter.

What is the disagreement? Some believe and teach that the atoning work of Christ must be interpreted with the concept of penalty at the center of it all. Furthermore, they insist that the essence of the idea of penalty must be punishment. They claim Christ's work was essentially to suffer the punishment for sin we deserved. If God is just, then punishment must be meted out. So some say that Jesus had to be punished by his Father for our sins. They claim that the suffering of punishment is the key to understanding what Christ accomplished for us. Without this key the entire truth of Christ's work is said to be lost, or

at least radically distorted. But is that really the case? Must it be interpreted in exactly that way?

It is true that Young denies that the saving work of Christ must be understood as the Father punishing the Son (p. 120). Instead, Young believes that the biblical teaching is far better understood as the Son paying a price or suffering a terrible cost in order to reconcile us (make us at-one) to God. Young says that Jesus paid a penalty, but the penalty is not to be understood as a punishment. He does not believe the Bible teaches that merely inflicting pain on someone satisfies God's righteousness or makes things right. Punishment, the simple infliction of pain or suffering, is not what the penalty the Son paid is about.

But if it's not a punishment, doesn't that cheapen and denigrate the value of what Christ did for us? I think the answer is clearly, no, it doesn't. Many times Young makes clear that Jesus and his Father both bore a terrible cost to themselves to bring about atonement, thereby making things right between God and his creatures (pp. 125, 163, 177, 191, 222). He describes Jesus love as costing him everything, calling for his giving everything up (p. 137) and his death as a horrible tragedy.

Papa says, "Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark" (p. 96). This price is represented in the wounds Jesus suffered and the marks that appear in a similar way on the wrists of Papa (pp. 96, 164, 222). Young is not light on sin nor does he minimize the price paid to see us at-one with God. He just disagrees as to how best to understand that price, that cost, that penalty paid on the cross of Christ. But, he is convinced that applying our everyday notion of punishment to Christ's work is actually misleading.

The main problem that Young has with the notion of punishment is that it pits the Father against the Son, it puts them and their wills in opposition to each other. If this is the case, then the Trinity itself is divided, broken apart. God is undone. But there can be no absolute division in mind, heart, will, or being between the persons of the Trinity, since if there were, the unity of God would be denied and dismantled. (See pp. 96, 163 and 186.)

Young stands in good company when he follows this line of understanding. The well-respected and widely recognized evangelical pastor and theologian John Stott has this to say in his book, *The Cross of Christ*.<sup>6</sup> Christ does not intervene in order to "pacify an angry God and wrest from him a grudging salvation." Nor does God "punish the innocent Jesus in the place of us" (p. 150). "We must not speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus persuading God, for to do so is to set them over against each other as if they acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with each other" (p. 151). It is clear that not all otherwise evangelical teachers agree with Stott. But that does not make Stott or Young a heretic. It might even be that these critics are mistaken in their understanding of the revelation of God in Scripture.

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<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Now you may wonder, but isn't that what scripture says? Well, yes, in some translations. (In the NRSV, for example, several Greek words are translated sixteen times as "punishment" although only seven of these references have to do with describing God's relationship to humans.) But that's just the problem—of the those several words used when speaking of the cross of Christ—none of them *has* to be translated "punishment" with the meaning of inflicting pain and suffering on (or on behalf of) the guilty as the essential remedy to unrighteousness.

Those various Greek and Hebrew words in the original language of Scripture can legitimately be translated with other words such as "price," "payment (of a debt)," "penalty," "ransom" or "exchange," "cost," "vindicate," "chastise," or perhaps "wrath." And these words usually carry a different meaning from punishment. Pain and suffering may accompany these acts, but the aim of these acts is to actually repair and put everything back to right, that is, to reconcile. The pain and suffering is not the aim itself. Rather the goal of the cost, price, penalty, ransom or payment is nothing less than making everything right. Punishment, however, is most often understood as the means to merely satisfy justice, without there being any reconciliation.

Young follows the reconciliation interpretation (see 2 Corinthians 5:19). The work of Christ was aimed at making things right, not just exacting pain and suffering to pay back pain for pain, and so satisfy justice without the intention to be reconciled. God's work aims at nothing less than making things right again (pp. 119, 120, 127, 169).

