

THE SHACK: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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I. THE STORY LINE

- A. As a boy Mackenzie Phillips—“Mack”—was severely abused and beaten by his father. He ran away from home at 13 years of age.
- B. Mack grew up, became a decent man, attended a seminary, moved to Oregon, married, held a good job, had an interest in God and religion, attended church occasionally, but was “not very religious.”
- C. When the story begins Mack is about 50 years old, has five children with three still home, including a young daughter Melissa (Missy), who is about 6 ½ years old.
- D. The “Great Sadness” begins when Missy becomes the victim of a serial child killer. Captor and victim are traced to a tumble-down shack on a lake in a deep forest area. In the shack Missy’s blood-soaked dress is found, but nothing else. Mack descends into deep grief.
- E. About three years later Mack gets a strange note in his mailbox: “Mackenzie: It’s been a while. I’ve missed you. I’ll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. –Papa.” (“Papa” is the wife’s nickname for God.) To Mack this is all unbelievable. Why the *shack*? How can the note be explained? Is it a cruel hoax, or is it really from God? How could it be from God? Doesn’t God speak today only through Scripture?¹
- F. Mack feels compelled to go to the shack, unsure of what he would find. He enters it and finds only the original bloodstain. In a rage he trashes the shack, and says to God, “I hate you!” “Some ‘Papa’ you are!” On his way back to his vehicle, everything changes, and Mack finds himself in an alternate universe. Winter turns into a beautiful summer scene all around him. The shack becomes a lovely, sturdy log cabin. All is “postcard perfect” (81): smoke coming from the chimney, the sound of laughter. Mack returns to the cabin and is about to knock when he meets God face to face.

II. WHAT MACK FOUND IN “THE SHACK.”

- A. He found the three persons of the Trinity in distinct theophanies.
 1. God the Father—“Papa”—is in the form of a large, beaming African-American woman (82), a loving mother figure, and the cook/housekeeper. Her/his name is Elousia, “God of all being.”
 2. God the Son is the fully-human Jesus: wearing tools, covered with wood dust, straight from the carpenter shop.
 3. God the Holy Spirit is a small, wiry Asian woman named Sarayu (Sanskrit for air, wind), the gardener. She has a shimmery, mystical appearance.
 4. After meeting them, Mack thought about the Trinity but was confused by their appearances. “Which one of you is God?” “I am,” said all three in unison” (87).
- B. God’s purpose, by means of this direct encounter, was to straighten Mack out, to lift away his “great sadness” by explaining to him the true nature of God and the true meaning of all things. The explanation is summed up in one word: LOVE.
 1. The solution to all the world’s problems is LOVE, or more specifically, *loving relationships*.
 2. Mankind was originally created *for* love and *to* love.
 - a. Papa: “You . . . were created to be loved” (97).
 - b. The Trinity is the original love relationship (101-102). “We created you, the human, to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love” (124).
 - c. Jesus: “We want you to join us in our circle of relationship. . . . I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me” (146).
 3. But the original human beings had free will, and they used it not to *love* but to assert their own *independence*. This was the FALL. It ruined everything.
 - a. Papa: “Creation has been taken down a very different path than we desired” (123).
 - b. Jesus: “The world is broken because in Eden you abandoned relationship with us to assert your own independence” (146).
 - c. Papa: “All evil flows from independence, and independence is your choice” (190).

¹ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), 65. (All page numbers refer to this source.)

4. Now God is working to *restore/redeem* creation via the power of love. He is leading all to renounce everything that negates love and to enter into loving relationships with everyone. As it applies to Mack, he needs to “get right” especially with God, with his own father, and with Missy’s killer.
 - a. The solution to all problems is “learning to live loved” (175).
 - b. Jesus: “My purpose from the beginning was to live in you and you in me.”
Mack: “Wait, wait. Wait a minute. How can that happen? If you’re still fully human, how can you be inside me?”
Jesus: “Astounding, isn’t it? It’s Papa’s miracle. It is the power of Sarayu, my Spirit, the Spirit of God who restores the union that was lost so long ago.” “The human . . . can once more be fully indwelt by spiritual life, my life” (112-113).
5. This is the essence of the weekend Mack spends at the shack.

