

An Aunt Jemima father, a handyman son, and a tinkerbelle holy spirit

a theological review of William Paul Young's semi-radical yet best- selling Christian novel, *The Shack*¹



by Paul Alan Laughlin

Imagine my surprise to discover that while we Fellows and Associates of Westar Institute have been about our subversive business of nudging traditionalist Christians to reexamine their faith with post-Enlightenment eyes, an improvised explosive device of sorts has been set off in the midst these despisers of modernity's wicked historical-critical ways by one of their own! Said weapon came in a seemingly innocuous form: a small, self-published novel penned by a first-time Evangelical Christian author, a volume that slowly and quietly exploded on the publishing scene, initially affecting only those closest to it. Meanwhile, most of us in liberal-progressive religious circles have been too far removed from this branch of the mainstream and too busy with our own strategies and tactics to notice or care.

1. Los Angeles, CA: Windblown Media, 2007. Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings are listed on the title page as collaborators. They are two friends of the author who read his book early on, encouraged him, and helped him pay for the initial self-publication. The reader is cautioned that the following review of a current best-seller and publishing phenomenon discloses much about its plot and main characters. It is highly recommended, therefore, that the would-be reader of this article pause, obtain a copy of the book, and read it before proceeding here. Despisers of fiction, of course, as well as aficionados of great fiction may proceed undaunted, since members of neither group will want to read the book discussed here.

I am no exception. I did not know about William Paul Young's book *The Shack* until one day in early December 2008. I was looking, as I occasionally do, at the Amazon.com Web page for my eight-year-old book, *Remedial Christianity*, to check on its current ranking in sales. While there, I glanced down at the "Customers who bought this book also bought" list, which changes regularly and often, apparently at the whim of the reading audience. Mentioned there this time among other suggested volumes was *The Shack*. I called up and read its description and some of its 2,000 customer reviews, all of which piqued my curiosity. Seeing that the book's discounted price was only a little over eight dollars,² I ordered it; and as I waited the two days it took for delivery, I read up on the book even more, and became increasingly eager for it to arrive.

Back Story and Story

One of the things I found in my anticipatory researches was that the genesis of the book is a good story in itself. The author, whose friends call him "Paul," is a survivor of child abuse, which he endured when he was living with his missionary parents among the tribal people of New Guinea. His family having relocated to Canada when he was ten, he grew up, underwent what clearly was a very conservative Christian college and seminary education, and became a youth minister. That career ended when, at 38, he was discovered having an extramarital affair, which his marriage somehow managed to endure. Not so his ministry, however, and he thereafter had a lackluster and spotty employment history. Some fifteen years later, in 2005, he began to work on the book, which he says was intended only for his wife and six children; but when their friends read and enjoyed the book and eagerly passed it on to others, demand grew and, with the help of two friends (both former pastors), he soon self-published the book for a slightly wider distribution through Protestant Christian bookstores. The three business partners then watched sales soar sufficiently—largely as a result of word-of-mouth publicity—to warrant securing the services of a major publishing group to take over the marketing and distribution in major bookstore chains and on amazon.com. As a result, within a year of its publication in 2007, the book had skyrocketed to the #1 ranking on the New York Times Trade Fiction Best Seller List, and at this writing has remained there for 28 weeks, with well over a million copies sold. The online readers' comments I had read tended to be at either the 5-star maximum or the 1-star minimum, at a proportion of about 5 to 1.³ The majority of the very positive reviewers describe the

2. Its regular price is \$14.99.

3. The ratio is hard to pin down, since the 1-star reviewers included a goodly number of customers who complained that they hadn't read the book because their orders for it had not been filled.

book as life-changing and faith-restoring, some calling it the best book they have ever read. Most of its online detractors, by contrast, charge it with being unbiblical, blasphemous, and theologically dangerous. In either or any case, *The Shack* clearly constitutes a publishing sensation and a cultural phenomenon that is almost certain to be made into a blockbuster movie.