Young objects to the punishment view where the satisfaction of God's righteousness or justice by merely punishing the wicked (or their substitute) fulfills God's primary purpose. In that event, reconciliation would be an optional second and separate decision; an event done after the punishment was completed and would be distinct from God's righteousness. This second follow-up act is often described as mercy. And often, in that interpretation, God's mercy or grace is put into contrast with, or as a counterbalance to, righteousness or justice. They are thus distinguished and independent from one another.

Quoting James 2:13, Young sees in the Cross the mercy of God triumphing over justice (p. 164). Mercy envelops and overtakes justice, as God fulfills his one end and aim, redemption. Young holds that, in the biblical view, God's righteousness cannot be separated from his mercy. In God's purposes mercy is the greater end, aimed at nothing less than making everything right. If God only punished sinners (or their substitute) and did not actually put things right, then God would fail in his ultimate purpose. Any pain and suffering involved in what God does to make things right is intrinsic, essential, to the aim of reconciling, making at-one, God and his people. And since our understanding of punishment usually does not align with this understanding, Young rejects it.

I think we can see the coordination of righteousness and mercy or forgiveness in the first letter of John. God is "faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God's faithfulness and justice give rise to his forgiveness and his forgiveness aims to cleanse us, that is, to make everything right again. God would be less than fully righteous if he did not complete it with mercy and aim to make things right.

Young's understanding affirms a substitutionary and penal view of the Cross underscoring the incalculable cost to God to atone. But, with John Stott, he rejects interpreting the penalty as punishment, preferring the legitimate alternative translations of those Greek words with "penalty," "payment," "exchange," "ransom," "cost" or "price." He thereby affirms the unity of Father and Son in being, purpose and action on the Cross and the unity and coordination of God's righteousness and mercy in his reconciling work. Does that view obscure the nature of Christ's work on the cross or clarify and magnify it?

### **Does *The Shack* Say Jesus Isn't the Only Way to God?**

There is one passage where Papa and Mack are in conversation about human institutional systems of power: political, social, economic and religious. Young makes the point that the church can't be reduced to an institution and that no human system can provide us the true freedom that only God can give. God's purposes are for us to find ways to interact with them but not be slaves of them (p. 181).

The conversation then moves on to Mack's (and our) desire to identify the people who know Jesus. Jesus indicates that Mack has often misjudged people in this regard. He then says: "Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats or Republicans . . . I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians" (p. 182).

Some have taken this to mean that Young has opened the door to affirming that there may be other mediators or saviors who can take us to God or provide us a way to be with God eternally. While this particular passage may not provide the clearest possible answer to that question, there is no reason, especially when read in context, to think that is what Young is at all suggesting.

First, Young has indicated that everyone needs to be set free from all these systems of the world. To think he's indicating that they are ways to God flies in the face of how he regards these institutions of power. We need to be saved from them all for they enslave us. And only God, can rescue us from these false ideologies or religious, social, economic, or political institutions of power (p. 181-82).

In his view we need to be set free from subservience to all of them: Buddhism, Islam, Republican or Democratic politics, the vices of the self-righteous or the sin of murderer as well as to denominational institutions. Only then can we really be transformed into God's sons and daughters through Jesus. All these systems and institutions from the start of Young's discussion are totally eliminated as means for approaching God. Saying Young leaves open the possibility that they are such means is simply mistaken.

So, yes Young doesn't quote Jesus' own saying that "no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6), but Young offers no alternatives whatsoever to Jesus being the only way. And Young does say in a later passage that "Life and living is *in him* and in no other" Jesus then describes himself as the "*living answer*" (p. 198, italics original). It would be hard to come by

a more universal and exclusive claim for Jesus. Critics have somehow failed to take note of this clear declaration and wrongly accuse Young of being less than clear on this matter.

Additionally Young does say a couple of things in this earlier part of the novel to guard against readers thinking that there are other ways. Just a few pages before Jesus explains to Mack that the gate into the church consists of a single pearl and that he himself is that pearl made precious by pain, suffering—and finally death. Mack says, “I get it, you are the way in” (p. 177). A few lines later Jesus indicates that no human person can build his church, but he alone can (p. 178).