III. WHAT JACK FINDS IN *THE SHACK*. It contains a mixture of good and bad, as in the nursery rhyme:
 “There was a little girl who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead.
 “When she was good, she was very, very good; but when she was bad, she was horrid.”

A. The GOOD.

1. The book affirms many of the usual attributes of God, e.g.:
 - a. Transcendence (epistemological). Papa: “That you can’t grasp the wonder of my nature is rather a good thing. Who wants to worship a God who can be fully comprehended, eh? Not much mystery in that”(101).
 - b. Infinity. Papa: “By nature I am completely unlimited, without bounds”(98).
 - c. Immutability. Papa: “I am God. I am who I am. And unlike you, my wings can’t be clipped” (97-98).
 - d. Eternal. Jesus: “Time, as you know it, presents no boundaries to the one who created it” (172).
 - e. Omnipresence. Mack: “Have you been with me the entire time?” Sarayu: “Of course. I am always with you” (195).
 - f. Omniscience. Mack: “You must know—calling you Papa is a bit of a stretch for me.” Papa: “Of course I know. I always know” (91).
 - g. Foreknowledge (no comfort for Open Theism here!).
 - (1) Papa is listening to music by a group called Diatribe, an album named “Heart Trips.” She says, “Actually, these kids haven’t even been born yet” (90).
 - (2) Papa: “Adam chose to go it on his own, as we knew he would” (99).
 - (3) This foreknowledge is not in conflict with free will. Papa: “I don’t wonder what you will do or what choices you will make. I already know” (186-187; cf. 94, 222).
 - h. Goodness, love, grace (see below). Papa: “If you knew I was good and that everything . . . is all covered by my goodness, then . . . you would trust me” (126).
 - i. One thing God is not: he is not a vegetarian! Papa cooked “roast bird of some kind” for one meal (105), and bacon and eggs for breakfast (118).
2. The book affirms a doctrine of the Trinity that sees three distinct persons who are equally divine. Papa: “I am one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely the one” (101). There are no hints of Unitarianism (as in modalism), or of Arianism.
 - a. There is a serious problem, though, with what is called the economic Trinity.
 - b. There is not enough *distinction* among the various WORKS of the persons of the Trinity toward the creation. E.g., the incarnation and redemptive works seem to be shared equally by all three.
 - (1) Papa: “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human” (99).
 - (2) Papa’s human manifestation at the shack had the same nail-scars on her wrists as did Jesus (95). She says, “We were there *together*” (96).

3. Jesus himself is both fully God and fully man. Papa: “Jesus is fully human” and “he is also fully God” (99). Jesus: “I am fully God, but I am human to the core” (112).
 4. The basic approach to the problem of evil—a major theme of the book—is pretty close to the best view, i.e., the “free will defense.”
 - a. Out of love God created human beings with free will, foreknowing they would sin (222). All evil comes from free human choices.
 - b. God does not intervene at every potential sin. Jesus: “To force my will on you . . . is exactly what love does not do” (145).
 - c. But God will bring good out of it all at the end. Papa: “I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (125). “Everything . . . is all covered by my goodness” (126). “I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies” (185).
 - d. Papa: “Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don’t ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That 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” (185).
 - e. On the surface this sounds a lot like Romans 8:28. This will be discussed below.
- B. The BAD. [Almost everything bad in *The Shack* stems from the key thesis that LOVE is the only true reality, or the only thing that matters. All problems stem from a failure to relate to all others in love; all problems can be solved by a return to LOVE.]
1. The fundamental error throughout the book is the misrepresentation of the nature of God as LOVE ONLY. [This is serious false doctrine, and I have taught against it my entire career. The very essence of Christianity depends upon distinguishing TWO sides within God’s moral nature, and in seeing them as equally ultimate. The two sides are (1) *love* (mercy, grace) and (2) *holiness* (wrath, retribution). See Romans 11:22. See my book, *God the Redeemer*, chs. 5, 6. Seeing God as love *only* is a serious error in itself; it also leads to many other false doctrines, as will be seen below.]
 - a. This idea is introduced as soon as Mack meets Papa at the shack: “He felt the presence of love” (83).
 - b. This is why the *Trinity* is important: this is why God IS love, and why love and relationship are inherent in God.

