



Exploring The Shack

Paul Coulter

Introduction to Paul Coulter's
"Exploring The Shack"

As well as topping the best-sellers lists for some time, The Shack appears to have managed to inspire, irritate or infuriate its readers, sometimes with a combination of such reactions. Why all the fuss? Isn't it "just a novel"? Whatever your reaction to the book, our family, friends and colleagues will also be reading it, offering us all an opportunity to open up conversations about God, suffering and a host of related topics.

With such diverse responses to the book, not everyone will agree with everything in Dr Paul Coulter's extensive study of The Shack. But when a book dealing with God and suffering proves so popular, it is important to know what the book says (as well as what it doesn't), and to consider how it might shape people's views of what Christianity is all about. For some, this may be the only 'Christian' book they read in years. Paul's article highlights many of the key issues that the book addresses, allowing us to think through and form our own response. Whether you agree with everything in it or not, this study is provided with the prayer that it will help you to make the most of the conversations that the book may provoke.

The article below consists of a number of extracts from Exploring The Shack. In addition to providing information on the book's author and background, Paul examines the type of literature that the book represents, and then goes on to analyse many of the theological themes that arise in it. The Contents list below indicates the full range of

topics covered. Linked items are included below. You can download the full article from the link above.

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AN ESTATE AGENT'S GUIDE

What's all the fuss about?

When a book with Christian themes makes it to the top of the New York Times paperback fiction best-seller list, and especially when it sits there for over 36 weeks (since 8/6/08 and still current) it is surely worth asking what makes it such a phenomenon. Even in the relatively secular UK, William P. Young's *The Shack* has, at the time of writing, reached number 24 in rank of sales of all books through *Waterstone's* and number 18 at *Amazon.co.uk*. First published in May 2007, over 6 million copies of *The Shack* are now in print. It is the first publication by author William Paul Young and the first book to be published by *Windblown Media*, which is now reported to have a co-publishing deal with *FaithWords* (publishers for Joyce Meyer and other Christian authors) for future titles and to be in the pre-production phase for a feature-length film of *The Shack*.

This 248-page book tells the story of Mack (Mackenzie Allen Phillips), a father of six whose past is overshadowed by the pain of a difficult relationship with his father. The story is told as if by Mack's friend, Willie. During a camping trip Mack's daughter, Missy, is abducted, and her blood-stained dress is later found at an abandoned shack in the mountains, casting Mack into a deep darkness that he calls *The Great Sadness*. Some time later he receives a letter, apparently from God, inviting him to come to the shack. Mack makes the journey, and upon arrival he meets the three persons of the trinity. God appears as Papa, a plump African American lady who loves to cook; Jesus as a Middle-Eastern carpenter; and the Holy Spirit as Sarayu, a slight Asian lady who likes to garden. Mack arrives at the shack on page 80, and the following 156 pages detail a series of conversations and shared experiences between Mack and Papa, Jesus and Sarayu. During this encounter, a wide range of issues are discussed in varying degrees of detail. The conversations lead Mack through a healing process as he deals with the hurt both of Missy's loss and his own childhood. The final twelve pages of the book complete the story in an unexpected way, and Mack discovers that his time at the shack, which seemed like a weekend, cannot have been more than a few hours, leaving the reader wondering whether it was a dream, a vision or something else. The story flows well and, although the conversations in the shack are often deep and thought-provoking, the book is not a difficult read. Young's writing is technically far from flawless, and the story feels a little superficial at times until the point when Mack reaches the shack, but the end result is still an enjoyable, gripping and, at times, deeply moving tale.

Reactions to *The Shack* among Christians have added to its intrigue. Many reviewers rave about the impact it has had on their lives and the freshness it has brought to their appreciation of God. American country music singer Wynonna Judd typified this when she said, "this story has blown the door wide open to my soul" (quoted on Amazon.co.uk). Respected scholar and translator of *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, said the book "has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did for his. It's that good!", while English evangelist J. John

described it as the most important book to read in the next year. On the other extreme, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Seattle's Mars Hill Church, has advised people not to read it, while author Chuck Colson's reaction is succinctly put in the title of his review, *Stay out of the Shack*. How could the same book produce such disparate responses from leading Christian figures? Is this book a must-read message to refresh your heart or a source of dangerous heresy that should be avoided?