And finally, immediately after the quotation about the institutions or systems where Jesus followers are from, Mack asks, “Does that mean that all roads will lead to you?” Jesus answers, “Not at all. Most roads don’t lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you” (p. 182). In *The Shack* Jesus explicitly denies that there are many roads to God that humans can make up and take. Rather, he indicates Jesus goes out and finds folks wherever they are.

Isn’t this just like the parables of the lost sheep, coin and prodigal son of Luke? Doesn’t this match Jesus’ own explanation of why he looks among sinners for those to repent, because only those who are sick will admit their need for a physician (Mark 2:17)? Isn’t this what the apostle Paul says about Jesus dying for the ungodly (Romans 5:6)? For if God doesn’t come after us in our sin, unbelief and fallenness, but only makes himself available after we have somehow first escaped ourselves, then no one could receive life from God. We are all enslaved, or are “dead in our trespasses” as Paul says (Ephesians 2:1; Colossians 2:13). God must take the initiative toward us where we are. Young opens up no door for anyone finding God, but for God through Jesus finding us wherever we are. There’s nothing unbiblical about that, but just the opposite.

### **Why Is Jesus Said to Be “The Best” Way to Relate to the Father and the Spirit?**

In connection with the question of Jesus being the sole mediator and savior, some have complained that in *The Shack* Jesus says that “I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu” (p. 110). Why doesn’t Jesus say, “I am the only way?”

Once again the force of the objection depends upon careless reading and taking things out of context. This discussion at this point in the novel has nothing to do with who can be saved or how people are saved. The question at hand is why Mack feels more comfortable relating to Jesus than to Papa or Sarayu. The answer Jesus gives is that he alone is human, like Mack, and so they have much in common (p. 110). That is why Mack senses he can relate better and more directly with Jesus than with Sarayu. And of course this is exactly what the incarnation is about: God creating the place where he can meet us and we can meet him (1 John 1:1-4).

So why does Young use the comparative, writing, the “*best* way to relate”? Better than what or who? The comparison is not between Jesus and some other human mediator. The comparison is between relating to Papa and Sarayu directly compared to relating to them

through Jesus. Jesus is the best among the three divine persons because he alone is fully human like we are.

This is exactly what's laid out in the book of Hebrews (2:14-18). Jesus shares our nature and so can sympathize with us and serve as our eternal high priest in our place and on our behalf. Young opens no door for any other human mediator at all in this passage. Young has not clouded, confused or obscured the gospel, but has brought out a very important aspect of it. We best know, approach and relate to the Father and Spirit through Jesus, for that is why he came to us in the form of a human servant (Philippians 2:7).

### **Isn't Young Confused about the Father's Relationship to Our Redemption?**

Some have objected that Young portrays wounds appearing on Papa's wrists that are just like those Jesus has. This seems to critics to suggest that the Father was incarnate and so was crucified as was the Son. When this teaching was explicitly raised in the early church it was labeled a heresy and given the name *patripassianism*, meaning "God the Father suffering." Does Young express this false teaching or something like it?

It's a good question. While Young's point is not often made today I believe he has committed no theological error. First, Young does not believe that the Father is a human. As discussed in the question "Has Young Mistakenly Depicted the Father as an Incarnate Human?" Young affirms that only the Son is incarnate and denies that the Father is incarnate. God the Father only appears to Mack in a human form. Jesus, however, is not just an appearance, he has actually and really taken on a human life.

OK, so what is Young's point? Why do wounds resembling Jesus' wounds appear to Mack on Papa's wrists (p. 95)? The point Young is making is that since the Father and Son are united, are one in being, what the Son experiences in his humanity affects the Father. The Father and Son are not and cannot be separated in being so that the Father remains unaffected. Now this does not mean that the Father experienced a human crucifixion. It means that he was affected by the sufferings of his Son. As Young explains it, they went through the experience of crucifixion together for us (p. 96). It was a joint effort.

Indeed, the Bible offers depictions of the atoning work of God involving all three persons. For example Hebrews 9:14 says Christ offered himself on the cross to God through the Spirit. Jesus also teaches that he only does what he sees his Father doing (John 5: 19). We're told that in seeing him we see the Father (John 14:9). He also declares that he works the works of the Father (John 9:4).