[Papa:] “If I were simply One God and only One Person, then you would find yourself in this Creation without something wonderful, without something essential even. And I would be utterly other than I am.”

“And we would be without . . .?” Mack didn’t even know how to finish the question.

“Love and relationship. All love and relationship is possible for you *only* because it already exists within Me, within God myself. . . . I *am* love” (101).
 - c. [This is true enough, but:] *The Shack* sees God as love ONLY. A non-triune God would be non-relational and incapable of love. Papa: “That kind of god could possibly act without love, and that would be a disaster. And that, is surely *not* me.” “The God who is—the I who am I—cannot act apart from love.” That’s why “this weekend is about relationship and love” (102).
 - d. [Romans 11:22 says we should “consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God.” But see this exchange between Mack and Papa (186):]

[Mack:] “But I always liked Jesus better than you. He seemed so gracious and you seemed so . . .”

[Papa:] “Mean? Sad, isn’t it? He came to show people who I am and most folks only believe it about him. They still play us off like good cop/bad cop most of the time, especially the religious folk. When they want people to do what they think is right, they need a stern God. When they need forgiveness, they run to Jesus.”

“Exactly,” Mack said with a point of his finger.

“But we were all in him. He reflected by heart exactly. I love you and invite you to love me.”
 - e. [God’s holiness is just folded into or blended into God’s love, not distinguished from it.] As Mack observes the pure love between Jesus and Papa, “to be in the presence of such love expressed seemed to dislodge an inner emotional logjam, and while he didn’t understand exactly what he felt—it was good. What was he witnessing? Something simple, warm,

intimate, genuine; this was holy. Holiness had always been a cold and sterile concept to Mack, but *this* was neither” (107-108).

- f. According to *The Shack*, God’s anger is just one way his love expresses itself (118-119):

“You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people,” Mack observed with a suspicious look. “Are there any who you are *not* especially fond of?”

She [Papa] lifted her head and rolled her eyes as if she were mentally going through the catalogue of every being ever created. “Nope, I haven’t been able to find any. Guess that’s jes’ the way I is.”

Mack was interested. “Do you ever get mad at any of them?”

“Sho ‘nuff! What parent doesn’t? There is a lot to be mad about in the mess my kids have made and in the mess they’re in. I don’t like a lot of choices they make, but that anger—especially for me—is an expression of love all the same. I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I’m not.”

- g. Mack challenges this: “But what about your wrath? It seems to me that if you’re going to pretend to be God Almighty, you need to be a lot angrier.” “Weren’t you always running around killing people in the Bible? You just don’t seem to fit the bill” (119).

[Papa:] “I understand how disorienting all this must be for you, Mack. But the only one pretending here is you. I am what I am. I’m not trying to fit anyone’s bill.”

“But you’re asking me to believe that you’re God, and I just don’t see . . .” Mack had no idea how to finish his sentence, so he just gave up.

“I’m not asking you to believe anything, but I will tell you that you’re going to find this day a lot easier if you simply accept what is, instead of trying to fit it into your preconceived notions.”

“But if you are God, aren’t you the one spilling out great bowls of wrath and throwing people into a burning lake of fire? . . . Honestly, don’t you enjoy punishing those who disappoint you?”

At that, Papa stopped . . . and turned toward Mack. He could see a deep sadness in her eyes. “I am not who you think I am, Mackenzie. I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it” (119-120).

2. One seriously false implication *The Shack* draws from the thesis that love is the only true reality is this: LAW and RULES are inconsistent with love.

- a. Loving relationships and rule following simply do not mix. See this conversation between Mack and Sarayu (197-198):

[Mack:] “It feels like living out of relationship—you know, trusting and talking to you—is a bit more complicated than just following rules.”

“What rules are those, Mackenzie?”

“You know, all the things the Scriptures tell us we should do.”

