

Theological Evaluation of the Novel
“The Shack”

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Introduction

This book has been a number one best seller, but Christians are divided about whether or not it is good and helpful for Christian living. Some think it is great and are even using it as a tool to reach out to people, while others refuse even to read it. My position is that the book says some good things that can serve as a reminder of important issues that the church has sometimes overlooked, but that the overall theological framework is unbiblical and therefore dangerous for the undiscerning. For this reason I don't generally recommend that people read it. In most of this essay I will offer my criticisms and point out some dangers. But first I want to address the following issues: 1) how different people might hear the story differently, 2) the legitimacy of theologically critiquing a work of fiction, 3) why I think the book has such an appeal to so many people, 4) an acknowledgement of the elements of truth that may serve as a rebuke to the church.

How Different Readers Might Hear the Story

Readers with different theological and experiential backgrounds will hear this story differently. Many of those who have a fairly good grasp of the Bible will see the good things in it that I will shortly mention, and will tend to interpret the whole within their biblical understanding. So when there are ambiguous statements about God—statements that could be interpreted more than one way—they will tend to think the best and interpret the book within their biblical understanding. They will say, “This book may have a few minor errors, but it's basically a good book—good enough to share with others without worrying too much about how they will interpret it.”

On the other hand, I think that unchurched post-moderns will clearly see the post-modern framework and interpret the whole thing in that light instead of within a clearly biblical framework. I believe the post-modern worldview does reflect some aspects of God's glory, but to the extent that it is used as the interpreting paradigm, it will lead to distortion.

My hope is that readers will be able to benefit from the emphases of the book, maybe even taking them as a legitimate indictment of the church in general, while at the same time being keenly aware of the dangers of presenting it as is to post-moderns—or anyone for that matter—as a good example of Christian thinking.

Theologically Critiquing a Work of Fiction

This book is a novel—a work of fiction. Should I even take the time to criticize a book theologically that is clearly a work of fiction? My view is that any work of fiction will reflect God's glory in some ways because of common grace. It is legitimate, therefore, to examine its view of God and man. How much more so when a book, like this one, is dedicated to explaining who God is from the author's perspective.

In fact, in the Acknowledgement section the author says he hopes this book will help others find the presence of Papa, Jesus and Sarayu in the midst of their own “shack” whatever it may be, and fill them with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Clearly the intention is to present a vision of God that will accomplish this purpose.

Furthermore, some people will want to use this book in their attempt to reach out to others—especially to those with broken dreams and grief. Because of this, it is legitimate to examine the view of God that is presented here to help those who read the book be more discerning.

The Appeal of the Book

The book is appealing to people for a number of reasons.¹ In the first place it is literature that attempts to wrestle with the question of God's presence and goodness in the midst of terrible evil—in this case the senseless and horrific murder of his young daughter Missy. In some ways it echoes themes from Job.² People who have suffered great tragedy will no doubt identify with Mack's "Great Sadness" after the murder of his daughter. It is very moving to see how Mack eventually sees Missy, and comes to realize that Jesus was palpably with her in the midst of her suffering, that she is now very well off and with him in a better place, and finally understands that God really is good after all.

Similarly, people who have experienced a great rupture in a significant relationship will be drawn to the reconciliation Mack experiences with his father,³ who had so abused him and whom he had killed by poisoning (215).

At the beginning of the book, Mack is characterized as a good man with a number of faults. In some ways he knows a lot about the Bible because he went to seminary, but he has a "wide" but not "deep" relationship with God (10). This is due, apparently, to his misconception that God is "brooding, distant and aloof" (10). It may also be due to a bad relationship with his father. In fact the author portrays Mack as one who has suffered unjustly at the hands of his father—an elder in the church (8). The lack of depth in his relationship with God is also due to his misconception that being a good Christian means following a set of rules and that if you aren't following them properly you just need to try harder (197). So he doesn't go to church much, and doesn't believe much in God, either. People who have not felt at home in church and in rule-following, but who have some interest in God, will no doubt feel very sympathetic towards Mack and maybe even identify with him.

