

Tearing Down the Shack
Karl Bjorn Erickson

I was looking forward to reading William Young's bestseller *The Shack*, as I had heard positive reviews from both friends and family. Perhaps most importantly, though, the tale is set in the beautiful Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, an area known as "America's Little Switzerland." It's a remote and picturesque region of pristine wilderness covering thousands of square miles and including both the Eagle Cap Wilderness and the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. Ever since I first ventured into the Wallowas (pronounced Wul-OW-wuhs) some years ago, the region has captured my imagination. When I picked-up the *The Shack* while on vacation in Texas, I was looking forward not only to a good read, but to rich descriptions evoking the unique imagery of the Pacific Northwest. Unfortunately, I quickly encountered one serious theological error after another--and a surprising number of editorial mistakes. The problem, however, is that one has to frequently read the book with a critical eye in order to catch the seriousness of many of these concerns. Sadly, there is not space enough to address everything I would like--from the feminine representation of God the Father to the narrative blunder when it comes to Mack's recognition of the shack in the note. This review will provide more than a half dozen major reasons why it's definitely time to tear down *The Shack*, a rambling sermon in the guise of a story, and why it's also just as important to take a stand against the modernism so clearly reflected in its pages.

First of all, some mistakenly categorize this book as allegorical fiction, but that genre doesn't quite fit. While we may passionately disagree with the author's message, what you see is what you get; there is no hidden meaning or carefully nuanced language. The author himself classifies the story as more along the lines of a parable or metaphor, which seems accurate enough. For those fortunate enough to have avoided a visit to the shack, the plot is relatively simple. Mack (Mackenzie) Phillips is a lukewarm Christian father whose young daughter Missy is kidnapped from a family camping trip to Lake Wallowa. This takes place four years before the story begins. After the kidnapping, her father stays behind and works with law enforcement in an effort to locate Missy. Information comes to light that suggests that she has been kidnapped by a serial killer, and a tip sends Mack and the searchers speeding to a remote area of wilderness in which they discover an abandoned shack.

There, they find only blood stains and Missy's discarded clothing. So begins a painful period in Mack's life that is called "The Great Sadness." The more Christ-centered life of Mack's wife, Nan, is exemplified by the familiar term of "Papa" she uses when talking about God. Fast forward those years ahead to a wintery day alone at Mack's remote home, and he is surprised to receive a note in his mailbox from Papa. It suggests they get together at "the shack," which he surprisingly recognizes as the same place where his daughter's bloodied clothing was found. He makes a visit and finds God waiting. God the Father is represented as a jovial, if stereotypic,

African American woman who goes by the name Papa. Christ is portrayed as a Jewish carpenter, and the Holy Spirit is described as Sarayu, a petite Asian woman. Without disclosing any spoilers for those who might care, the rest of the story mostly consists of the dialogue between Mack and the three persons of the Trinity as they discuss elements of faith and life.

Forgiveness and Free Will

A prominent theme of the story is the nature of forgiveness, but there is also confusion here. The following sentence of dialogue, which concerns a discussion between Mack and Papa about Missy's murderer, gives us an insight into the problem. "When you forgive someone you certainly release them from from judgement, but without true change, no real relationship can be established." Although, there is a degree of ambiguity in this quote, one key error is the assertion that our forgiveness in some way binds God. By forgiving the person, Mr. Young suggests that we are removing the obligation or necessity for that individual to seek forgiveness for himself, to actually be repentant--at least in terms of judgement if not the "relationship". If this were true, however, it would cancel our free will. We would be forgiven and removed from judgement without having to express any degree of remorse or repentance. The Catechism of the Catholic Church eloquently explains the true nature of repentance in the paragraph below.

1431 *Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called animi cruciatus (affliction of spirit) and compunctio cordis (repentance of heart).*

While our Lord calls us to forgive all those who do us harm (seventy times seven), our forgiveness in and of itself is not sufficient for the person who sinned against us. There must be repentance on that person's part, since we can't force someone to confess his sin and repent. It must be an act of the individual's own free will. I will venture, however, that our forgiveness of the person combined with prayer may go a far in becoming a tool of God's grace within the life of the particular sinner. And, since we are all sinners, this serves to remind us all the more of the need to "forgive those who trespass against us." Our very spiritual lifeblood depends on this. After all, as we forgive, so will we be forgiven.

Universalism

In a book which aims to stare unflinchingly at the ugly face of pain and suffering, it's important to note that neither Satan nor the devil are ever mentioned. There is, in fact, nothing in the book which would convict us of anything. Guilt and conscience are likewise ridiculed in favor of the vague "relationship." For illustration, see the concluding paragraphs of the twelfth chapter. Incredibly, the author has the following words said by Christ.

Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans, and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous.... I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa...

Before jumping into the critique, it is necessary to note the answer that Mack receives when he then asks Christ whether "all roads lead to you?" Jesus' answer is that "most roads don't lead anywhere." So, again there is an element of inconsistency or ambiguity present in the narrative. The reason likely has more to do with the editing efforts of the publisher, WindBlown Media, than anything else. I suspect that they were attempting to obfuscate things just a bit in order to deflect just this kind of criticism, but this is just my opinion.