“Okay . . .” she said with some hesitation. “And what might those be?”

“You know,” he answered sarcastically. “About doing good things and avoiding evil, being kind to the poor, reading your Bible, praying, and going to church. Things like that.”

“I see. And how is that working for you?”

He laughed. “Well, I’ve never done it very well. I have moments that aren’t too bad, but there’s always something I’m struggling with, or feeling guilty about. I just figured I needed to try harder, but I find it difficult to sustain that motivation.”

“Mackenzie!” she chided, her words flowing with affection. “The Bible doesn’t teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus. While words may tell you what God is like and even what he may want from you, you cannot do any of it on your own. Life and living is *in him* and in no other. My goodness, you didn’t think you could live the righteousness of God on your own, did you?”

“Well, I thought so, sorta . . .” he said sheepishly. “But you gotta admit, rules and principles are simpler than relationships.”

“It is true that relationships are a whole lot messier than rules, but rules will never give you the answers to the deep questions of the heart and they will never love you.”

. . . “I’m realizing how few answers I have . . . to anything. You know, you’ve turned me upside down or inside out or something.”

“Mackenzie, religion is about having the right answers, and some of their answers are right. But I am about the process that takes you to the *living answer* and once you get to him, he will change you from the inside. There are a lot of smart people who are able to say a lot of right things from their brain because they have been told what the right answers are, but they don’t know me at all. So really, how can their answers be right even if they are right, if you understand my drift? . . . So even though they might be right, they are still wrong.”

“I understand what you’re saying. I did that for years after seminary. I had the right answers, sometimes, but I didn’t know you. This weekend, sharing life with you has been far more illuminating than any of those answers.” . . . “So, will I see you again?” he asked hesitantly.

“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, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa’s goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us.”

[Note: this entire conversation commits the logical fallacy of FALSE CHOICE. Rules and relationships are not a matter of *either/or*, but *both/and*. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15).]

- b. But *The Shack* says, when we learn to share the *life of love* with God and others, we don’t need law. In fact, says Sarayu, “In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful” (203).

[Sarayu:] “Why do you think we came up with the Ten Commandments?” . . .

[Mack:] “I suppose, at least I have been taught, that it’s a set of rules that you expected humans to obey in order to live righteously in your good graces.”

Sarayu specifically denies this. “Actually, we wanted you to give up trying to be righteous on your own.” So that list of commands “was a mirror to reveal just how filthy your face gets when you live independently.” In fact, Jesus fulfilled all the law for you “so that it no longer has jurisdiction over you. . . . Jesus laid the demand of the law to rest.” . . .

“Are you saying I don’t have to follow the rules?” . . .

“Yes. In Jesus you are not under any law. All things are lawful. . . . Rules cannot bring freedom; they only have the power to accuse” (202-203).

- c. [The result of all this is just another version of Joseph Fletcher’s original “situation ethics”: love gives us the freedom to respond in any situation (1) without rules and requirements, without being *supposed* to do a certain thing; (2) without expectation that we should respond in a specific way; and (3) without responsibility.] See 205-206:

[Sarayu:] “Religion [which is a bad thing] must use law to empower itself and control the people who they need in order to survive. I give you an ability to respond and your response is to be free to love and serve in every situation, and therefore each moment is different and unique and wonderful.”

[Sarayu:] “Expectancy” is OK in a relationship, but “expectation” is not. “But what happens if I change that ‘expectancy’ to an ‘expectation’—spoken or unspoken? Suddenly, law has entered into our relationship. You are now expected to perform in a way that meets my expectations. Our living friendship rapidly deteriorates into a dead thing with rules and requirements. It is no longer about you and me, but about what friends are supposed to do, or the responsibilities of a good friend.” . . .

“But,” argued Mack, “if you didn’t have expectations and responsibilities, wouldn’t everything just fall apart?”

“Only if you are of the world, apart from me and under the law. Responsibilities and expectations are the basis of guilt and shame and judgment, and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as the basis for identity and value. You know well what it is like not to live up to someone’s expectations.” . . .