The book will appeal to people who have had an erroneous view of God as distant and angry. It emphasizes the humanity of Christ and his presence with his people in a loving relationship. All three persons of the Trinity come across as extremely likeable, while being challenging in some ways at the same time (119). They are people that anyone would want to hang out with. In many ways the church in the modern era has portrayed God as distant and angry. Sometimes this has been done with words, but other times it has been done simply through our lack of concrete compassion and reaching out to our neighbor. To the extent that this is true, the book serves as an indictment of the church and a challenge to show the love of God in Christ in concrete ways. The church is the body of Christ—his hands, his feet, his smile. It is through Christ's body that his love is to be experienced by a world that is shattered by sin. To what extent is it the fault of the church, then, that people see God as distant and angry? At the beginning of the book, Mack is apparently not helped

¹ I'm not saying it *should* be appealing to them, but trying to identify why it seems to be appealing.

² One of the main differences is that the central character in this story—Mack—has not been close to the Lord, whereas Job had been. Also, Job never did find out why he suffered, and didn't need to, while Mack did find out.

³ In a trip to something like heaven.

by the church. After his experience with the Trinity, however, he ends up being a great blessing to those around him.

The book will appeal to the post-modern mindset. Let me list two sets of characteristics—modern and post-modern—that are adapted from a Business Week article published in August of 2000.⁴ See how many of the modern characteristics are vilified in the book, and how many of the post-modern ones are identified with God’s purposes.

Modern	Post-Modern
Pyramid (authority)	Network (relationship)
Institutional	Organic
Structured	Flexible
Stability	Change
Self-sufficiency	Interdependence
Top-down	Bottom-up
Dogmatic	Inspirational
Security	Personal Growth
Certainty	Uncertainty

This is definitely a book written from the post-modern mindset. People inclined to think *post-modernly* will probably find the book very appealing. This is not necessarily a bad thing,⁵ because post-modernism reflects God’s glory in important ways. Because of its post-modern outlook, then, the book serves to highlight certain aspects of the Bible message. Again, I suggest that some of these are aspects that have not been highlighted sufficiently in the past, and therefore will be appealing to many people whose personality or generational culture are reacting against modern emphases and the ways they have been abused.

One other thing that will probably appeal to many people is the possibility the book presents of being in God’s presence in such an immediate and palpable way. At one point Mack says to Jesus, “You said I don’t really know you. It would be a lot easier if we could always talk like this” (112). Jesus responds by saying that this is a special situation because Mack was so stuck, but that Jesus’ invisibility under normal circumstances doesn’t have to be any less real. I think, though, that many people will like the idea of having immediate access to God in the special way that Mack did.

Elements of Truth⁶

1. One of the main things I like about the book is the reminder that God is someone who is fun to be around. Abraham invited God over for dinner. In Christ God became human. When Jesus walked the earth before and just after his death and

⁴ One of the pairs is added from another source.

⁵ But see my critique later on.

⁶ But as I will show later, these elements are enveloped within a series of untruths that make the whole book “another gospel.” The truths sprinkled throughout only serve to make the argument as a whole more deceiving although they may also serve as a critique of the church as affected by modernism.

resurrection, his disciples got to experience his deity and humanity in a very immediate way. Without a doubt part of that experience was having fun together. The first question of our Westminster Shorter Catechism says it clearly: “The chief end of man is to...enjoy God forever.” Now that Christ has ascended into heaven and sent the Spirit, he is still with us. And there is no reason to think that God is any less fun to be with. We are most like Christ when we are most fully human—as God intended humanity to be.

