

First Presbyterian Church  
LaGrange, GA  
The Shack  
William Paul Young  
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**Wm. Paul Young's View of the Christian Church**

When candidates for ordination as Presbyterian ministers present to a gathered presbytery their statement of faith, examining presbyters typically scan the document for orthodox statements on the following facets of faith: scriptures, trinity, dual nature of Christ, the nature of salvation, the sacraments, the church and its mission, creation, fall and sin. We've already asserted that Young's novel is neither a systematic theology nor a statement of faith. Having said this it may be useful to bring a similar checklist to the task of assessing The Shack. It strikes me that the novel offers positive and orthodox ideas on all of these categories except those pertaining to the church—namely its nature and mission.

W. Paul Young's personal background as a missionary's son and his experience in recovering from personal addictions and accumulated hurt has left him doubtful about the vitality of traditional religion in conveying the transforming power of God, which he presents so movingly in The Shack. Further, Young is not currently active in organized religion.

The novel does not have an expanded discussion of conventional religion, but it makes several clear and scathing statements in Chapter 12. Says Jesus:

...I don't create institutions; that's an occupation for those who want to play God...I'm not too big on religion," Jesus said a little sarcastically.

Placed on the lips of Jesus, that is a stark critique of Christianity. Jesus further says:

As well-intentioned as it might be, you know that religious machinery can chew up people!

Further:

Put simply, these terrors are tools that many use to prop up their illusions of security and control. People are afraid of uncertainty, afraid of the future. These institutions, these structures and ideologies, are all a vain effort to create some

sense of certainty and security where there isn't any. It's all false! Systems cannot provide you security, only I can.

### **Young's Positive Vision of the Church as Invisible**

This negativity is balanced with a brief comment about the Church being the "bride" of Christ, much beloved, and profoundly important. It is helpful to recall the idea of the "invisible church" in the effort to clarify Young's idea. Jesus talks about the church—the real or invisible church—being "the woman I'm in love with."

The narrative moves into a lyrical reminiscence of an image in the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, whose visionary picture of the Jerusalem Temple paints a vivid picture of what God's community might mean in the world:

...The Church: individuals who together form a spiritual city with a living river flowing through the middle, and on both shores trees growing with fruit that will heal the hurt and sorrows of the nations. And this city is always open, and each gate into it is made of a single pearl..."

Young holds an idealized vision of the church, but religion in its actual expression in the world is deeply flawed. It's worth noting that Young favors the word, "religion" rather than "church" or "Christianity."

### **The Miracle of God's Church in the World**

Young's ecclesiology (his ideas about the Church) is hardly unfamiliar for Protestants. His stark critique of religion reminds one of the theology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Karl Barth, who drew sharp distinctions between all forms of human religion on one hand and the grand saving project of God who sent Jesus to liberate us even from religion and its participation in human sinfulness and evil. As the bumper sticker says: "After Religion, Try Jesus."

But an orthodox assessment of the Church in the world does not stop with withering critique and presumably rejection. What Young misses is that God's work *nevertheless* miraculously goes forward in the real world via the Church of Jesus Christ as an organization filled with flawed and sinful people. This mystery of God's work succeeding with sinful people leaves us with the paradox of a church that is like Jesus--fully human and fully divine. Young has nailed the human aspect and missed the miracle that God uses his people nevertheless.

The Church's divine aspect is the prime work of the Holy Spirit. Sarayu's work as described in The Shack is primarily individualistic

and is never envisioned as animating the advance of the Kingdom of God through God's flawed people.

One of the most striking aspects of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' public ministry is that there is nothing unusual about the disciples. They are every bit as flawed as contemporary readers of the gospels. But they manage to advance God's work because they are animated by the Holy Spirit.

Mack's transformation in story is an individual encounter with God. What Young has described is compelling and revealing about both God and the process of personal sanctification. What is missing in the story is that this process typically unfolds—implausibly and miraculously—in the context of the believing community.

During Mack's weekend at the Shack, he was encompassed by God's love, which drew him into the inner community of God's three-fold being. One finishes the Shack wondering if Mack forever after felt slightly lonely after he returned to wife Nan, and friend, Willie. In the normal Christian experience, a broken and sinful person is drawn not only into the inner being of the community of the Trinity, but also the inner being of the Spirit-animated Church.

Further, individual transformation is not an end in itself. Just as broken people contribute to the brokenness of the world, so do Spirit-sanctified people contribute to the healing of the world and her peoples. Salvation is purpose-driven as Rick Warren might put it. All of this belongs to a wholesome, orthodox ecclesiology, which is missing in Young's book.