

“Is Gwen Shamblin’s (Weigh Down Workshop) Remnant Fellowship a Cult?”

A young couple that I know have gotten involved in a “church” called Remnant Fellowship that was founded by Gwen Shamblin. Could you tell me if this is a cult and give me more information about it?

I’ve just had a MOST enlightening trip through some internet web pages to help me answer your question. With some heartbreak I have to agree that Remnant Fellowship is, indeed, a cult. I am a former Weigh Down Workshop person, and it wasn’t until after I stopped doing Weigh Down that I was able to figure out what bothered me about Gwen’s teachings. Unorthodoxy—and a complete misunderstanding about the nature of God. Especially about the Lord Jesus!

A man who almost joined part of the Remnant Fellowship tells his story here:

<http://tinyurl.com/an37n>

I couldn’t stop reading. Sadly, it was like watching a (theological) train wreck happen.

Another excellent article from former Remnant Fellowship members can be found here:

<http://www.spiritwatch.org/remnantwatch.htm>

A young lady who left the RF after experiencing its abuses has written her testimony here:

<http://www.hkpatterson.com/testimony.htm>

Christian Research Institute also has an article on Gwen, Weigh Down Workshop, and her theology: [Gwen Shamblin: Weighed and Found Wanting](#). Don & Joy Veinot, the authors of this

article, have researched and written four other MCOI Journal articles on Gwen Shamblin at Midwest Christian Outreach. These articles are available on their website to be read online or printed off; the direct link to the most recent article written in 2008 is "The Pied Piper Is Shamblin" at www.midwestoutreach.org/Pdf%20Journals/2008/Spring_Summer_2008.pdf.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin

"You Got Christian Science Wrong"

I have read [your thoughts](#) about the religion Christian Science. Although you have researched the religion quite well it seems, to me, that your interpretation is wrong.

Christian Science is a religion based out of love for the lord God. Just like other Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religions.

What does the fine detail of those religions matter if they are based on the teachings of God. What does it matter how they choose to praise God and live the life they think they should. As long as it does not harm any person, and as I speak for my religion, Christian Science, it certainly does not.

I follow the teaching of Jesus Christ. I live my life for God each day. Who are you to judge the religion in which I choose to believe in? Jesus teaches us to follow the Lord and live our life in his Love. Christian Science has taught me to follow the Lord and live my life in his Love. Christian Science is about understanding that God has made you in his

image and likeness (as it says in the bible).

I believe that everyone is entitled to an opinion, but I believe your writings to be criticizing the lives of others, in which only God can judge.

Our analysis of Christian Science isn't about criticizing the lives of others. It is about criticizing the LIES which are manifested in this particular set of teachings. Christian Science is based on the non-biblical worldview of Gnosticism, not the teachings of God revealed in the Bible. Your experience with it may be different from what you read in our article, but we analyze the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, not individuals' experiences.

The "fine detail" of different religions is what determines what is true and what is false. Our eternity depends on what we believe; if we put our trust in what is false, we will remain alienated from God forever. I respectfully suggest you listen closely to what is said at your church about sin and what to do with the sin problem that separates us from God. If what is taught differs from what God has clearly said in His word—that the only solution to sin is to trust in Jesus' death on the cross which paid for that sin—then it is not true and is giving people hope that is groundless. That is very dangerous.

Thank you for writing. I send this with a prayer that, because you truly seek to know God, He will show you what is true and what isn't. You say you follow the teaching of Jesus. But He didn't say to follow His teachings. He said to follow HIM. He said He was the way, the truth and the life, not the way-shower. The epistles explain that Jesus actually lives inside the Christ-follower who has put his trust in the crucified, risen Lord. Then Jesus Christ lives His life through us, the way light shines through a window. That is very different from any other religion—including Christian Science. I pray your eyes will be opened and you will see what's true. I am so glad

you wrote.

Sue Bohlin

Posted 2008

“Do Our Pets Go to Heaven?”