So, while the Father and Son must be distinguished as Father and Son, they cannot be separated in what they do. It would be one error to collapse the Son and Father (so that the Father would also be said to be incarnate) and another error to separate them entirely. Young's critics fall into this second error. Young avoids the error of collapsing the two by clearly stating that the Father is not incarnate, is not a human being (p. 201). But he also avoids the error of separating them by following the teaching of the Bible, as noted above, in that he describes the Father and Son, each in their own way, being co-involved in the saving work. The co-involvement Young represents by having Papa also have his own wounds. But

he received them, as it were, in his own nonincarnate way from the Son, by going through the crucifixion with his Son.

This is no heresy but corresponds with the teaching of Jesus regarding his co-acting with his Father in his earthly ministry. Indeed Jesus' claim to be coworking with the Father led directly to the charge of blasphemy since it so correlated them. "My Father is working still, and I am working. This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God. And Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise'" (John 5: 17-19). Certainly this teaching applies to the work of the Cross and Young brings this out in great relief.

### **Weren't the Father and Son Separated When Jesus Took on Our Sins?**

There is another theological puzzle that often comes to mind and that Young addresses which is a great mystery of the New Testament. It is often noted that sin separates. Jesus took on our sin. So then, the logic goes, the Father and Son must be separated by that sin. This understanding is then used to interpret why Jesus on the cross quotes from the Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But there are potential problems putting the pieces together this way.

If the Father and Son are truly, totally and absolutely separated, then sin has undone the being of God, has dismantled the Trinity. In effect sin has then unraveled or killed God! It's never a good idea to assume that any word or idea in the Bible must be taken in the most absolute or extreme way we can possibly imagine. And this is one of those places. Whatever the experience of forsakenness Jesus had, it can't mean the Trinity was broken apart. There would be no one around to raise him from the dead. In fact, Jesus would cease to be who he was if the Trinity was torn asunder.

So, any separation or forsakenness must be taken to mean something less than or other than total separation. That puts Young in the clear when he wants to indicate a real togetherness of Father and Son in the work of atonement. Young does acknowledge that what the Son went through is a challenge, a threat, to their communion. It cost them to maintain their fellowship and communion.

Young first of all notes the unity of the Trinity echoing passages in the Gospel of John where Jesus teaches about the unique union between him and the Father. This was made evident in the works that Jesus does so that we should understand that "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:39). This same mystery of their unique relation of mutual indwelling is repeated in John 14:11 and 14:20. Young says the Father and Son were always together and that Father and Spirit are in Jesus (p. 186).

Regarding Jesus' speaking of his experience of being forsaken, Papa explains it to Mack this way: "We were there *together*" (p. 96, italics original). Mack states he thought the Father had left him. Papa continues, "You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he *felt* at that moment, I never left him . . . Don't forget, the story didn't end in his sense of

forsakenness. He found his way through it to put himself completely into my hands. Oh, what a moment that was!” (p. 96, italics original).

Perhaps we can say, along with what Young says and consistent with the biblical teaching noted above, that sin attacked or threatened or attempted to disrupt the unity of the Father and Son. Perhaps it was the Evil One’s desire to destroy the Trinity and to use the cross to do so! Perhaps the Son experienced for the first time in all eternity a disruption of his communion and communication with the Father. And the Father, for his part and from his side, while aware of his Son, knew that his Son’s awareness of him had gone blank. Jesus has no awareness of his Father’s presence, although the Father was never absent.

Perhaps this was the greatest suffering of Jesus on the Cross—the interruption of his communion and sense of the presence and love of his Father for him. And the Father felt and was affected in his own way by this suffering of his Son as well. But the Father never stopped being the Son’s Father and never stopped loving his Son, indeed was never absent in being with his Son, although the Son lost awareness of it. No, the Father (and Spirit) overcame the disruptive and destructive power of evil to bring back to fullness their communion in holy loving. And in this way, perhaps we see more deeply into the suffering God (Father, Son and Spirit) willingly and gladly went through for us and our salvation.