2. The hope presented so graphically of this stage of life being just the anteroom of eternal life through Christ is very compelling and comforting. Christ overcomes even terrible tragedies, giving us the hope of being with loved ones forever. Death is the great enemy, but death has been overcome (167).
3. The book reminds us that God is good and works out all things together for good. We are too finite to understand what kinds of circumstances are really good for us. But God knows and loves us (125).
4. The book reminds us that God is a Trinity—three in one—and that the relationships among the Trinity are the basis of love and relationships among people. Without the Triune nature of God, relationships make no sense (101).
5. The book says a number of good things about God in addition to his triune nature. He is beyond our comprehension (101) and beyond the best version of ourselves we can imagine (98), he is already full and doesn’t need us (201), God doesn’t delight in the death of the wicked, people get what they choose, and God is good—better than we can imagine.
6. The book says a number of good things about Christ. He is fully God and fully man. He is the center of God’s plan. Elousia says, “Everything is about *him*” (95). The Bible is not so much a set of rules to be followed as a picture of Jesus (197). The law is a mirror showing us our sin, and Jesus fulfills the law in us (202). Through Christ God is reconciled to the world (191-192).
7. The book says a number of true things about the nature of sin. At its core sin is a desire and attempt to be independent of God (124), it is unbelief in God’s goodness (126, 197), it is like a matrix that traps us while blinding us to its existence (124), through humanity it has affected all of creation (132), in the Fall, humanity lost any rights it had (137).
8. The book says a number of good things about believers. As much as we try to perform, we can’t be good apart from Christ, not even by following his example (149).
9. There is one more thing I’d like to mention here, but see also my critical comments in the next section. The appearance of God as a woman in the book is shocking, I think, to most people. Some will like it and others will not. In any case, it is true that God is like a mother. In Isaiah 49:15 God likens himself to a mother who could never forget her children. They are graven on his hands. He will always remember them in the sense of dwelling on them and taking action on their behalf. In Isaiah 66:10-13, God also likens himself to a mother. As a mother comforts her child, so God will comfort his people. He will do so through a renewed Jerusalem, who is also likened to a mother. Through Jerusalem he will nurse them and carry them. There will be no need uncared for. Furthermore, he will take delight in them. There is a sense in which God is like a mother, and we will do well to remember it.

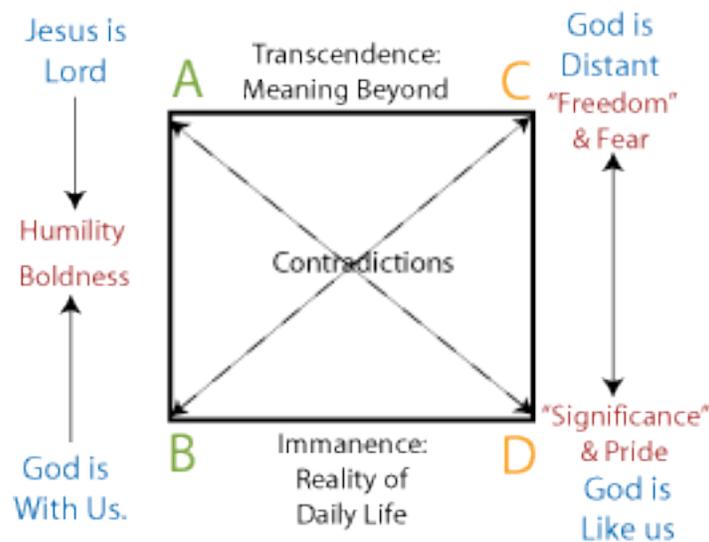
My Criticisms

In spite of the elements of truth in this book, and in spite of the critique it could offer to the church as overly affected by modernism, the overall framework of the book is unbiblical, as I will show in what follows.

Transcendence and Immanence

Cornelius Van Til used to contrast Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking with a diagram that I have modified below. The Christian believes that Jesus is Lord, (A) and that he is also with us (B). The former is the Christian's principle of transcendence, while the latter is his principle of immanence. This produces in us a bold humility. We are bold because he is with us, and humble because he is our Lord.