Papa now spoke up. “Honey, I’ve never placed an expectation on you or anyone else. . . . And beyond that, because I have no expectations, you never disappoint me.”

“What? You’ve never been disappointed in me?” Mack was trying hard to digest this.

“Never!” Papa stated emphatically. “What I do have is a constant and living expectancy in our relationship, and I give you an ability to respond to any situation and circumstance in which you find yourself. To the degree that you resort to expectations and responsibilities, to that degree you neither know me nor trust me.”

- d. [Analysis: this shows a serious failure to understand the difference between law and grace as ways of salvation, and is a serious distortion of Paul’s teaching that we are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14).

- (1) Here Paul is contrasting the law *system* of salvation with the grace *system* of salvation. In relationship with Jesus we are not under the law *system*, but under the grace system.
- (2) But there is a serious difference between the law *system* and a law *code*. Even though we as Christians are not under the law as a system of salvation, we are still under a law CODE as a way of life.

- (3) Even though we are *justified* by faith and not by works done in obedience to our law code (Romans 3:28), we are still absolutely obligated to obey our law code. Such obedience to law commandments is the essence of *sanctification*.]
3. [The false thesis that loving relationships are the only true reality leads to another seriously false conclusion, namely, to the condemnation of all authority, hierarchy, and true submission as illegitimate.] In other words, *The Shack* draws the conclusion that love requires the universal application of the irrational concept of “mutual submission.”
- a. The question comes up in relation to how the persons of the Trinity relate.
- (1) Mack: “Isn’t one of you more the boss than the other two? . . . I have always thought of God the Father as sort of being the boss and Jesus as the one following orders, you know, being obedient,” with the Spirit being also “under the direction of the Father” (121). “Don’t you have a chain of command?” (122).
 - (2) The Trinity’s answer: Don’t be ridiculous! “Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us” (122).
 - (3) Why is it so wrong? Because authority and hierarchy destroy relationships. “It’s one reason why experiencing true relationship is so difficult for you,” says Jesus. “Once you have a hierarchy you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it. . . . Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you” (122-3).
 - (5) All such hierarchy is the result of the Fall. “Humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge” (122). Sarayu explains: “When you chose independence over relationship, you became a danger to each other. Others became objects to be manipulated or managed for your own happiness. Authority, as you usually think of it, is merely the excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want” (122-123).
 - (6) The bottom line is that the relationship among the persons of the Trinity, which is the model for all personal relationships, is a kind of “mutual submission” [with the concept of submission being completely redefined]. Jesus says, “That’s the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect” (145).
- b. This concept of mutual submission also applies to our relationship with God. Jesus says to Mack, concerning the Trinity, “We are submitted to you in the same way.” Mack replies, “How can that be? Why would the God of the universe want to be submitted to me?”(145). Jesus replies, “Because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don’t want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me”(146).
- c. *The Shack* applies this concept of mutual submission to all human relationships, especially to husbands and wives.
- (1) When Mack is first told that hierarchy and authority are wrong, he is incredulous: “Every human institution that I can think of, from political to business, even down to marriage, is governed by this kind of thinking; it is the web of our social fabric.” Papa’s reply: “Such a waste!” (122).
 - (2) When Jesus explains the concept of mutual submission to Mack, he replies: “And that’s how you want us to love each other, I suppose? I mean between husbands and wives, parents and children, I guess in any relationship?” Jesus answers, “Exactly! When I am your life, submission is the most natural expression of my character and nature, and it will be the most natural expression of your new nature within relationships”(146).
 - (3) Male headship is specifically described as the result of the Fall in Eden, when Adam and Eve traded relationship for independence. The woman turned to the man for her identity,

and he became her ruler. Both men and women need to return to God, and give up the false security of authority and power. “I’ve always wondered why men have been in charge,” Mack pondered. “Males seem to be the cause of so much of the pain in the world” (146-7).