Much has been written about *The Shack*, but most reviews either focus exclusively on the book's alleged faults or glaze over them in praise of the book's personal impact on the reviewer. In this response I will attempt to examine some of the major themes of *The Shack* and to highlight what I believe to be its strengths and weaknesses. I do this from the perspective of an evangelical Christian who accepts the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as the inspired word of God and the final authority for matters of faith. [top]

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SURVEYING THE SHACK

What does it say about major theological themes?

To engage fully with every aspect of theology that *The Shack* touches on would require a substantial volume, and is therefore beyond the scope of this document. *The Shack* is not a theological textbook or systematic theology, and as such it neither seeks to provide exhaustive explanations of theological concepts nor to engage with the range of theological perspectives held in the contemporary church or throughout church history. Furthermore, the nature of the discussions between Mack and the persons of the trinity is at times enigmatic, and it is clear that the book's God does not always intend to give complete answers to Mack's questions. The exchanges frequently raise more questions than they answer, and the reader's impression of God is shaped as much by the manner in which God interacts with Mack (for example his informality, patience and humour) as by what is actually said. Having said all of this, there are a number of key themes that surface in the dialogue between Mack and God, and we will attempt to say something about what the book says about each of them and how this compares with what the

Scriptures say.

It should also be said at the outset of this discussion that we cannot always assume that the views of the God presented in the book reflect Young's own views. Hence when quoting the book we will refer to the ideas of Papa, Sarayu or "Young's Jesus" (to distinguish from quotations of Jesus from Scripture). Any references to Young's own views will be based on interviews with the author.

The Shack on ... Suffering

God's response to human suffering is perhaps the major theme of the book. The summary on the back cover of the book says that "THE SHACK wrestles with the timeless question 'Where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?'" Unsurprisingly, given Mack's story, the theme of suffering is central to his encounter with God, and the foremost question on his mind is "If you couldn't take care of Missy, how can I trust you to take care of me?" (p.92). This is no abstract discussion of the problem of suffering, but the struggle of one man to find something concrete on which to base his life and to process his own loss, pain and anger. The result is that, although the book is not the most complete treatment of, or even the best introduction to, the theology of suffering (C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* is a much better introduction to the issue), it is one of the most thought-provoking and moving ones available. The author does not attempt to place neat and tidy answers on the lips of God, and the force with which he emphasises God's desire to heal Mack's pain and to draw him back into a trusting relationship is compelling. As Papa says (p.92):

That's why you're here Mack ... I want to heal the wound that has grown inside of you, and between us ... Honey, there's no easy answer that will take your pain away. Believe me, if I had one, I'd use it now. I have no magic wand to wave over you and make it all better. Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship.

So, then, God's remedy for our pain, according to *The Shack*, is not answers to our questions but a relationship of trust with Him. This response certainly seems to be consistent with the biblical message about suffering, but the question

remains what kind of God we are being called to trust in. In general, Young succeeds in presenting God's compassion for those he loves whilst at the same time leaving room for the mystery of unanswered questions. God's power and holiness are, however, less clear, a problem that will be discussed in the section entitled *The Shack on ... the Character of God*.

Readers may be considering passing this book to people who are currently suffering. Susannah Clark, Public Theology Researcher for Evangelical Alliance UK suggests in her online review of *The Shack* that:

this book would be especially relevant to anyone experiencing suffering in his or her own life. Indeed, I think The Shack has the potential to be a source of healing and encouragement. It will not be what you expect, it may be uncomfortable and it is certainly not conventional, but I would thoroughly recommend that it is well worth reading.

Given the concerns expressed in this response about other aspects of the book's theology, this writer must fall short of whole-heartedly recommending *The Shack* to people who have experienced suffering. In the immediate, early stages of grief or pain the words of Scripture will be of greatest help, and there are other books that have the potential to lead the reader to a more balanced view of God's character (Ronald Dunn's *When Heaven is Silent* or even C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* may be more appropriate). [top]

The Shack on ... the Trinity

The nature of the trinity is another major theme of *The Shack*, and Young's caricatures of the persons of the trinity are probably the most immediately and strikingly unusual aspect of the book. The representation of Jesus as a large nosed Middle-Eastern carpenter is likely to be uncontroversial. This representation is clearly based on the biblical record of Jesus, although it may also be intended to be corrective to the familiar but unhelpful depictions of Jesus as a fair skinned, fair-haired northern European man.