Non-Christian thinking, on the other hand, doesn't want Jesus to be Lord (point A in the diagram) because then people would have to submit to his authority. So they are willing to accept any "god" who is just like us—on our level (D). This is the non-Christian principle of immanence, and it supposedly provides the non-Christian with a sense of significance—he isn't humbled into submitting to someone else. He can be somebody. On the other hand, the non-Christian doesn't want someone who is Lord to get too close. So he is also willing to accept any "god" who is so distant that he can't really interfere too much. This is the non-Christian principle of transcendence, and supposedly provides for freedom.



I believe that this book presents another gospel and is fundamentally a case of non-Christian thinking, in spite of the truths within it.⁷ Let me explain why.

⁷ In all of this I'm not saying what the author's intention is, because I don't know. But the overall result is not good.

Redefining Transcendence

The book flirts with a non-Christian thought structure in the first place by redefining God's transcendence. The author does this by explaining the usual categories related to God's transcendence—like authority, power and sovereignty—primarily in terms of relationship, which is an immanence category.

It might be tempting to think the author is simply saying that authority and power have been abused because of being affected by sin, and that they must include a relational element. After all, in one place Sarayu says, "Authority, as you usually think of it, is merely the excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want" (123). The implication seems to be that there is another kind of authority. And in the novel Jesus mentions "true power and authority" that comes from Sarayu (148). These are the only two positive references to authority and power that I can find in the book.

However, this "true authority" is not explained as authority liberated from the effects of sin. I think the author goes much further than simply criticizing the affects of sin on these transcendent characteristics of God. He is redefining them in terms of the immanence involved in relationships. True authority, for the author, is mutual submission that involves no authority—no hierarchy.⁸

For example, in the novel Jesus says, "That's the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and have

⁸ I will not deal with the book's view of power separately because it links them together: 123, 124, 149, 181.

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. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way" (145). Authority and relationship, on this view, are antithetical to each other because the former involves hierarchy.⁹

The book views authority that has not been redefined in terms of relationship as the result of man's fall into sin.¹⁰ According to the author, the Trinity involves no authority relationships within it.¹¹ Marriage ideally has no authority structure (148). According to the book, neither should the church have any authority. In the novel when Mack hears Jesus talking about his bride the church in glowing terms, he says, "She's not the place I go on Sundays" (177). Jesus then replies, "That's because you're only seeing the institution—a man-made system. That's

⁹ In the novel Jesus says, "Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you" (123).

¹⁰ Jesus is made to say, "As the crowning glory of Creation, you were made in our image, unencumbered by structure and free to simply 'be' in relationship with me and with one another. If you had truly learned to regard each other's concerns as significant as your own, there would be no need for hierarchy" (124). However, the Bible clearly presents the second Adam—Christ—as having all authority in heaven and earth after his resurrection (Matthew 28:18ff).

¹¹ In response to Mack's question about authority within the Trinity, Jesus says, "Chain of command? That sounds ghastly!" Then Papa adds, "At least binding.... Though chains be of gold, they are chains all the same" (122). Then Sarayu adds, "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.... Hierarchy would make no sense among us" (122).

not what I came to build.... [The church] is all about relationships and simply sharing life” 177-178). Later Jesus is made to say, “I don’t create institutions—never have, never will.... That’s an occupation for those who want to play God” 179).

In many ways this critique of church tugs at us—especially when the book contrasts it with the worst version of the institutional church: “a bunch of exhausting work and long list of demands, and... the sitting in endless meetings staring at the backs of people’s heads....” (178). We find it appealing in some ways because very often there is just too little of the “sharing life” that goes on. However, the way the book gets life into the church is by getting rid of authority. Of course, one of the main things that makes the church an institution as opposed to “simply sharing life,” is the authority that God gives to elders.