I have a dog that I love very much. She is starting to get old and will only be with me a few more years. Can you tell me if our pets that we love and care about with all our hearts will be with us in heaven?

All we have to go on is what God has revealed to us in His word. According to what the Bible says, there is no indication that our pets will join us in heaven. (However, this does not rule out the possibility; it's just that the Bible is silent on this issue.) Animals are God's creation, but they are not made in His image as human beings are. Animals have bodies and we can say that some are [souls](#) (Gen. 1:21 and 24 use the word for “soul” [*nephesh*] to describe the land creatures), but soul in that context means “a breathing creature.” Because animals are not made in the image of God, they do not have a spirit where God indwells like humans do. (Neither do angels, by the way.) As far as I can tell from scripture, it is this God-imaging spirit-soul that lives forever.

Revelation 19 does include a vision of the Lord Jesus on a white horse, along with the armies of heaven on white horses, but at this point we can't know if the horses are symbolic or not. And that would be a very tenuous (and unsupportable) connection to conclude that pets go to heaven.

I should tell you that this is not a hill I'm willing to die on. If I'm wrong, that is perfectly okay with me. <smile>

Perhaps there is a spiritual parallel to *The Velveteen Rabbit* where pets who are loved by people are made “real” in a forever sense. But if it turns out that pets will be in heaven after all, it will be by God’s grace, because their presence can somehow add to God’s glory and our worship. There is no loss in heaven, so if they are not, then we will be so joy-soaked and absorbed in the presence of God that we won’t notice or be troubled by their absence.

Sue Bohlin

“What About the Witch of Endor Calling Up Samuel’s Spirit?”

I just read the [Animism](#) article. It states that Christianity specifically teaches against the existence of ghosts (spirits of dead people) in the world, and that dead people cannot communicate with the living and vice versa. What about the passage in I Samuel 28 with Saul and the witch of Endor? She calls up Samuel’s spirit to communicate with Saul.

The incidence in 1 Samuel 28 is one of two exceptions to the “no crossing over” boundaries in scripture, both highly supernatural miracles. The witch of Endor had no power to truly conjure up the spirits of dead people; that’s why she screamed in terror when Samuel actually appeared. It was God at work, not the witch or even the departed prophet responding to the summons. Samuel gave the word of the Lord to Saul, and his prophecy was fulfilled shortly thereafter.

The other miracle was when Moses and Elijah appeared along

with a transfigured Christ to Peter, James and John (Matt. 17). The disciples did not summon the spirits of these dead saints; they were sent by the Father (probably to encourage the Lord Jesus).

The fact that there are two biblical exceptions, both of which required divine intervention to send departed spirits into this world, does not affect the truth that there is a “great gulf fixed” between the living and the dead (Luke 16:26). That’s the point of miracles: they are God-powered exceptions.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“Trusting God a Joke Since Wicked Prosper, Godly Suffer”

I write to you feeling perturbed about God. At times I really wonder the question of His existence.

I would appreciate if you could enlighten me in the area of trusting in God. I find it hard to trust Him nowadays. I trust in Him to provide financially, but instead I receive more financial problems. I see sinners who are ruthless and despicable earning tons of money, curse Him with the very breath He gave them. What a joke! His children suffered in hunger and He dared to claim that He will not allowed the righteous to suffer hunger. Sometimes when I see how He blessed those rogues, I told myself where is His logic? Of course He hopes that by showing mercy, these crooks will repent, then how about His children who are suffering hunger?

You mean God enjoys people cursing Him so that He could bless them? Then I think His children will begin to curse and swear at Him.

I poured my hope on Him in several areas of my life. He said that whoever called upon the name of the Lord shall not be put to shame. I trusted Him time and time again in some areas of my life such as my career, my family problems etc. But none of them came true for me. Instead my feeling right now that He is a cheat and I feel more ashamed trusting Him. What a joke!

I thought to myself, if He cannot even keep up His promise as Jehovah Jireh, our providence, that can meet our needs on earth, how can we trust Him for our salvation?