The Holy Spirit appears as a semi-transparent

Asian woman named Sarayu. Young explains in his interview with Kim Gravel that this name, which is a Hindi word for a refreshing wind, was suggested to him by an Indian friend. He had been looking for a word that carried a sense of the Spirit as a wind, which is a biblical image of the Spirit's activity (John 3:8; Acts 2:2). In fact, the Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, also means wind. The derivation of the name and the ethereal nature of Sarayu make this depiction of the Spirit relatively easy to accept, especially since most Christians are unlikely to conceive of the Spirit as either male or female. In fact, the clear depiction of the Spirit as a person is probably a healthy redress to the tendency some believers have to think of Him as merely an impersonal force to be referred to as "it".

It is the idea of the Father appearing as a black woman called Papa that is most likely to cause surprise, and perhaps concern, for the reader. The name Papa is taken from Mack's wife's affectionate name for God, and its significance is clear enough. According to Young (in Kim Gravel's interview), Papa's character is based largely on a friend of his, but I agree with other reviewers who have commented on her similarity to the Oracle from the Matrix movies (both are black women who have great knowledge and great tenderness, who love to bake and who speak to an enquirer in somewhat enigmatic terms).

Concerns about the portrayal of the trinity in *The Shack* are highlighted in a video clip of Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, which was part of a series of teaching on doctrine. Driscoll advises anyone who hasn't already read *The Shack* not to do so, and warns those who have that they should not think that they understand the trinity based on the book. In fact, he says, the book's teaching on the trinity is "actually heretical". Driscoll lists the following bases for this accusation:

§ That the portrayal of the Father in human form breaks the second commandment, which prohibits the making of "graven images" of God for use in worship. Driscoll also cites John 4:24, where Jesus says that God (the Father) is Spirit. He does not have the same concern about Young's portrayal of the Son and the Holy Spirit in human form because the Son became human and the Spirit appeared physically in Scripture (albeit in the form of a dove).

§ That the portrayal of the Father as a woman encourages "goddess worship".

§ That the book teaches the heresy of Modalism because it says that the Father suffered with Jesus on the cross.

§ That the book says there is no hierarchy in the trinity, and suggests that hierarchy only exists because of sin, whereas Scripture describes deference within the trinity and hierarchy within the angelical beings, neither of which are the result of sin.

Since these points seem to summarise the main concerns that have been expressed regarding *The Shack's* portrayal of the trinity, we will use them as a framework for the discussion that follows.

On the portrayal of the Father in human form

Driscoll argues that this breaks the second commandment, which says (Exodus 20:4-5):

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

The prohibition here is against the use of images of God or any created thing in worship, but not the use of verbal descriptions of God. Scripture uses many verbal images to describe God, particularly in the Old Testament, and if we accept that the part of *The Shack* where Mack meets with the trinity is allegorical, then it is unfair to suggest that Young intended to create an image of God for use in worship. Hence, Driscoll's accusation based on the second commandment does not seem to be fair. This kind of excessive reaction to the book is careless and only likely to cause its fans to dismiss Driscoll's comments altogether. This would be unfortunate, as Driscoll's other reason for concerns about the idea of representing the Father in physical form, based on verses like John 4:24, bears more weight. In the book Papa herself talks on about the limitations of any description of the Father in male or female form in expressing who the Father is. She suggests that her choice to appear as a woman was at least in part to break Mack's "religious stereotypes" and that the alternative of appearing as "a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf" would be no more accurate or helpful for Mack (p.93). This rather misses the point, though, as

nowhere in Scripture does the Father appear to anyone in *any* physical form. In fact, Scripture says that no one has ever seen God (John 1:18; I John 4:12) and that God is invisible (Colossians 1:15; I Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). The Father chose not to reveal Himself to human beings in human form, whereas the Son became fully human whilst remaining fully divine.

In conclusion, then, it was perhaps at best unwise of Young to present the Father in human form. Young's desire, voiced by Papa in the book and in person in interviews with Sheridan Voysey and Kim Gravel, to break down stereotypical views of God seems rather ironic since his decision to portray the Father in human form and to place so many words on the lips of each person of the trinity is only likely to create a more fixed view of God in the mind of the reader. Young is quite right that the stereotype of God as a Gandalf, Santa Claus or Zeus-like figure is decidedly unhelpful, but the solution to this is hardly to replace it with an alternative image. Rather, we need to have our understanding of God enhanced by immersing ourselves in Scripture and silencing ourselves before Him.