The book views authority and power at all levels as sinful and “binding” like a “chain” (148). This viewpoint is typical of the rejection of point A of the diagram above: no submission to authority is allowed. It is too demeaning.¹²

This viewpoint also fits well with point C in the diagram. The Biblical view of transcendence (point A) is replaced with one in which—to the extent that God is not

¹² Theology typically distinguishes between the ontological trinity and the economic trinity. The former is the Trinity in itself apart from Creation (about which we know little or nothing), and the latter is the Trinity as functioning in creation and redemption. Whether or not these categories are helpful, it is clear that the Father has authority to send the Son and the Spirit. Jesus submits to the authority of the Father. After his resurrection Jesus claims to have all authority in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, marriage is portrayed in Scripture as a relationship of authority.

just like us (Point D), he is so completely different that we can’t even understand anything about him, thus relieving us of any responsibility toward him. This is not like the Biblical view, according to which he is knowable to the extent that he *reveals* himself to us.¹³ In the book, God is portrayed as either unknowable or as pretty much just like us.

The book refers to this distance on a number of occasions. For example, it calls God “wholly other” (98) and identifies this with his holiness. It also calls him “a totally separate other in my nature” (201). In theological circles these phrases are used to portray a God who is by nature unknowable—at least in certain aspects. Holiness, however, does not imply unknowability. It means God is set apart in that he is the Creator and we are the creatures. He is knowable and we can know him as he reveals himself to us.

Redefining Immanence

According to the structure of non-Christian thought as expressed in the above diagram, unbelievers don’t want a transcendent God with authority, power and sovereignty (Point A) to be “with them” (Point B). That would be very uncomfortable. Rather, they would like a god who doesn’t come with demands from on high (Point C) and who is pretty much like themselves (Point D).

The God of the Bible is great enough to bring together power, authority and sovereignty on the one hand, with love and relationship on the other. The god of “The Shack” rejects the former to allow room for the latter. There are certain mysteries involved in accepting the God of the Bible because he hasn’t revealed everything to

¹³ Deuteronomy 29:29, 1 Corinthians 2

us. For example, how do sovereignty and responsibility go together? We can't seem to figure it out logically, although both have clear implications for our life. Because God is sovereign, we trust him and submit to his authority. Because we are responsible, we don't become passive waiting for God to work out his plan. But the god of "The Shack" eliminates these seeming contradictions, thus making himself more palatable to the human mind. Here are some ways the book does that:

1. Biblically there are three senses of God's will: 1) his plan, 2) his Word, and 3) his desire. In the first sense, God has planned everything that comes to pass, even though he is not the author of sin. In this sense his will is always done, but we don't usually know what it is ahead of time. In the second sense, we know his will because it has been revealed to us. But his will is not always done. That's why we pray, "You will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We see the third sense in verses that indicate God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. He is not willing that any should perish. Jesus wanted to gather Israel as a hen gathers her chicks, but she was not willing. These three senses of his will seem to clash, but they are all revealed in Scripture and all have clear implications for our living.

In "The Shack," however, only the third sense is kept intact (and maybe the second sense in a very weak way). For example, Papa says to Mack, "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" (120). There is something true about this statement: God does not delight in the death of the wicked. He doesn't want anyone to perish. This refers to his will in sense #3. But the formulation of the book eliminates senses #1 and #2. Even though it's true that sin is its own punishment, God also punishes sin. Punishment of sin is part of his plan and is also revealed in Scripture.

2. Similarly, with regard to Missy's death, Sarayu explains, "This was no plan of Papa's" (165). Of course it's true that in sense #3 God did not want this to happen to Missy. Nevertheless, it was still part of his plan in sense #1.
3. Similarly, in the book God says, "I used your choices to work perfectly into my purposes" (189). And, "True love never forces" (190).¹⁴ This is further explained by God saying, "...reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely and finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way" (192). The assumption is that if God has a plan in sense #1, then he must force us to choose. The Biblical view is that God does not force us, but he still has a plan and the coming to faith of his people is part of that plan.
4. Similarly, God is portrayed in the book as having nothing to do with the condemnation of people (162).

¹⁴ What about a parent who sees his or her three-year old about to stick a knife into an electrical socket? I would force my child to stop it.