First of all, the passage quoted above is not referring to those, who by no fault of their own, have never heard the saving message of the Gospel; that's a whole another article. The only meaning to take from the earlier quote is that there are indeed multiple paths to Christ. This, of course, runs counter to Scripture and Tradition. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

The Deity and Most Perfect Example of Christ

One of my strongest criticisms of this book is the manner in which it attacks the deity of Christ. The term "hypostatic union" reminds us of the two perfect natures of Christ: the Divine and the human mysteriously present within one person. As we read below from Philippians 2:5-8, He is, at once, all man and all God.

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

This most certainly is not the Christ of *The Shack*. Instead, Mr. Young has Papa observe in chapter six that “Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.” The author is attempting to carve up the natures of Christ, re-creating the Creator, and dismissing the deity of Christ, man and God.

With all the tangents and conversational digressions the author asks the poor reader to patiently endure, it’s also important to briefly note the omission of Mary. Given the "down home" nature of life in the shack some mention of Mary would seem to fit into the conversation. After all, in Jesus' time there was actually this idea of honoring your father and mother. Is she just a vessel to be used and then forgotten? Because, reading between the lines, that appears to be one of this author's many misguided little messages.

Symbolic Incongruity

The reader too frequently encounters sections that convey unclear or contradictory meanings. An excellent example of this kind of bewildering writing is found when Jesus washes Papa’s feet. For purposes of contrast, let’s start with reading from John 13:5-10.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Master, are you going to

wash my feet?” Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.”

The profound message of this passage is one of the teacher or master lowering himself to wash the feet of his disciples. It teaches the lesson of humility and servanthood, demonstrating the necessity to place ourselves last. The strength and symbolism of the message, however, hinges upon the juxtaposition of roles: the teacher serving his disciples. Contrast this clear meaning with the strange and disturbing ambiguity and confusion of Mr. Young’s following prose from the opening paragraphs of the seventh chapter.

Sarayu had already started wiping the goop from the floor and cupboards, but Jesus went straight to Papa and, kneeling at her feet, began to wipe off the front of her clothes. He worked down to her feet and gently lifted one foot at a time, which he directed into the basin where he cleaned and massaged it. “Ooooh, that feels sooo good!” exclaimed Papa...

Besides coming across as just a bit creepy, the narrative loses any shadow of the meaning or depth found within John’s Gospel because it fails to describe a relationship of unequals. Since it

sheds no light on the Trinity, nor does it expand upon our knowledge of God or man, we're left scratching our heads as to what precisely the author is attempting to convey.

The Trinity

Part of the challenge in analyzing exactly what's wrong with *The Shack* in regards to its trinitarian message is that there exists a certain inconsistency within the spiritual universe created by the author. Still, there is a definite leaning in the narrative towards Modalism or Sabellianism, which makes the heretical error of understanding the Trinity as three faces or modes of God as opposed to the three distinct persons of the Trinity. As Catholic Answers put it, "He [a Libyan priest named Sabellius] claimed there is only one person in the Godhead, so that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one person with different "offices," rather than three persons who are one being in the Godhead, as the orthodox position holds." It is important that we don't confuse Modalism with an interesting theological term called *communication of idioms*. As Dr. Scott Hahn points out in his wonderful book entitled *Hail, Holy Queen*, this rule is what allows us to confidently call Mary the Mother of God. It's saying that Christ's two natures both reflect pure Truth. Whether they are human or divine attributes, they are all dimensions of the true nature of Christ Himself. It is by this principle that we may make statements such as God fell while carrying the cross, since God and Jesus are one.

One of the most telling passages concerning Modalism is found in the sixth chapter of *The Shack*.

Papa didn't answer, only looked down at their hands. His gaze followed hers and for the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his. She allowed him to tenderly touch the scars, outlines of a deep piercing, and he finally looked up again into her eyes.

In passages like the one quoted above, Mr. Young is going further than simply blurring the lines between the persons of the Trinity; he is, I would suggest unknowingly, re-making the Trinity in the form suggested by Sabellius and his third century followers. It may further help to briefly quote from Saint Mehtodius' *Oration on the Psalms* in regards to his response to this heresy.

For the kingdom of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is one, even as their substance is one and their dominion one. Whence also, with one and the same adoration, we worship the one deity in three persons, subsisting without beginning, uncreated, without end, and to which there is no successor. For neither will the Father ever cease to be the Father, nor again the Son to be the Son and King, nor the Holy Ghost to be what in substance and personality he is. For nothing of the Trinity will suffer diminution, either in respect of eternity, or of communion, or of sovereignty

For book which rails against religious authority, it's amusing in one sense that so much of an attempt is made at explaining the mysterious nature of The Trinity. The Trinity, after all, is not a belief made clear in a literal reading of Scripture; it is the result of Tradition and the Church. In other words, the author is indirectly attacking his own argument, since he is relying upon Tradition and the Fathers of the Church for our acceptance of the Trinity in the first place. In fact, when the author says through a character that evil is the absence of good, he also is borrowing the argument of Saint Augustine. So, he attacks the Church and Tradition, while at the same time, he swipes little bits and pieces from here and there--as long as it satisfies his preconceived notions of God and "Her" nature.