On the portrayal of the Father as a woman

The reasons for Young's choice to present God in female rather than male form in the book appear to be twofold:

- a) To break down stereotypical preconceptions about God in Mack's (and potentially the reader's) mind.
- b) Because Mack (and Young himself) had experienced such a difficult relationship with his father, and so could not accept God as a father figure. Indeed, before the end of the book Papa appears as a wiry, older man with ponytail and goatee (p.218), although there is no suggestion that this is a more true reflection of who He is than the earlier female figure.

Frankly, Driscoll's suggestion that *The Shack* encourages "goddess worship" finds no basis in the book or in any of the interviews with Young referenced in this document. It smacks of exaggeration and mockery intended to dismiss the book altogether rather than engaging in serious discussion. Young does not intend to present a goddess to be worshipped as an alternative to the one true God of Scripture.

Rather his intention was to help to alter the reader's conception of who the true God is by presenting God in a different light, or, as he would argue, emphasising aspects of God's nature that have not traditionally been emphasised. Young agrees with mainstream Christian belief when he argues through Papa in the book that God is, "neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature" (p.93). He is also correct in pointing out in his interview with Sheridan Voysey that the Scriptures use female imagery to describe aspects of God's character. For example Deuteronomy 32:18 and Isaiah 42:14 liken God to a mother giving birth to Israel; Psalm 131:2, Isaiah 49:15 and 66:13 compare Him to a mother caring for her child.

Having accepted that it is not heretical to use female imagery to speak about aspects of God's character and behaviour, it is still important to note that the Bible normally speaks of God in male terms. The masculine pronoun, "he", is always used, never the female "she", and by far the predominant image of God's relationship to His people is as Father. This is particularly evident in Jesus' references to His own Father and in how He taught His followers to pray to "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). It is predominantly in masculine terms that God had chosen to reveal Himself to us. It is not that God is male in the sense that a human being can be male, having neither anatomy nor chromosomes to fix Him as either sex, but that the role God plays is best understood in male terms. The Bible clearly expects that male and female are different, and that they have complementary but distinct roles. Fatherhood derives from God, as does motherhood, but the Father's relationship to Jesus and to us is to serve as the model for perfect fatherhood, and the concept of God as Father is connected with the biblical concept of headship (the concept of headship will be discussed in the section entitled *The Shack on ... Hierarchy and Authority*). In his interview with Sheridan Voysey, Young expresses his concern that, "Many people have projected their own fathers onto the face of God", and that this has led to wrong perceptions of His character. I do not doubt that this is true for some people, but Young could turn this around to more positive terms by suggesting that human fathers can learn what good fathering is by relating to God as Father and that people who have never known a loving human father can find

the Father they need in God.

On Modalism

Modalism is an understanding of God that is essentially non-trinitarian. It teaches that God is only one person and that the three persons described as divine in the New Testament represent modes of the same God, who appears as Yahweh in the Old Testament, became human in Jesus Christ and then came to indwell Christians as the Holy Spirit. Modalism can be demonstrated to be unscriptural and heretical (see McGrath p.254-255 for a longer discussion of Modalism), but is Driscoll correct in accusing *The Shack* of promoting it? In actual fact, Young's description of the trinity and the relationship between the three persons has much to commend it. He does a fantastic job of describing intimacy and mutual love and respect within the relationships of the three persons. He manages to present God as three persons but also clearly as one. This is far from easy, especially given his decision to present all three persons of the trinity in human form. The book even attempts to correct a commonly used but inadequate illustration of the trinity, with Papa explaining that (p.101):

We are not three gods, and we are not talking about one god with three attitudes, like a man who is a husband, father, and worker. I am one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely the one.

On what, then, does Driscoll base his claim that *The Shack* teaches Modalism? There are two passages in the book that could be understood to indicate this heretical view:

a) The three became fully human – Papa says (p.99):

When we three spoke ourself into existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood.