Far from being heretical and unbiblical Young’s depiction of the wounds of the Father worthily upholds the unity of the Trinity and shows us the cost of our salvation affecting the whole Trinity. In this way he illuminates the unimaginable depths of God’s love for us to bring us back into communion and fellowship with him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### Questions about Scripture

#### **Does *The Shack* Undermine the Authority of Scripture?**

Some have claimed that Young weakens the authority of Scripture and offers new personal revelations as normative for knowing God. Is this the case? I don’t think so. Here’s why.

First, Young’s primary complaint is not about Scripture or its authoritative status. It is about what he was taught Scripture said or how the Bible was interpreted to him. He expresses his skepticism about his formal training in seminary and about doctrinal systems that claim to be faithful to Scripture but are not necessarily so (pp. 65 and 91).

At one place the narrator reveals Mack’s impressions of his seminary training and says, “God’s voice had been reduced to paper and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects” (pp. 65-66). Who had reduced God’s voice to paper? Clearly Mack believes it was the teaching he received about the Bible and the training in how to rightly interpret it that had done so.

*The Shack* does not claim that the Bible is merely a piece of paper that can be dismissed. Rather Mack is critiquing the teaching he received about the Bible. This passage doesn’t tell us what exactly Mack thinks about the Bible itself, but *The Shack* tells us he believes his teachers had reduced God’s interaction to speaking only through the Bible when correctly

interpreted by those teachers. Apparently in this approach there was no longer any actual connection between God, the Bible and its readers. Mack was left only with words on a page and given proper techniques to mine their meaning.

Mack came to believe that many things he was taught were not necessarily faithful to Scripture but were, as we hear Jesus himself warning, the “traditions” of men that actually can make void the word of God (Matthew 15:6). Jesus questioned the interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures by the Jewish religious leaders of his day. Jesus does this when he says, “You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you . . .” (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). Questioning the authority of human teaching about Scripture is hardly the same thing as denying or minimizing the place and value of Scripture.

Now it is true that a wholesale dismissal of all or most teaching and doctrine that attempt to be true to the realities in Scripture is unwarranted. That would be harmful to our spiritual well-being. This danger would be especially true if we doubt that any human being could grasp and communicate faithfully the essential message of the Bible. That would severely limit if not nullify God’s Word. If God was faithful to provide his written Word, then we should be optimistic that the same God could provide the church, the body of Christ, some faithful preachers and teachers down through the ages to interpret Scripture and help us understand its meaning.

But such teachings should never be taken on the same level as Scripture itself, just as Young’s critique presupposes. So the Church as a whole should critically but humbly measure those teachings by the biblical revelation. Such a process should lead us, as a church, to find certain teachings more faithful to the biblical revelation than others. Young is seeking to contribute his part to this task in the form of his book.

Young does not present his own doctrine of Scripture nor provide an explanation of the purpose and place of doctrines of the church. This may leave readers with little understanding of the place of theological teaching in the life of the church and individuals. And if there’s a criticism of Young, that should be a primary target. It would have been good for him to include something about the place of theology or doctrine in the life of the Christian. But in practice we can see that Young does not dismiss Scripture as authoritative nor uncritically jettison all teaching and doctrine related to Scripture.

The biblical basis he draws on for his own understanding is captured in hundreds of allusions he makes to passages of Scripture, especially from the New Testament. Anyone who has studied the Bible in depth will recognize Young’s extensive familiarity with Scripture since most every page of his book is infused with references to biblical material. What Young critically engages and then rejects are certain understandings and interpretations of biblical texts. But he then goes on to offer what he believes to be better and more faithful understandings. In doing so, he thereby affirms the task of Christians now and in the past attempting to gain a faithful, if human, understanding of the message of Scripture.

While he does not indicate it, his particular understanding, expressed in his unique literary way, does line up well with a prominent strand of Christian teaching presented through the

ages. But only those familiar with the history of Christian teaching could be expected to recognize that. For the rest of us, those who are familiar with the creeds and confessions of the early church (e.g. the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed) will recognize his theological conformity to those longstanding summaries of the Christian faith.

