

— THE ABI REPORT —

Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church

9/1/2009

Answering the reply: “*But The Shack is just fiction*”

by Dave James

More than once I have both read and heard, in a sort of defense of the book, the "fact" that The Shack is fiction.

Although *The Shack* was self-published by a then-unknown author, it ended up on Amazon.com, reached "critical mass" through word-of-mouth - and the rest is history. To put things into perspective, consider the following statistics for all book sales in 2008 (from Publisher's Weekly):

#1 - A New Earth by Eckhart Tolle: 5,298,355 copies sold

#2 - The Shack by Wm. Paul Young: 4,432,439 copies sold

Sales of *The Shack* remain strong this year, with the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association continuing to list the book at #1 this month (up from #3 last month) (I assume this is August over July).

I just checked on Amazon.com and there are currently 3630 reviews of the book. A few months ago, I read through many of the reviews and by far the majority were not just positive - but ranged from "glowing" to "gushing." The following quote by Scott on January 30, 2008 probably captures the sense of the "best of the best" reviews:

This is probably the most profound and best book I have ever read in my entire life. It has brought me totally back to God. I have never felt better. I totally identified with Mack and the Great Sadness which has been in my life also.

However, despite incredibly strong sales and broad popularity, it has not been received well by many theologians. There has been extensive and sometimes scathing criticism of the theology in the book. And yet for all the negative critiques and many warnings, that *The Shack* has poor theology and even heresy, there are many more who defend the book on the basis of its effect on them personally. Many attempt to deflect criticism on the basis of it merely being fiction. But this begs the question: Just what was it about *The Shack* that affected them so deeply at both an emotional and spiritual level? The answer will always be something along the lines of: "It is the presentation of God in a new, insightful, convicting and comforting way."

What, then, would be the short version of that answer? It is the theology - it is the teaching about God. So, then how should we classify this novel? Is it theological fiction? Or is it fictional theology?

If it is fictional theology, then it is theology that has no biblical basis. That would make it heresy by definition. So, one can't claim that it is fictional theology and still defend it as a basis for personal spiritual growth, comfort and encouragement.

If it is theological fiction, then wouldn't it have something of a parallel in the genre of historical fiction? How does historical fiction work? In general, it uses (and must use) true historical

events as a framework for the book. For example, no historical novel could ever put the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1950. If it did, then such a book would be relegated to "fictional history" - and no one would take it seriously from an historical perspective.

However, many people do take *The Shack* very seriously. And those who do take it seriously now view God differently than they did before. In other words, their theology has changed. But their new theology is not found in the Bible. And not only is this new theology not biblical, it actually contradicts the theology of the Bible. Therefore, any emotional or spiritual impact that *The Shack* might have is based on something other than the truth - which in other words, is a lie. Quite obviously, believers cannot base their spiritual growth on a lie. If they try to do so, something might happen, but it can't be called "spiritual growth."

Mr. Young has admitted that the essence of the book is rooted in his own personal experience. He claims to have had conversations with God. In *The Shack* we don't simply find monologues by the main character, Mack - but rather dialogues between Mack and God. In some way, this is what Mr. Young is claiming happened to him.

And not only that, but Mr. Young's purpose for writing the book was to provide some sort of documentation of these conversations with God to his children. In other words, from his perspective he is writing about real events. Real events are the framework - making it theological fiction. This means that Mr. Young's intention is not to simply write fiction - but to convey what he believes to be real events and very true theology - with fiction only serving as a vehicle.

Some have suggested that *The Shack* is the Pilgrim's Progress of this generation. But make no mistake, John Bunyon's very clear intent was to convey theology - and he simply used fiction (in this case an allegory) as a vehicle. In the same way, *The Shack* is first and foremost a theology book. It is a theology book just as much as is Ryrie's Basic Theology or those written by Chafer or Grudem or Berkhoff or Geisler.

I continue to hear stories of *The Shack* being used as a basis for Sunday School lessons and Bible studies. It continues to be recommended among friends, in blogs and in book reviews. But do we really want to be responsible for teaching or recommending something that contains false teaching about God to others? Do we want to attribute our own personal spiritual growth to heretical views of God?

If you haven't done so, I encourage you to take some time to read the review of the book on the ABI website - and do a search for other articles that discuss the many heretical views set forth in the book *The Shack*.