

# The Shack: A Christian Perspective

**\*\*Spoiler Alert: This document covers the plot and ending in a fair amount of detail.\*\***

This is a touching and thought-provoking book that does a good job dealing with the biggest argument against an Omnibenevolent Jehovah: the problem of pain and injustice. In addition to this all-important matter of Christian apologetics, the book discusses some additional matters of Christianity as well. But before I go on, there was, for me at least, a very peculiar yet obvious "God moment" I experienced just before I read this book. I would like to take a few minutes of the gentle reader's time to share this unique experience.

I had actually begun another book just before I started this one. It is *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Apologizing for My Life) by Saint Cardinal John Henry Newman. It is the autobiography he felt compelled to write concerning his conversion from the Anglican Church to the Catholic Church. It was in response to accusations made against him suggesting that he had been a Catholic spy while in the Anglican ministry. While most U.S. citizens know little of this, this scandal was perhaps the most monumental event in the Anglican Church since King Henry VIII decided to separate from the Pope. I had gotten through the lengthy introduction by Philip Hughes, read all the letters between Newman and Mr. Charles Kingsley that sparked the scandal, and the formal public responses both of them made before the autobiography formally began. I was quite interested in continuing the book, but I intended on using *The Shack* in a major work of mine based on its reputation. Due to timing matters, I was forced to put off *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* in favor of reading *The Shack*. But there was a line in Newman's book that I feel is essential in fully appreciating *The Shack*: "... the Protestant system, as such, leads to lax observance of the rule of purity; Protestants think that the Catholic system, as such, leads to the lax observance of the rule of truth." (letter dated 8 January, 1864) I had found it early in the book, and I had just finished reading Newman's explanation of what he meant by that, as well as Kingsley's own interpretation, before I put it aside. This line also echoed in my head with every theological position *The Shack* presented.

Now, the idea of Purity and Truth dovetails well with my usual talk of Ritual and Philosophy. Christianity is full of such paradoxes, with Jesus being the point at which they all come together. In Jesus, Purity and Truth are one. But for us imperfect humans, these two terms become separate. Using an example from the great debate, Mr. Kingsley denied the sainthood of Walburga because he felt the evidence of the miracles attributed to her was second hand, meaning that appointed officers did not examine the evidence first hand. He also denied the miraculous oil attributed to her (it flows for about five months each year around a rock in her tomb). This is an argument based on Truth. For Saint Newman, the fact that the miracles were not officially recorded as they were happening was not proof they didn't happen, and he personally attested to the healing properties of the oil in question (although he made no claim as to the natural or supernatural cause of the healing). He made his argument based on Purity. Mr. Kingsley would rather miss out on the possibility of finding God in Saint Walburga's story than to be wrong. Saint Newman would risk being a fool for a chance to encounter God in her story. Certainly, either view can be dangerous when taken to the extreme. We each must decide for ourselves which way and how far to go in any given situation, but keep in mind that Jesus is found at the balance point between the two (which was the whole point of Saint Newman's comment in the first place).

With that out of the way, *The Shack* was written by William P. Young as a Christmas present for a handful of family members. They enjoyed it so much that they shared it with friends, and the demand

for more copies compelled him to self-publish it in 2007. By June 8 of the next year, he had sold over a million copies. It was made into a popular movie in 2017.

The story is about a man who, on a camping trip, had to rescue his son from drowning in a canoe accident. In the time it took him to rescue his boy, his youngest daughter disappeared and the only two clues were a ladybug pin the killer left behind as his trademark, and a truck seen going into a remote portion of the park. Rescue operations eventually found the girl's dress and a large blood stain in an abandoned, rickety shack, but the trail went cold after that.