This way of describing the incarnation goes beyond what Scripture says. It is misleading to suggest that the Father and Spirit spoke themselves into existence as the Son. According to Scripture, the Son eternally existed with the

Father, one with Him and in very nature God (John 1:1; Philippians 2:6-8), and was sent into the world by the Father (John 3:16-17; Galatians 4:4).

b) The Father suffering with the Son – The other contentious passage is on page 95, where Papa is revealed to have scars on her wrists. The implication is that the Father suffered on the cross with Christ. As Papa says, "We were there *together*" (p.96). This appears to fall into an ancient heresy known as patripassianism (literally "father-suffering"), which is generally derived from Modalism (see McGrath, p.254). Although Colossians teaches that the fullness of the deity lived in bodily form in Christ (Colossians 1:19, 2:9), and Jesus did say that He and the Father are one (John 10:30), nowhere does the New Testament suggest that the Father became human or suffered physically on the cross. Of course it may be unfair to suggest that Young was intending to convey patripassianism, and it would not seem to fit with the quotation above from page 101, which presents an orthodox view of the trinity. It seems likely that the image of the Father bearing wounds was simply intended to emphasise the spiritual and emotional pain that He experienced as Christ died on the cross. In this sense Young is countering another deficient view which is the impassibility of God, meaning the claim that God is incapable of suffering, which entered Christian theology from Greek philosophy (see McGrath, p.210). It may also be an attempt to challenge poor illustrations that are used to describe the cross, and especially the explanation of the atonement that is generally called penal substitution. One writer famously suggested that this concept sounds like "cosmic child abuse", but this accusation is based more on poor illustrations than on careful explanations of the concept. Having given Young the benefit of the doubt we must still conclude that this description of the Father's involvement in the cross is confused and potentially misleading.

So, then, Driscoll would appear to be unfair in claiming that the book represents Modalism, but these two passages of the book certainly do have the potential to lead the reader into error if not compared carefully with Scripture.

On hierarchy in the trinity

The Shack suggests that hierarchy of any form is

the result of sin, and we will return to this claim in the section entitled *The Shack on ... Hierarchy and Authority*. For now, however, our attention must turn to the issue of hierarchy in the trinity. Young's Jesus says (p.145):

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 am to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her.

This is simply unbiblical. Whilst it is entirely correct to say that Jesus lived in submission to His Father during His time on earth (see, for example, John 5:19 and 8:28), there is no suggestion in Scripture that the Father submits to the Son. This appears to be an attempt by Young to avoid the obvious implication that submission does not always have to be equal in both directions between two parties. Scripture speaks of the Father sending the Son into the world (Galatians 4:4) and the Spirit into the lives of believers (John 14:16), and of Jesus baptising people with the Spirit (e.g. Matthew 3:11), which establishes an order of submission or as Driscoll calls it "deference" of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It may be wrong to call this a hierarchy, as all three remain equal in power, but it is equally wrong to deny that there is an order within the trinity that cannot be equally valid if reversed. Scripture never speaks of the Father submitting to the Son or Spirit, or of the Son or Spirit sending the Father.

So, then, Young's description of the trinity is profound in some ways but potentially misleading and even unscriptural in others. Before leaving the topic of the trinity, it is worth remembering that it is impossible for us to fully understand the trinity. As Papa says (p.101):

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.

Some reviewers appear to have given Young the benefit of the doubt on the basis that no one can hope to explain the mysteries of the trinity fully. Although this is true, I would argue that an inability to explain something fully should not be an excuse for missing what can be known about it or presenting a distorted version of it.

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THE SURVEYOR'S REPORT

In conclusion, how should we respond to the book?

What makes a great work of fiction? Is it, perhaps, the quality of the writing? On this score *The Shack* ranks averagely. Whilst it is generally well written, it is no literary masterpiece. Is the key to greatness the originality of the story's plot? Once again, *The Shack* fails to impress. The book is basically about an encounter of a man with the trinity in a shack. The story that surrounds this encounter lacks originality and depth. Can greatness be defined by the book's impact on the reader? It is on this score, which is probably the most important measure for the postmodern mindset, that *The Shack* hits the jackpot. This book has the power to influence many people profoundly because it appeals to the modern Christian reader, and other people with an interest in "spirituality".

The Shack is innovative, interesting and provocative in its approach to theological concepts, and it could serve as a helpful primer for discussion of issues such as the trinity, the character of God and the problem of human suffering. It is vital, however, that these issues should be discussed in light of Scripture. *The Shack* is firmly orthodox in a number of important respects:

- It portrays a personal God who is Creator of all things and who is actively involved in His creation and especially in the lives of people.
- It places Christ at the centre of God's historical purposes.
- It emphasises the need for a personal relationship with God based on His grace rather than a legalistic religion of works righteousness or a fearful belief in a God who must be appeased.