- (4) Jesus says to forget about gender *roles*. “Mack, don’t you see how filling roles is the opposite of relationship? We want male and female to be counterparts, face-to-face equals,” and “fully equal” (148).
- d. [Analysis: How does this relate to Biblical teaching?
 - (1) One of the biggest issues among Evangelicals today is whether there is an eternal relationship of subordination or hierarchy within the Trinity. Most non-feminists argue for such a relationship, and try to use it as the basis for inherent male headship and female submission. In my judgment *eternal* subordination is not the crucial issue, since Scripture is clear that in the *incarnation* Jesus did take upon himself such a role in relation to the Father, which is the model for male headship and female submission (1 Cor. 11:3).
 - (2) Jesus’ incarnational role of submission to the Father’s will (John 4:34; 6:38; Heb. 10:7) gives us the true understanding of authority and submission, contrary to the concept of “mutual submission.”
 - (3) The whole concept of “mutual submission” is a verbal and conceptual oxymoron, a human invention without any basis in Scripture whatsoever, created *ex nihilo* by feminists to explain away texts such as Eph. 5:22-24. I have discussed these issues thoroughly in my book, *Headship, Submission, and the Bible: Gender Roles in the Home* (College Press, 2008; 334pp., pb.)]
4. An apparent implication of the book’s unrelenting emphasis on loving relationships is universal salvation.
 - a. This comes out in the book’s ultimate purpose, i.e., to offer hope in the presence of *evil*, to try to help people deal with the “problem of evil.”
 - (1) The basic answer: God created for the purpose of love (loving relationships), which requires free will; but human beings distorted everything by using their free will to sin.
 - (2) Nevertheless, God will still see that his purpose of love is fulfilled, in spite of pain, murder, etc. Papa says to Mack: “We want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourself. We created you, the human, to be in face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love. As difficult as it will be for you to understand, everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will” (124-5).
 - (3) God will use every human choice—even those involving pain, war, and child murder—to accomplish his purpose. Papa: “But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (125).
 “The real underlying flaw in your life, Mackenzie, is that you don’t think that I am good. If you knew I was good and that everything—the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives—is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me. But you don’t” (126).
 [Mack:] “One last comment. I just can’t imagine any final outcome that would justify all this.”
 [Papa:] “Mackenzie. We’re not justifying it. We are redeeming it” (127).
 - (4) [This *sounds* a lot like Romans 8:28: “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”] As Papa says, “Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies” (185).
 - (5) [A major difference, though, is that in Romans 8:28 this promise is NOT made to everyone, but only to the saints (v. 27), those who love God and who have answered his call. *The Shack*, however, universalizes this promise, thus opening the door to universal salvation.]
 - b. Such universalism is implied by the basic idea that God’s ultimate nature is goodness and love.

- (1) In a kind of judgment scene, a female figure (Sophia) shows Mack that he is judging God for not judging child killers. She challenges Mack: “You must choose two of your children to spend eternity in God’s new heavens and new earth, but only two.”
- “What?” he erupted, turning to her in disbelief.
- “And you must choose three of your children to spend eternity in hell.”
- Mack couldn’t believe what he was hearing and started to panic.
- “Mackenzie. I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does. He knows every person ever conceived, and he knows them so much deeper and clearer than you will ever know your own children. He loves each one according to his knowledge of the being of that son or daughter. You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from His presence and apart from His love. Is that not true?”
- “I suppose I do. I’ve just never thought about it like this. I just assumed that somehow God could do that.” . . .
- “So you suppose, then, that God does this easily, but you cannot? Come now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell?” . . .
- Mack just could not do it. There was simply no way he could sentence any of his children to an eternity in hell just because they had sinned against him, or even committed some heinous crime. He couldn’t! For him, it wasn’t about their performance; it was about his love for them.
- Sophia’s reply: “And now you know Papa’s heart, who loves all his children perfectly” (161-163). “I don’t do . . . condemnation,” says Papa (223).
- (2) This is where the cross comes in. Why did Jesus go to the cross? “For love. He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love. Would you instead prefer he’d chosen justice for everyone?” (164-165).
- (3) Papa: “Evil is the chaos of this age that you brought to me, but it will not have the final say” (190). Sophia: “This life is only the anteroom of a greater reality to come. No one reaches their potential in your world. It’s only preparation for what Papa had in mind all along” (167).
- (4) Papa relates this to the cross again: “Like I said, everything is about him. Creation and history are all about Jesus. He is the very center of our purpose and in him we are now fully human, so our purpose and your destiny are forever linked. You might say that we have put all our eggs in the one human basket. There is no plan B.”
- “Seems pretty risky,” Mack surmised.
- “Maybe for you, but not for me. There has never been a question that what I wanted from the beginning, I will get. Honey, you asked me what Jesus accomplished on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world.”
- “The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?”
- “The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open up the way” (192).
- “In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship” (225).
- (5) This is why we forgive even child killers. Papa tells Mack that he (Mack) will one day completely forgive Missy’s killer. “And then one day you will pray for his wholeness and give him over to me so that my love will burn from his life every vestige of corruption” (227).
- c. [Analysis: On the reality and eternality of hell see my book, *The Faith Once for All*, ch. 33.]