Once the book arrived, I quickly discovered that while it is not a great piece of literature, the sometimes amateurish prose style is largely inoffensive and adequate to the story being told, a tale that is both compelling *and* contrived. It hinges on the kidnapping and murder of the six-year-old youngest daughter of an unremarkable fiftyish man nicknamed "Mack." The crime is committed by an unknown perpetrator in or around an old, remote, and ramshackle cabin located deep in the woods. Mack and his family are understandably devastated. Four pain-filled years later, he is surprised to find in his mailbox a surreptitiously delivered note asking him to return to the same "shack" where his daughter's bloody dress had been found soon after the crime. The typed note is signed "Papa," his wife's pet name for God. Mack follows the instructions skeptically, reluctantly, and secretly. And back at the shack, believe it or not, he meets not only God, but the entire Trinity—albeit not the one he had always imagined. Be that as it may, the result of Mack's weekend of confusing conversations and, yes, miraculous experiences with this unlikely Trio, is that the pall of deep sadness that has burdened him for his whole life, but most poignantly since his daughter's murder, is lifted. He returns home—after a severe, life-threatening, and gratuitous automobile accident on the way—with his faith in God restored and love and forgiveness for everyone in his heart.

Theological Risks, Contradictions, and Failures of Nerve

First and foremost among the theological innovations in this novel is the quirky Divine Threesome that Mack encounters in the shack. In the place of the expected Father, for example, we have a large, gentle, friendly, motherly, homemaker-type, black woman named Elousia (*El*, short for "Elohim," one of the Hebrew names for God + *ousia*, Greek for "being" or "Being"), but whom Mack inexplicably continues to call "Papa." Her favorite activity is cooking heaps of food and coaxing everyone to eat it in great volumes. Older readers may be forgiven for being reminded of the sweet, old, friendly, nurturing, and totally endearing advertising icon of yesteryear, Aunt Jemima—however politically incorrect she may be today. As for the rest of the Terrific Trio, in place of the dovish or fiery Holy Spirit of Christian tradition is a vaguely oriental and ephemeral female phantasm named Sarayu, a Sanskrit noun that means "wind," and is therefore synonymous with the New Testa-

ment Greek word *pnuema* ("breath," "wind," "spirit"). She is the least convincing of the novel Triad, a kind of larger but out-of-focus Tinkerbell, who leaves the reader yearning for something more substantial *and* assertive—perhaps a cross between a Warrior Princess and a Jedi Master. The Third Person of this goofy Trinity, the equivalent of the traditional Son, shows up (disappointingly) in the person of an unremarkable-looking, vapid-sounding, sometimes clumsy, and (I kid you not) stereotypically big-nosed Middle Eastern "Hebrew" male handyman wearing saw-dusty jeans and named "Jesus." (Okay, the story has its insensitive *and* downright hokey moments.)

In any case, Mack's sometimes tedious, certainly unsatisfying, and finally pace-killing discussions with this oddball Trinity—mostly presented in Chapters 6 and 7 of the novel—serve to introduce non-traditional theological concepts, while dismissing or ignoring a number of conventional ones. Notably absent from Young's theology are human depravity, divine judgment, eternal damnation, and even that old standby, hell. In their place is the notion that since the disobedience of the primordial couple in the Garden—which, for no apparent reason, "Papa" insists actually, factually happened—humanity has suffered the deleterious effects not of Original Sin, but of individuality and the hierarchical power structures (e.g., social, political, economic, and religious institutions) that fortify it. The "sins" that people commit are simply the results of this individuality and freedom of will, and are self-punishing. Missing as well, therefore, is a wrathful, vengeful, judgmental, and punitive God. In "His" place is the all-loving and forgiving Mama ("Papa") God and Her two Peers, all Three distinct but unified in a loving, coequal, circular, power-free and purely consensual relationship—and, if truth be told, an exceedingly vapid, sappy, and boring one. This Trinity, then, exudes nothing but grace, love, forgiveness, and—yes, indeed—salvation for all. This includes the serial murderer of Mack's little daughter, Mack's alcoholic and cruelly abusive father, and finally even Mack himself. For the narrative strongly hints that our long-depressed protagonist may be guilty of patricide, having placed strychnine in all of his father's booze bottles before running away from home for good at age thirteen, shortly before that abusive parent's untimely yet well-deserved death.