While it's true that God does not delight in the death of the wicked, their condemnation is certainly revealed as part of his plan.

5. Similarly, God says in the book, "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.... I've never placed an expectation on you or anyone else.... And beyond that, because I have no expectations, you never disappoint me" (206). It's true that God isn't trying to motivate us by guilt. However, it's also true that he does place expectations on us—he does this in his Word (sense #2 of his will). In fact, he tells us to be perfect as he is perfect! It is also true that he is sometimes disappointed in us. Doesn't the Holy Spirit weep and grieve over our sin?

In all of these cases, the inscrutability of God as he has revealed himself is being reduced to something more palatable to the human mind. People are willing to accept a God who is pretty much like us (Point C). In this way the multifaceted nature of God has been reduced to "relationships" so that he is more acceptable. If we can't understand how power and love can go together, or how authority and love go together, or how expectations and love go together, or how control and love go together, should we eliminate one of them in order to make God more acceptable? Of course not. But this is what the book does in most

instances.¹⁵ In this book, immanence is not the inscrutable God who puts authority, power and love together living with us by his Spirit. No, it is a redefinition of God with the result that he becomes acceptable to the human mind.

The Work of Christ

Another example of what I have explained in the previous sections has to do with the work of Christ. In the book God explains the work of Christ in this way: "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" (192).

At first glance this sounds pretty good and Biblical. However, when you dig a little deeper, there are problems with it.

1. At the end of the book Mack is relieved to know that Jesus was with Missy in a palpable way during her kidnapping and murder. It is encouraging to know that God is not going to leave his children alone—especially at a time like this. However, the book applies the same principle to God the Father's presence with Jesus on the cross. Mack brings up what Jesus said from the cross, quoting from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the book God's reply is, "Regardless of what he *felt* at the moment, I never left him" (96).

¹⁵ In one case the book does not eliminate the tension between different things God reveals to us: God is equally three and one. However, this is a relational tension, so I suppose that's why it is acceptable in the book. The book does have an error in its portrayal of the Trinity. It says that the Father and the Spirit became human through the Son (99, 192).

This is an attempt to make God more palatable to the human mind. Since according to this book relationship is more important than anything, the Father could not have left the Son on the cross.

However, this is an attack on the substitutionary atonement. According to the Bible, the Father did leave Christ alone in order that Christ might suffer the wrath of God against sinners. The Father left Christ alone so that God would never have to leave his people alone. According to the book, however, God is never disappointed with his children. So there is no wrath to suffer. Even though the book talks about “reconciliation,” “death and resurrection,” the triumph of mercy over justice (164), and the centrality of Christ, there is no hint in the book of the substitutionary atonement. When we see all those biblical words, we are tempted to interpret this book in light of the substitutionary atonement. But I don’t believe it is there.

In fact, the various attempts to make God acceptable as explained previously actually prevent the acceptance of a substitutionary atonement. God would have to be a God of wrath as well as a God of love, and that is unacceptable. After all, God doesn’t punish people because sin is its own punishment (119-120).

The book does talk about substitution. At one point Mack asks God if Missy had to die so he himself could be changed. God says no, but

that the story of the Indian princess who exchanged her life for others was how Missy “came to appreciate what Jesus did for her and the whole human race. Stories about a person willing to exchange their life for another are a golden thread in your world, revealing both your need and my heart” (185).