III. THE UGLY. Jesus is stripped of his power to redeem us.

[*The Shack* presents a basically orthodox view of the *person* of Christ: he is fully God and fully man (99, 112). But here is a serious qualification with regard to his *work*: although Jesus is fully God, “he has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything” (99). The implications are devastating.]

A. This completely negates the power of Christ to be an atonement for sin.

1. Mack: “What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?” Papa: “Oh, nothing much. Just the substance of everything that love purposed from before the foundations of Creation” (191). “Through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world” (192).

2. The problem is that *The Shack* never explains HOW the cross accomplishes the purpose of love. It affirms that he did it “for love,” and in so doing “mercy triumphs over justice because of love” (164). But there is no explanation of why the cross was necessary for accomplishing this, or of how this works.
 3. [The Bible, however, makes this all clear: God is love (1 John 4:8), but he is not *love only*. He is also a “consuming fire,” the fire of wrath (Heb. 12:29). The righteous God must pour out his wrath upon sinners to satisfy the demands of his holy nature; but his own love has provided Jesus as a substitute for sinners, to receive God’s wrath in our place. This is the sense in which the cross is a propitiation (Rom. 3:24-26; 1 John 4:10), an offering by means of which Jesus turns God’s wrath away from us by taking it upon himself. The cross thus allows God to forgive believing sinners and still be righteous. (See Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, ch. 14; and Cottrell, *God the Redeemer*, ch. 7.)]
 4. [But *The Shack*’s God is *love only*; he has no real wrath, and he does not punish sin. When God is viewed thus, the whole rationale and purpose for the cross must be drastically changed. In fact, it becomes difficult to provide any rationale at all for it.]
 5. [This is why Papa can say with such finality that even though Jesus is God, “he has *never* drawn upon his nature as God to do anything” (99). This must mean that even on the cross, Jesus was dying only as a human being, and that his divine nature was not involved.]
 6. [This is what strips the atonement of its power. In his finite human nature alone, Jesus could never have atoned for all the sins of the entire human race. As our substitute he suffered the equivalent of eternity in hell for every individual—an infinite quantity of suffering. He could have done this only if his divine nature, which itself is infinite, participated in the atonement. This is why God (the Son) became a human being in the first place. To say that he never drew upon his divine nature to do anything negates the whole purpose of the incarnation and the whole power of the atonement. See Cottrell, *God the Redeemer*, 509-516.]
- B. [The principle that Jesus never draws upon his divine nature for anything actually negates his uniqueness altogether. That he exists and operates only through his full unity and relationship with the Father just makes him the prototype or model for all humanity. Everything he did and does as a human being is simply what God expects of all human beings.] Says Papa of Jesus: “He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost—the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my goodness without regard for appearance or consequence.” “Only as he rested in his relationship with me, and in our communion—our co-union—could he express my heart and will into any given circumstance. . . . That’s how he lives and acts as a true human, how every human is designed to live—out of my life” (99-100).

CONCLUSION. As a novel *The Shack* is a creative project and interesting reading. However, the religious teaching it contains is such a mixture of good and bad that anyone reading it for spiritual benefit is in danger of being deceived in many serious ways.