As I proceeded further into the book's slower-moving theological parts, I felt obliged to applaud this apparently evangelical Christian author for the theological risks he had taken. At the same time I regretted his obvious missed opportunities and apparent failures of nerve. Making the Holy Trinity two-thirds female and multi-racial, for example, was commendable; but depicting the second Person of the Trinity, not as the more abstract and therefore enigmatic *Son-qua-Logos*, but as a traditionally-conceived, convention-

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Mary stayed in banking and went back to school, completing a bachelor's degree at Florida International University and then a Doctor of Ministry degree at the South Florida Center of Theological Studies. She began a church in her home and, in 1982, made the jump to full-time church work with the establishment of the Universal Truth Center.

Mary first became aware of Westar and Bob Funk through his book, *Honest to Jesus*. She then began coming regularly to the spring and fall meetings of Westar and attended several summer school sessions. She and Bob had many discussions about Westar, religious literacy and her ministry in the church. These discussions led Bob to invite her to join the Westar board to help Westar with its interface with churches.

When the Campaign for Westar was launched with the Robert W. Funk Leadership Chair at its center, Dr. Tumpkin was one of the first to step forward and make a significant commitment. "I want to see Westar not only survive, but to get even better. When a charismatic leader like Bob passes, we must carry on his work. You have got to put your money in to something you believe in, and I very much believe in Westar."



An Aunt Jemima father *Continued from page 22*

al Jesus (p. 86) constituted a huge failure of imagination, nerve, or both on the part of the author. Ironically, a mere seven pages later, "Papa," the Father-turned-African-American female, explains that "To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf⁴ would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is *not* about reinforcing your religious stereotypes" (p. 93). Yet the cosmic-eternal Son turns out to be a garden-variety, stereotypical Jesus rather than, say, an illegal alien and homeless Hispanic or displaced Pakistani earthquake victim or poor Tibetan refugee longing to be back in what used to be his or her homeland—or, for that matter, a Krishna or a Buddha or a Lao-tzu. Also, the novel's explanation of the need for a Trinity—if "explanation" is even the right word—is lame. Paraphrased, it boils down to "I as God couldn't really love or model love for humanity without being in a loving peer relationship within Myself."

The book's sketchy doctrine of the Incarnation likewise holds out a promise that is never quite fulfilled. One is hopeful when the Jesus of Young's Trinity is described as totally human, empowered by God's love within *like every other human, just more perfectly*.⁵ For a liberal or progressive Christian, such a quantitative rather than qualitative difference from the rest of humanity is promising, as are the

pluralistic suggestion that all religions are paths that God might use to reach out lovingly to humanity and the universalistic claim that a loving God could not possibly judge Her/His children, but only love, forgive, and finally accept them into the divine fold. Along the way, however, and spectacularly in the end, the book gets hopelessly Christocentric—or just plain "Jesus-y," in a sentimental "Sweet Jesus" rather than an objective "historical Jesus" way. Moreover, the author clearly declares (at least twice) that in the end (as in "The End"), every knee must bow before Jesus and Him alone—and this for reasons especially unclear after the book's unconvincing explanation of the Atonement allegedly effected by His gracious self-sacrifice. While making theological inroads, you see, the novel never quite carries them to the point of clarity.

Conclusion

But despite its disappointments, liberal-progressive Christians will find much in this uneven novel to appreciate. As for me, the bottom line is that *The Shack* offers at the very least a quick and pleasant read as well as an excellent conversation-starter, not only between Christians across the entire theological spectrum, but between the faithful and the secular as well. Its literary and theological pretensions and shortcomings aside, *The Shack* must be congratulated for the fact that it has penetrated the consciousness and culture of Evangelical Christians and a growing host of others, and has thereby encouraged them to rethink their theology, and managed to inspire a goodly portion of all of its readers to think about their faith or non-faith. Let's face it: any book that has stimulated widespread conversation about religion *and* alarmed so many doctrinaire traditionalist Christians can't be all bad! **4R**

4. The wizard in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

5. See especially the dialogue in pp. 99-100, which would seem to make Jesus a perfection of human potential rather than the utterly unique God-man of the ancient Councils and Creeds. Yet the novel never explores the implications of this radical recasting of the divine-human relationship or its compatibility with the contention typical of mystically-based Eastern religious philosophies: namely, that we all have within us the same divine essence and potential as the great spiritual masters did—and do.