My pastor emphasized a lot on His grace and prosperity. I believe wholeheartedly but now I feel very cheated by such messages. I felt worse than Job, he suffered but at least God restored him eventually. I felt like a fool believing in a book that was claimed to be written by Him.

Jesus came to give us life so that we can have life more abundantly. Now instead of having life more abundantly, I guess it should be read as a bums life. A life that is cheap and useless comparable to the fate of a bum.

I winced when I read that your pastor emphasizes prosperity. If it's the same kind of prosperity theology that some preach here in the U.S. that God wants to lavish good stuff on His kids, including health and lots of money and whatever our hearts desire then no wonder you are disillusioned with Him. We believe this is a false gospel and it leads believers to stumble because it teaches a lie about God.

God is concerned about His glory, and about us having a close, intimate relationship with Him (the second produces the first). Making us or keeping us comfortable usually doesn't result in God getting the glory or in a close, dependent relationship with Him, because it's so easy to cherish the

gifts instead of the giver.

So, because of false teaching, it is quite possible that you had unrealistic expectations of a God who is not the same God of the scriptures a God who is holy, just, righteous, sovereign, and not at all committed to jumping through our hoops. And then you blame God for not being faithful or good, correct?

But because God IS good and because He loves us so much, He only acts in our best interests. If our prayers are for things that are not in our best interest, He will not grant our requests (or our demands). Which is why I think Philippians 4:6-7 is so incredibly important: God wants us to let our requests be made known to Him *with thanksgiving*. However He chooses to answer, when we give thanks, we are relinquishing our illusion of control and expressing our belief that He is sovereign and He knows what He's doing.

I learned this important (and now precious to me) lesson the hard way when He kept saying "no" to the huge prayer of my heart for physical healing. I invite you to read my story, [How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change](#).

Blessings,

Sue Bohlin

[Editor's Note: The inquirer shares the frustrations of the psalmists in seeing the rich and ruthless get off apparently scot-free, seemingly unnoticed by a God who promises justice and blessings. This quandary is nothing new, but it is significant that a sovereign God would allow it into the Scriptures it would make God look bad if there were no bigger, truer picture as explained briefly above. See for reference: Psalm 73: 2-12.

Regarding the inquirer's reference to Psalm 37: 25-2 about the righteous never being forsaken or their children begging for

bread, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and others, explains, “David must surely have seen good people in great difficulties! But this misses the psalmist’s point. He did not question that the righteous may be temporarily forsaken, needy and poor. Rather, he observed that nowhere can it be shown that the righteous have experienced continued desertion and destitution.... The point is this: in the long haul, God does not forsake his own whether they have little or much; their children will be blessed! (pages 267-268).” *Hard Sayings of the Bible* also addresses the issues of why the godly so frequently suffer and the ungodly seem so prosperous related to Psalm 73. For another Probe perspective on how Psalm 73 helps us deal with the problem of evil, please see Dr. Ray Bohlin’s article [“Where Was God on September 11?”](#)]

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Spanish Feedback: “I Regret My Abortion, We Must Fight It”

Translated Spanish Q & A:

Dear Sirs:

I support the points you make in your [article about abortion](#). It is true...I’m telling you this because I had one. The abortion happened when I was 21 years old and now I really regret doing this. I have 2 children that show me how beautiful it is to be a mother. When I think of what I did, I feel very sad.

**We definitely have to fight against abortion.
("Definitivamente hay que luchar contra el aborto.")**

Dear friend,

I am so sorry to hear of your pain over your abortion. Do you know that Jesus Christ offers you forgiveness and cleansing for your sin? He cannot take away your choice, but He can take away the guilt and the pain. The Bible tells us, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for all of your sins, including abortion, and then God raised Him from the dead. He is alive today and wants to have a warm, love-filled relationship with you. For more information, please see this article on The Most Important Decision of Your Life at www.ministeriosprobe.org/docs/decision_mas_importante.html

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin

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“Do You Have Articles on Losing Your Salvation?”