The book pretty much equates the story of the Indian princess with the story of Jesus, except that the death of Jesus was for the whole world, not just for an Indian tribe. But the principle is the same. In fact the “Great Spirit” of the legend is identified with Papa (31). Notice also that the princess did not die to expiate wrath. The members of her tribe were sick and *somehow* (the book doesn’t explain how) the voluntary death of an innocent person would heal them (28). Mack applies the story of the princess to Jesus in the following way: “Jesus chose to die because he and his daddy love you and me and everyone in the world. He saved us from our sickness, just like the princess” (31).¹⁶

In this book the substitutionary atonement—which is so hard to swallow because it means God’s wrath rests upon us—is morphed into the voluntary of an innocent person who *somehow* by his death

¹⁶ On page 225 God is made to say that he has forgiven people their sins against him. But in light of the rest of the book, it is hard to interpret this in a biblical way. Sin, according to the book, is not believing God is good. True enough as far as it goes. But this unbelief is pretty much excused in light of what Mack has suffered at the hands of his father and through the institutional church. Forgiveness does not involve atonement.

rescues people from their *sickness*. This is another way in which the book takes the message of the Bible and tries to make it more acceptable.

2. The book has universalistic implications. God says that in Jesus he has forgiven all humans (225). So if he has forgiven everyone, of course he isn't going to condemn anyone. That has been explicitly stated in the book. However, not all of them choose relationship. So it's up to them. On the other hand, God says that Mack didn't succeed in locking out God from his life as Mack attempted to cling to his independence. Then God tells him why he didn't succeed: "because my love is a lot bigger than your stupidity.... I used your choices to work perfectly into my purposes" (189). So if God has already forgiven everyone, and if his love is able to break through their unbelief without forcing them, then it seems that all will be saved. This is not stated explicitly, but is implied.

God as a Woman

According to the book, God is neither male nor female, although both are derived from him (93).¹⁷ So there is no good reason God should necessarily appear as a man or a woman. The reason he appears so much as a man in the Bible is because in a fallen world "true fathering would be much more lacking than true mothering. Don't misunderstand me, both are needed—but

¹⁷ Of course God is not male or female in a physical sense, but I prefer to think that our gender differences are reflections of a greater sense of masculinity and femininity that are part of God's nature. In this sense God is both masculine and feminine.

an emphasis on fathering is necessary because of the enormity of its absence" (94). In other words, God reveals himself as Father in the Bible because of the fall, and because fallen fathers do a worse job than fallen mothers of fulfilling their functions. In fact women, according to the book, don't seem to be quite as affected by sin as men (147-148).¹⁸ So there could be no such thing, according to the book, as the eternal Fatherhood of God.

According to the book, God appears to Mack as a woman because of the bad experience he has had with his father (93). This seems to contradict the previous statement that in the Bible God reveals himself as Father because earthly fathers do such a bad job. In any case, the question remains about God revealing himself as a woman in this book, which implies that people who insist on God as a white male are prejudiced. There could be some truth to this, but I believe there are other reasons for God revealing himself primarily as Father (not necessarily white, though). In the first place, God doesn't just say he is *like* a father. Rather, he clearly calls himself our heavenly Father. I don't believe that the very heavy Biblical emphasis on the Fatherhood of God is due to the fall. For some reason God wanted to reveal himself this way, and we should not assume it was just a matter of expediency because of the fall, or that we can just as easily present God as a woman without distorting God's intent if we think the circumstances warrant it.

I have already indicated two places in the Bible in which God says he is like a mother. These passages emphasize God's care for, comfort of and delight in his people. He

¹⁸ I disagree with this assessment. Sin may affect them in different ways, but both are equally sinful.

will never forget them. The point I'd like to make here is that this image of God as mother—as all Old Testament images—was fulfilled in Christ. Through his death and resurrection he showed ultimate care for, comfort of and delight in his people. Furthermore, in the Old Testament passages that compare God to a mother, there is an emphasis on God “mothering” his people through Jerusalem. In the New Testament age, Jerusalem becomes the church. God now mothers us through Christ as by his Spirit he is at work within the church. If someone needs a mother image, there should be plenty of Spirit-filled women—of various colors and ages—who could be of help. We are the body of Christ. It is through us that God now reaches out to touch those who are experiencing the shattering effects of the fall.

It may be that the author felt compelled to present God as a woman precisely because the church has not been doing a good job of being the healing, comforting, delighting body of Christ. I still don't think it's a good idea to present God this way, but it does serve as a rebuke to the church.