Three and a half years later, with the pain of the loss still affecting him and his family, this man finds a mysterious note in his mailbox that claims to be from "Papa," the word his wife uses for "God." Not sure what to think of it, but knowing he can't ignore it, he heads back to the shack one wintry weekend. There, he does indeed find the Triune God, but nothing is like he expects. He also meets Wisdom incarnate, sees his lost daughter playing with Jesus and her older siblings (who were able to join her this one time in their dreams), the spiritual form of his drunken and abusive father (where a reconciliation takes place), and the location of his daughter's body. In between these and other events, most of the apologetics of the book unfold. In the end, the father leads authorities to the girl's body by following the secret marks the killer left behind. Now knowing what to look for, the remains of the killer's four previous victims were also found, and enough evidence was collected to find the killer. The book ends with a still hurting but much healed family and the father's desire to speak to the killer in hopes the killer can finally have his own pain healed by God.

While the story has appealed to a great many people with their own pains, suffering and doubts of God, it has also been criticized by several churches and clergy, even so far as to call it heresy. And here is where I think the words of Newman are of such value in understanding what the book does. What the book does is try to break down all the stereotypes that are artificially preventing a full understanding of the Christian Faith. The very question of whether the book is fact or fiction plays into this Truth-Purity concept. Mr. Young makes several appearances in the book himself, and in the introduction explains that he is writing this story on behalf of his neighbor, Mackenzie "Mack" Allen Phillips. It was this introduction that was my "a-ha" experience where I tied *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* to it and had my God moment. If we approach this book from the perspective of Truth, then we will easily decide that it seems too unlikely to be true. If we approach this book from the perspective of Purity, we have to admit that God certainly has the power to make all that transpires in it happen, and He has certainly gone to even greater lengths to console grieving than what the book portrays. It is for this very reason I was very conscious NOT to confirm whether it was fact or fiction until after I read it, and it is a spoiler I will not share here.

Perhaps the most iconic example of the Truth-Purity debate is the simple and touching scene when God the Father, who is portrayed as a black woman, is confronted by Mack for not being a white male as he expected. Papa reminds Mack that his Earthly father was abusive, and then asks Mack if he could truly accept and open up to healing from a father figure right now? I feel we have to ask ourselves if an all-loving God would manifest Himself in any other way given this reality of Mack's past. Is the Truth that God has no form more important here than the Purity of being healed by God's special Grace?

Of course, the answer to this question is (I hope) rather obvious. Fortunately, most of the "heresies" this book is accused of are likewise easy to accept because they come back to God doing everything but taking away our Free Will in order to heal us. But there are several times when the story does go beyond merely trying to heal Mack, and gets into more generalized apologetics. When it does,

it stops being a lesson on Purity and moves into the realm of Truth, which is counter to the main premise of the story. While these transgressions are few and minor, they can be toxic. It is here I think the detractors of the book have a valid point.

For me, the example of this that stands out the most in the book is God's declaration that He has no use for religion (which is mentioned at least twice). It is true that religion did not exist in Eden, as God walked with man during that time and there was no need. But with man being expelled from Eden in Chapter Three of Genesis, a need arose. We see religion in the very next chapter when Cain and Able offered sacrifices to God. I can accept the idea that man originally did not need religion in the Garden of Eden (as was God's plan), but man's rejection of this relationship means that religion is the only way man can seek God by his own means. Such thinking is devastating. Studies clearly show how Christians migrated from attending church to staying at home since the 1980s (the so-called "nones"), and today the movement from stay-at-home Christianity to Agnosticism and Atheism is well documented. Christians are losing the ideological war against Satan by all Earthly standards, and staying at home was where this big change started.

Overall, I found the book a very worthwhile read. It is unquestioningly a tear-jerker; it was meant to be. I can easily understand why it has helped heal so many people with their own pains and losses. But what I don't think most people expect is how well it also points out our own stereotypes of what religion should be. While I think most of them are helpful to the typical Christian, there are a few times I think the book goes too far. At least twice I felt the "Pure" cure was potentially more toxic than the sterile "Truth" it tried to replace.

I hope I have provided a framework for one to decide on their own which is Purity and which is Truth. I think the good far outweighs the few negatives, as long as one remembers that teaching a new "Truth" was never the intent.

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