But Young's theological understanding and interpretation of Scripture does not align well with certain other strands of theology on issues which go beyond the central concerns expressed in those early confessions. For example, he differs from some on how to understand the relations in the Trinity or the nature of Christ's atoning work. (See the responses to other questions above on how Young differs theologically with other Christian interpretations.)

Young approaches Scripture by taking it as a whole (avoiding prooftexting) and by having a center located in the being and character of God known and revealed in Jesus to be the Trinity. Young most clearly indicates his stance on the place and central message of the Bible when Sarayu says to Mack, "The Bible doesn't teach you about rules. It is a picture of Jesus . . . And you will hear me and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for a relationship—a way of coming to be with us" (pp. 197-98). The Bible leads us to Jesus who leads us into right relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To review then: Young's extensive allusions to the Bible's message and story throughout *The Shack*, the positive statements he does make about the Bible itself (though few), and his conformity to the teaching of the early creeds of the church (nearly universally accepted throughout the Christian church today) all bear witness to his regard for the normative and authoritative place of Scripture. His critical engagement with various interpretations and understandings of Scripture reveal a strong skepticism (perhaps too strong) of human formulations of biblical teaching. But his skepticism does not reach the point of complete dismissal since he offers his own understanding of the biblical message and because his own understanding does align with some, but of course not all, strands of Christian theology.

His strongest critics are those with whom he has the greatest theological differences. But the differences are theological and are about correct interpretation of the Bible, not about its authority. You can disagree about another's understanding of Scripture without questioning Scripture's unique and unequalled authority.

### **Does *The Shack* Advocate Other Revelations that Rival Scripture?**

Some claim that Young teaches that there are other sources of revelation about God that rival or displace Scripture. There is a special concern that personal experience is set forth as just such a rival source. Is this an accurate understanding of what Young presents?

As mentioned above, Young does make extensive use of the Bible to inform his entire book. But he does believe that God's interaction with humans is not strictly limited to Scripture, especially to human interpretations of it. But some want to know if Young has left behind an essential Christian principle? Hasn't God limited himself to only speaking to us through the

Bible? We can simply answer, no. Limiting God's communication and interaction to Scripture doesn't do justice to the Bible's own position. Rather that is a reduction of it.

God communicates and interacts in a variety of ways with people, namely by his Holy Spirit. Young's critique in effect amounts to the charge that some theological teachings about God and the Bible entirely neglect the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit (Sarayu). The "direct communication with God" (p. 66), that Mack's narrator mentions and that critics object to, refers to the gracious communicating activity of the Holy Spirit, not just any old human experience.

Young has a high and biblical view of the work of the Holy Spirit, not a low view of the Bible.

The Holy Spirit is shown in *The Shack* to interact directly with people and to address them deeply in their hearts, minds and spirits. I think we can say that the Holy Spirit speaks objectively to us in our subjectivity, but the Holy Spirit isn't the same thing as our subjectivity.

Now certainly the Holy Spirit has everything to do with the Bible: its original inspiration (1 Timothy 3:16) and our ongoing illumination to rightly hear God's voice in Scripture. In fact, it is the Spirit who makes the Bible more than a piece of paper. For without the Spirit that book would not be more than that. It would remain nothing more than "the letter that kills" (2 Corinthians 3:7).

It is the Spirit's on-going ministry that "opens" eyes and hearts to hear the message that the Apostles were preaching (Acts 16:14; 26:18). It is the Spirit that brings about the conviction of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). It is the Spirit himself that bears witness to our spirits (Romans 8: 16) and intercedes for us in prayer (Romans 8:26). The Spirit enables us to understand God's gifts and teaches us so that we can interpret spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). And given the fallenness of humankind, it is only by the Spirit God that we see that the "heavens declare the glory of God" and can perceive in creation his "invisible nature [and] eternal power and deity" (Romans 1:19-20). There is no revelation of God without the working of the Spirit, both through Scripture and also outside of it, such as through nature.

The biblical view is that God does indeed interact directly with people, both believing and unbelieving, both in connection with Scripture and also apart from Scripture, and both by the Holy Spirit. But doesn't this amount to unmediated communication of God with sinners? No. The mediation that is needed for the Spirit to so minister, especially by indwelling the believer, is that of Jesus Christ. So yes, a mediator is needed, but that mediator is not in the first place the Bible. Rather it is Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). It is a theological mistake to reduce mediation to Scripture alone, ruling out the ministry of the Spirit based on the mediation of Christ.