My friend believes it is possible to lose your salvation. He believes if you are in sin or sinning at the point of your death and have not had a chance to repent you will not go to heaven. Do you have any articles on this?

We cover that issue in several answers to email:

- ["Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?"](#)
- ["How Can You Say I Can't Lose My Salvation?"](#)
- ["Can a True Believer Commit the Unforgiveable Sin?"](#)
- ["Is God Punishing Me Because I Committed the Unforgiveable Sin?"](#)
- ["I Fear I Have Committed the Unforgivable Sin!"](#)
- ["What is the 'Sin Unto Death'?"](#) [Jimmy Williams]
- ["What is the 'Sin Unto Death'?"](#) [Michael Gleghorn]
- ["How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?"](#)
- ["Were Those Who Fell Away Ever Saved or Did They Lose Their Salvation?"](#)
- ["Does Jesus' Vine/Branches Discourse in John 15 Mean You Can Lose Your Salvation?"](#)
- ["What About Believers Who Stop Believing in Christ?"](#)

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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"Wicca is Not a False Religion!"

You sound like a very knowledgeable person but when I was searching the web and came upon your website I was not angry but I wanted to email you and explain something about [the young girl someone took in](#). Well when you said that Wicca is a false religion you are quite mistaken. Wicca is another word or newer version of Paganism which is actually a very old and sacred religion. Paganism was even hundreds of years before Christianity. I am not sending this to you as hate mail but as a young pagan teen who is very tired of religious people

saying that we need help. I would very much appreciate if you refrain from speaking about or making false accusations about other religions who do not agree with you.

Thank you for the respectful, gentle way in which you disagreed. I appreciate that so very much!! That says something lovely about you.

My statement about Wicca being a false religion is from a perspective that believes it is opposed to the one true religion. I do realize that may sound arrogant and foolish, and it absolutely would be if Christianity (with its roots in Judaism) were a man-made religion. But it is the one way of connecting with God that originates with Him. All man-made religions, including paganism and Wicca, are the result of man trying to find his way to God, or to various kinds of spirituality. The Judeo-Christian story is God reaching down to and communicating with us, and actually becoming one of us. I do know that Wiccans and pagans worship the creation. But how did that creation get here? It makes sense to worship the one who created it! (And us.)

I do understand that this is a time for you to search out what you believe and how you want to live your life. You are obviously a smart, thoughtful young lady; I hope you are wise enough to receive this piece of wisdom. As you work your way through this very important part of growing up, don't merely look for *what works*; look for *what is true*.

Blessings to you,

Sue Bohlin

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“Is God Punishing Me With Singleness?”

At times I feel tormented regarding sexual issues. I was 21 when I got saved and still a virgin. I committed at that time to be obedient to God's sexual standards. For 27 years I have prayed for marriage and family. I am now 48 and still a virgin. There have been times over the years that the God-given(?) sexual feelings were just tortuous. However, God has not answered my prayers for marriage.

Even though I know that I am within God's will, I feel tremendous shame because I feel like I'm just not good/attractive enough to attract a husband. I look at other women who have husbands and/or children and I just feel like I am defective compared to them.

Also, it seems that plenty of people have premarital sex with impunity and that the way to get a husband is to fornicate (This is what I see demonstrated). Also, a church in my area is going to great lengths this Mother's Day to celebrate and honor single mothers. Those of us who waited and those of us who did it right and married before having children are expected to serve and bless the single mothers, most of whom are single mothers by choice. This just kind of makes me feel like my choice is silly.

I even kind of blame God for making me unattractive so that men won't want me. I just feel so much shame, torment, and low self-esteem. I feel like God might be punishing me or playing games with me.

I am so sorry. That is a very difficult burden to bear. And you are not alone! Proverbs says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (13:12), and there are a lot of heartsick people who would so love a spouse and children, but it hasn't

happened.