On the other hand, the book has several theological weaknesses:

- Its portrayal of the trinity is at best confused and at worst unbiblical.
- It undermines the concept of authority and belittles the importance of Scripture.
- It seems to belittle the importance of the local church in God's purposes.
- It falls into question the idea that belief in certain objective truths is important in Christian faith.

- It is imbalanced in its depiction of God's character, emphasising His love at the expense of His holiness.
- It is soft on human sin and seems to leave no room for the wrath of God or for judgement.
- It fails to present the cross as the sole basis for redemption or to explain how the cross could have achieved salvation.
- It is unclear about whether or not all people will ultimately be saved.

These are not minor, peripheral issues in theology. They strike at the very heart of what the Christian faith is. As such, *The Shack* is a potentially dangerous book. It places ideas on the lips of God that are not consistent with what He has said in Scripture, and although it may be too strong to claim that it openly presents a different gospel from that revealed in Scripture, there are aspects of its message that certainly seem to lead in that direction. The book's power to move the reader at a deep emotional level makes it even harder for the reader to exercise discernment.

Undoubtedly there are a number of reasons why *The Shack* has proved so popular among Christians in the early 21st Century. It is very readable, and the length makes it accessible to those who don't have much time or inclination to read. The way in which the conversations unfold and the images the author uses to illustrate them increase the accessibility further, and the book succeeds in drawing the reader into deep theological waters without feeling out of their depth. The positive aspects of *The Shack's* message are also highly pertinent for many Christians, particularly in the Western countries where sales have already been so high. The book paints a compelling picture of the warmth of God's love for the reader and the possibility of intimacy in relationship with Him, and it strongly emphasises grace rather than legalistic religious observance as the basis of our relationship with God through Christ. There are many believers today who, like the authors, have experienced hurt and disillusionment with local churches. Some have been hurt by breakdowns in relationships, abused by spiritual leaders, and disappointed with internal bickering and politics. Others have been left wondering how the management theory, organisational over-kill and prolific programming of many 21st Century churches relates to the organic church life

described in the New Testament. Furthermore, a large number of people have effectively lived under a wrong perception of God as a distant deity who they must work hard to please. Although they may claim to believe in God's grace, in practice they have made their actions the measure of their spiritual life, focusing on externals like attendance at church services and frequency of Bible reading rather than simply living by faith in God, filled with and led by the Spirit. *The Shack* must be praised for its clarion call back to a focus on relationship with God and trust in Him rather than in their own performance.

Despite this timeliness of the book's message, a note of warning must also be sounded. It is troubling to hear some Christians speaking effusively about this book as if it has revolutionised their understanding of God. One wonders how much of this response is based on an authentic discovery of truth and deepening of relationship with God and how much is simply based on an emotional response. One internet reviewer, Danny Bryant, describes the responses he has experienced when he has expressed concerns about the book as follows:

This book has struck a chord with so many people. The chord that has been struck is extremely personal. Almost everyone I have expressed concerns about the book with has taken my concerns personally. I think that points to one of the most significant characteristics of our generation. When post-modern people experience emotion, that emotion is usually given authority. There is a misconception that says, 'if it moved me, it must be true.'

If you have already read the book and been moved by it, it would be advisable for you to re-visit it and to evaluate what you have learned from it in light of the Bible. If the book has helped to rekindle your love for God and your desire for Him it is important that you seek to grow in your knowledge of God through reading His word and applying it into your life. If you have not already read *The Shack* and you plan to do so, do not read it as if it were purely a fictional novel. Be prepared to make notes, begin discussions and search the Bible where ideas strike you as fresh or unusual. If you do so, then this book could be a help to you. It will also enlighten you as to some of the more common contemporary trends in

Christian thinking.

At every stage in the history of the Church, God's people have been confronted with messages that claim to be a fresh insight into God's truth or to revive lost insights. We must exercise discernment, and return to the word of God to enable us to hold on to what is good and helpful and to jettison whatever is contrary to the gospel so that we may be strong both in God's love and in the knowledge of His truth. My prayer for you, the reader, is based on Paul's prayer for the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

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