So Young's conviction that the Spirit interacts with people in ways not directly connected to the Bible is in accord with biblical teaching. Those who restrict God's interaction to the

Bible have indeed neglected the working of the Spirit who “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). And the working of the Spirit in this way certainly cannot be said to undermine or downplay the authority of Scripture, since the authority of Scripture derives from that same Spirit.

### **Is the “Multnomah Legend” Another Source of Revelation?**

Critics have noted several places where they believe Young teaches that there are sources of revelation that are equal to or superior to Scripture. Early on in the book (p. 27) Mack recalls the time his daughter, Missy, wanted him to retell the legend of the daughter of the Indian chief of the Multnomah tribe. The legend involves the gods requiring a willing human sacrifice to end the death-dealing illness spreading throughout the tribe. The chief's daughter decides to climb up to the top of the ridge and throw herself off to satisfy the gods and stop the illness among those she so loved. After she does so the plague stops. Then, at the place from where she leapt to her death, a waterfall subsequently appeared and still flows to this day. Mack liked the story because it “had all the elements of a true redemption story, not unlike the story of Jesus that she [Missy] knew so well (p. 29).

Some have claimed that Young teaches God reveals himself in a saving way through stories like this. Does he? No, Young makes no such claim. Later on in the book Mack has occasion to reflect again on the legend of Multnomah Falls (p. 185). He queries Papa about whether that story explains why his own daughter had to die.

He asks, “Is that what this is about? Did she have to die so you could change me?”

Papa snaps back, “Whoa there, Mack . . . That’s not how I do things” (p. 185).

Papa outright denies that the legend explains how God works. It’s actually misleading! Unlike the gods of Multnomah, he can work good out of unspeakable tragedies, but doesn’t cause them or need them. God doesn’t need suffering to accomplish his good purpose. Thinking that way Papa says, “will only lead you to false notions about me. Grace doesn’t depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors” (p. 185). So the legend, for all its parallels to the gospel, not only does not save anyone, it teaches false notions about God rather than revealing God.

Now there is a certain sense, Young believes, in which God can use even this misleading story. Papa explains that Missy’s love for the story was useful. “That’s how she came to appreciate what Jesus did for her and the whole human race” (p. 185). The story served as a means to point to what Jesus really did for us. But of course since so much is misleading about that story, once she met and understood Jesus’ different kind of sacrifice, she would naturally leave behind the pointer and believe in what it pointed to, the reality in the Cross of Christ. The legend of the Multnomah Princess has no further use.

So we see in his explanation of the use of the story that it is not an equal authority or source of revelation, but a very flawed means that God graciously uses to lead some to the greater truth. This understanding seems to be similar to how Paul approached the Athenian philosophers and appealed to their belief in an “unknown god” (Acts 17: 23). But God’s

using certain stories that might have some parallels to the gospel hardly amounts to subverting or replacing Scripture as an authority, especially when it is noted that in themselves they are misleading.

### **Can the Spirit Communicate Through Art or Music?**

In a conversation with Sarayu near the end of the book, Mack realizes that his time of interacting so directly with God is coming to an end. He asks, “Will I always be able to see you or hear you like I do now, even if I’m back home?”

Sarayu replies: “Mackenzie, you can always talk to me and I will always be with you, whether you sense my presence or not.”

Mack continues, “I know that now, but how will I hear you?”

Then comes the reply critics point out. Sarayu says: “You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours, Mackenzie” (p. 195). Towards the end of their conversation Mack follows up, “So, will I see you again?” And Sarayu explains, also to the consternation of some critics, “Of course. 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. My ability to communicate is limitless. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways” (p. 198).

First, note that Young affirms the communication of God by the Spirit through the Bible. But he does also indicate the Spirit’s communication in other ways as well. But as noted above, this is not unbiblical. In addition to the ways indicated above, we should note that as prophesied by Joel and Jeremiah and confirmed at Pentecost, the Spirit puts his laws within us and writes it upon our hearts, gives visions and enables his people to speak forth his word (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16). Sarayu’s words echo this very biblical teaching.