Authority and the Church

One of the central themes of *The Shack* is to take, as Windblown Media puts it, "...a harsh look at how many of our religious institutions and practices have blinded people to the simple Gospel and replaced it with a religion of rules and rituals that have long ceased to reflect the Lord of Glory." As far as the author is concerned, the overused word *relationship* conveys all that is important between man and God. This is another case of the fabric of truth being stretched to conceal the lie. The truth, of course, is that we should all strive for a closer relationship with our Savior. While Catholics view conversion as a work in progress, many do

point to a particular moment where their lives turned and changed course to follow Christ, a second conversion. This pursuit of Christ entails a relationship, but that only tells part of the story. Let's first take a look at the author's message as it comes into focus in these words from Papa in chapter 16.

Papa spoke gently and reassuringly . “Son, this is not about shaming you. I don't do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. They don't produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness, and that is why they were nailed into Jesus on the cross.”

Some chapters earlier Sarayu describes rules as only having “power to accuse.” So, as we can see, there is no love lost between Mr. Young and any dimension of religious authority. The problem is that when we dismiss authority and conscience, we blind ourselves. After all, the true nature of a relationship is being ignored. That is, relationships are not without work, trials, and sacrifice. Look at the effort involved in making a marriage successful, for instance. Do we say there are no rules with regards to how we treat our spouse, no expectations? As James reminds us in James 1:22, we must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

There are clear expectations and boundaries within all relationships, and this is precisely what the author turns a blind eye to as he attempts to mold God in the image of man. Look at the simple message of John 14:15. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Another

passage that reflects the reality of the eternal relationship for which we were fashioned is 1 John 5:1-4.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by him. In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.

As I wrote in *This Rock* a couple of years ago, our story of conversion or enrichment to the fullness and beauty of the Catholic Church from the Protestant tradition had a great deal to do with the authority and sure-course of the Catholic Church. It was C.S. Lewis, for instance, who saw the dangers so clearly facing the Anglican Church and wrote his stirring essay entitled “Fern-seed and Elephants.” We were present in the Episcopal Church at the time a practicing homosexual named Gene Robinson was ordained bishop of New Hampshire and the denomination began to weaken and break all around us. This is not the unity Christ calls us to in verses such as John 17:11. In order to attain unity and avoid heretical teaching, authority is a prerequisite. In light of Mr. Young’s methods of biblical interpretation, a particularly good example at this point would concern sola scriptura. Does the Holy Spirit lead different denominations in opposite directions concerning the same Bible passage? The answer clearly is

no, so this means that not everyone can be right. This is the shepherding role of God-given authority, and this role is entirely misunderstood and mischaracterized by Mr. Young.

The last straw for this reviewer was a section towards the end of the book where Mr. Young essentially mocks the Holy Eucharist (and the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John). “Without any ritual, without ceremony, they savored the warm bread and shared the wine and laughed about the stranger moments of the weekend.” It was all I could do to finish the rest of the book. This is a work which seems to appeal more on an emotional level than on a rational or theological one, and this is important to bear in mind when discussing the book with one or two of its many fans. In the end, we have to ask can God use this book? As Catholics, we understand that God can bring good out of bad circumstances, and I believe that this is no exception. Still, I'd agree with Chuck Colson and James Dobson of Focus on the Family who both have come out publicly against this book and its deceptive message. Whether you ever pick-up *The Shack*, or not, its mistakes are a clear reflection of the errors of our own time. It's modernism's answer to the question of God. Sadly, like the book itself, modernism has no real answer. That's why we must be ready to articulate our faith and take a stand for Christ and His Church.

About the Writer

Although Karl Erickson considers himself primarily a children's writer, his articles have appeared in ***America, The National Catholic Weekly***, Catholic Answers' ***This Rock, Episcopal Church News***, Seattle Pacific University's ***Response, TiberRiver Catholic Book Reviews***, as well as the ***Portland Tribune***.

In addition to writing, his wife, Kimberly Erickson, and he enjoy opportunities to speak and share their family's spiritual journey. Karl is also one of the founding members of the Catholic Writers' Guild, a new association of Catholic writers and artists engaged in trying to make a difference for God and bring creative renewal to Catholic literature. Through the CWG, Karl has also recently begun adapting his articles and fiction for possible future radio broadcasts.

Kimberly Erickson, is an artist and the illustrator of his children's books: ***Toupee Mice*** and ***Tristan's Travels, Scared Spitless***. Kimberly is also the daughter of artist John Carroll Collier, the celebrated sculptor of the Catholic Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City. Kimberly recently completed a yearlong project water gilding a fifteen-foot frame for Saint Peter's Catholic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. The installed frame now features a painting of Saint Peter and Christ by her father. It should be no surprise, then, that the intersection of faith and the arts is of great interest to Karl and Kimberly Erickson.

In Karl's "spare time", he works for the State of Oregon--as he has done in a variety of positions for the last decade (between the Oregon State Department of Revenue and the Oregon State Employment Department). While he currently works as a tax auditor, his identity is closest tied to his faith, family, and writing.