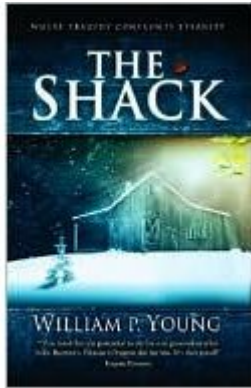
It sounds like you may have been listening to the enemy's slanderings about God—that He is not good, and He does not really love you, and He is withholding goodies from you because He is capricious. In order to live in peace with your life as it is, may I respectfully suggest that it starts with learning to “live loved,” as the author of *The Shack* puts it? I suggest that you pray every day, “Lord, show me how You love me.” And be looking for the various ways in which He shows His love to you. It is essential to seek God's help in being content; otherwise, we can turn into grumpy, critical, self-pitying people that others don't want to be around. An “attitude of gratitude” goes a long way in embracing life as it is instead of focusing on what we DONT have. That's why I strongly encourage people to keep a gratitude journal, recording three things every day for which we can thank the Lord.

I do understand shame, and lived with a “shame disability” for many years before God set me free from it when I accepted His gift of His acceptance, as well as the gift of self-acceptance. I pray you will receive this gift as well, learning to embrace His love for you and see the many ways in which He communicates His love and delight in you, every day.

Sue Bohlin

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Response to “The Shack”



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel,{1} for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read ["Is The Shack Heresy?"](#) by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It's a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It's signed "Papa," his wife's favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*,{2} where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character's questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of "How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?"

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don't read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn't have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my "wisdom journal," a book I've been adding to for years with wisdom

from others that I didn't want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn't. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about "doing Christianity." It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

Fresh Insights

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

- God is warm and inviting
- He collects our tears in a bottle
- Jesus was not particularly handsome
- God is one, in three Persons
- The Holy Spirit is a comforter
- There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
- God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation
- God values what is given from the heart
- God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God
- God is compassionate toward the anguished question, "How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?"
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ
- The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled

- There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
- How good triumphs over evil
- The nature and purpose of the Law
- The healing nature of God's love
- Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
- God's omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
- In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as “a large, beaming, African-American woman” (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa's reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

“Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.”

She leaned forward as if to share a secret. “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious

stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.”

. . . She looked at Mack intently. “Hasn’t it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you’ve been through, you couldn’t very well handle a father right now, could you?”

*He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful.
(pp. 93-94)*

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack’s heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of “God is our Mother” garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

Deep Ministry

On his personal [website](#), the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to “kill our independence” (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God’s love looks like.

I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn't just love me, He *likes* me.

An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

“We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. . . . What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense to us.” (p. 122)

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

“We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) 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.” (p. 145)

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *serving*. God submitting to His creation? I don't think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack*, one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, “If you’ll let me, I’ll be the Papa you never had.” (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God’s eyes when they meet face to face, who can’t give themselves permission to rest from their “hamster treadmill” for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ’s bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant, grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God’s heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only “Christianity from the neck up,” but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*. Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that “boys express affection aggressively.”

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best “take-away” of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people’s hostility toward the book isn’t about what it actually says, it’s about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like “heresy” and “dangerous” to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it’s important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife’s urging, “You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them

understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God.” He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young’s “out of the box” theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a “slice of God,” so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul’s view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—“Gandalf with an attitude,” as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking “What is the author using this imagery to portray?” is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the [heart of El-Shaddai \(“the breasted one”\)](#). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father’s and

the Spirit's hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul's children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn't know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

The Shack presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see

confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise seminarian told me, "We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy."

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people's understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It's a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree.

In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to “be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that’s important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. “Controversies don’t bother me,” this wise believer said. “I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis, time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it.”

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals’, and it troubled me. As I prayed, “Lord, what’s up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective,” I believe He answered me: “He doesn’t get everything right.” Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don’t know what our blind spots are and we don’t know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with “getting your theological beliefs right.” And not “getting everything right” is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this “heretical” book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is that He knows Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and He’s using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there’s something to be said for that.