In the book of Acts we read that a decision made by the apostles and elders was confirmed by their discernment that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Throughout the New Testament, being filled with the Spirit is not limited to reading Scripture correctly. The Spirit works in the hearts and minds of his people. Jesus tells his apostles, who might face persecution, that the Spirit will “teach you at that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:12) The Spirit is called a teacher who will “teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). And the Holy Spirit of God is said to teach us to love (1 Thessalonians 4:8-9). The Holy Spirit can work directly in and upon persons, especially those who belong to Jesus Christ—and that is not subjectivism or relativism.

Furthermore, the Spirit is said to give gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-13) and give rise to the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness (Galatians 5:22) in people who then bear witness to his working. In the Old Testament the Spirit is said to equip those constructing the tabernacle with special artistic abilities as well as intelligence, knowledge, working with metals, stone and wood, linen and with “every skilled craft” (Exodus 35:30-35). Thus, just

as Sarayu says, the art or music of those individuals so gifted would indeed point to the Spirit of God.

This work of the Spirit with individuals is in addition to the creation itself bearing witness to the glory of God. And throughout the New Testament, Christians indwelt by the Spirit are said to bear witness through their lives and love to God (John 13:35). So there are a variety of ways that God interacts with people that bear a witness to him besides Scripture.

Now it is true that such witnesses are not in the end regarded in the Bible as normative and authoritative as Scripture itself and the preaching of the Gospel. Nevertheless, God uses these as additional, if secondary, means to bear witness to himself and his working in the world. And there is no reason to believe that this biblical teaching detracts from biblical authority, just as they don't in the Bible's own view.

While Young does not explicitly say how the various witnesses to God are related, his affirmation of the Spirit's work in people and through creation to point to God does not downplay the role of Scripture any more than does the teaching of the Bible regarding the Spirit's ministry and the Christians' and creation's witness. But those critics who claim that God only makes himself known through the Bible and in no other secondary ways have, I'm afraid, downplayed the ministry of the Holy Spirit as indicated in Scripture itself! Young's book counters that theological error.

### **So What Is the Nature of Scripture According to *The Shack*?**

Now this leaves one last question open. Does Young understand Scripture to have a unique authority above these other witnesses? Young does not speak to that issue directly. What he does say indicates that Scripture is not at all on the same level as the authority of human teachers and interpreters, but is certainly higher since it is able to call them into question. We can also say that it has its unique authority because of its connection with the work of the Spirit. This is clearly evident in the fact that the primary discussions about revelation and the Bible take place between Mack and Sarayu, who represents the Holy Spirit. And that connection with the Spirit does indeed place it higher than any human authority or experience.

We have already noted that Young does not deny the Bible's unique authority nor offer any rival sources that displace the Bible's authority. And we do have a couple of places where Young affirms a central role for the Bible. He does believe the Spirit gives the Bible its authority but also works outside of it. While he doesn't exactly say how these two workings are related, he does assume they are at least coordinated and not in opposition. But note, both are workings of the Spirit who is above all human authority and experience.

The most significant evidence for Young's affirmation of the unique and unequalled authority of Scripture for knowing God is in the very way the novel is put together. The plentiful allusions and the teaching and explanations parallel to the Bible, permeating the entire book, give normative shape and substance to the entire message of *The Shack*. So, I think we can safely conclude that Young does assume the unique, normative and unrivalled authority of Scripture. But we should also say that including a discussion about the nature of

the Bible's authority and its place in relation to other workings of the Spirit that bear a distinct witness to God would have been helpful to rule out any potential remaining ambiguity.

In summary, Young has highlighted the full working of the Spirit without denigrating the place of the Bible as God's primary and normative revelation. He has clearly subordinated all human teaching and doctrine to biblical revelation and has in practice demonstrated his own submission to the teaching of Scripture. We see this because the Bible informs and drives all his various critiques of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Scripture. The Bible is also the source of the positive points he makes about the nature and character of the Triune God, the goodness of God and God's victory in Christ over evil and his offer of forgiveness to all.