God's Communication of Himself

In this book the Word of God does not have an important role. The most positive thing about Scripture I can find in the book is this statement: “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. Living and life is in him....” (197-198).

For the most part, however the author prefers personal experience with God over the written word. For example, in the context of Mack having received a note purportedly from God, the author says, “In seminary he had been taught that God had

completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners' access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book” (65-66).

In fact, the Bible is presented as just one among many ways that God might communicate with us. Sarayu tells Mack that religion is about getting the right answers, but that God is about taking you to the living answer who will change you from the inside out (198). Mack replies, “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?” (198).

Sarayu replies, “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” (198).

After Mack asks Sarayu how he will hear her once he is back in his normal world, she says, “You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours” (195).

Of course God reveals himself in creation as well as in Scripture, but the revelation in creation must be interpreted in light of the Bible. Of course people have often failed to put Scripture into practice, thus not benefitting from it. It doesn't come alive to them because they don't take it seriously or apply it to their lives. And it's true that many times they see the Bible simply as rules to follow that will make them "good Christians" instead of seeing Christ in the Bible. In the previous quotes, however, it appears that Scripture is just one way among many of God communicating with us. Furthermore, it doesn't at all appear to be the most important way.

The book also privileges uncertainty over certainty. Both are Biblical in my view. There are things God has not revealed that we may never know. Thus we are constantly running into mystery. However, God's Words are certain. The book has no mention of the certainty of God's Words in Scripture.

I would say that principles are not necessarily bad. They are simply ways of looking at God's words, which are very obviously good. Understanding the principles found among God's words can help us with our relationship with God and with others as they point us to Christ. Overall, I would say the book encourages us to look more to our personal experience than to Scripture, which I think is very dangerous.

The Church

The book clearly looks down on the institutional church. Structure and systems are portrayed as always bad (179). You can't avoid them, but you should see yourself as "in them but not of them." Structures are here identified with what the Bible calls "the world." There is no

distinction between Christ-centered structures and worldly structures.

In my view, structure is simply a habitual way that members of a group relate to each other. It is impossible not to have some structure when people meet together regularly, and I believe structure can be Christ-centered or worldly.

Of course, the institutional church is structured and is therefore bad. It is viewed as "religion" (179), which is one of the three man-created terrors (179). The book's condemnation of structure leads us to an individualistic view of the church. The church is just a bunch of individuals that "share life" as they happen to bump into each other. It is "being open and available to others around us" (178). Official leadership in the church is also bad since leadership creates structure.

His picture of the church is in some ways compelling because of the lack of body life in many churches. When he says the church is just about sharing life, we say, "that would be nice." The solution, however, is not to get rid of structure. The solution is to be the body of Christ in the midst of our structures, and to examine them to see if they are Christ-centered or not. For example, I believe the church has become captivated by the culture in a number of ways. One of these is that the church has taken on the busy-ness of the culture and has become too busy to be the body of Christ. In general people don't have time to be the hands, feet, ears and eyes of Jesus.

Conclusion

This book is compelling to many people because it highlights certain aspects of the Christian life that in many ways have been overlooked or minimized in the modern era. You might say the modern era, probably without even knowing it, emphasized many of the transcendent aspects of God: control, power, authority, efficiency, achievement, and knowledge. These things are not bad. But people, cultures and generations tend to make an idol out of what they are good at. So you might say the modern generations made an idol out of these good things.

The next generation—the post-modern one—now views these things as evil in themselves, and I would say it's because of the way idolatry has affected them. The post-modern solution is to emphasize the immanent aspects of God, especially his love and personal relationships. This is what the book does. Because these aspects have been lacking in many ways, the book serves as a challenge to the church. In my view, however, the author fails to see that he is advocating the exchange of one set of idols for another. The book is cast in a post-modern mold, thus emphasizing some things we need to hear, while at the same time reducing the message of the gospel to “love” and “relationship” in a way that produces “another gospel.”