

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

September 5, 2017

Somewhat belatedly, Jill and I watched *The Shack* on Sunday night (the movie came out last spring). Having “met” Octavia Spencer when she played the mother of my friend, Leonard Vaughan, in *Hidden Figures*, I thought she was the perfect choice to play “Papa” in *The Shack*.

I’ve read *The Shack* a number of times, and have twice taught the book in weekly sessions for an entire year. I think it is one of the most significant books for the advancement of the Gospel written in my lifetime.

The first time I read the book, nearly a decade ago, I wept through the entire reading. In the first third of the book, I wept at the pain and darkness being depicted; in the last two-thirds, I wept at Paul Young’s winsome depiction of the incredible love of God.¹

Not a few Christian leaders, including some whom I respect, consider *The Shack* to be heresy—a dangerous book. I have read their critiques many times, and with care; and obviously, if I agreed with them, I wouldn’t have spent so much time teaching the book. I am sad for those whose theology has no place for such an understanding of God. I think they have failed to understand the book, as well as the Realities it represents.

The greatest philosophical challenge to God as Christians understand God is the problem of evil. Evil would not be a theological problem if we understood evil to be part of God’s nature, as some religions do. Evil would not be a theological problem if we understood God’s power to be less than complete, as some do. The fact that evil exists, whether human (as at Charlottesville) or natural (as hurricanes Harvey and Irma), is only a theological problem for those who maintain—as the Bible clearly *does*—that God exists, and is both Good and Powerful.

The Shack doesn’t shy away from the problem: wrestling with evil occupies a central place on nearly every page. Nor does *The Shack* fail to state God’s response to evil: the person of Jesus, together with the mystery of the Trinity, are present on nearly every page as well.

The gift *The Shack* gives is that it opens up a path to the Heart of God that many—maybe most—of us have never seen or experienced before. *The Shack* is not Scripture, but it may be inspired, nonetheless. And I contend that it is deeply congruent with what God has given us in the Bible. Eugene Peterson, whom you may know as the translator of *The Message*, has written that “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!”

¹ Having just preached on “Three-Part Harmony” last Sunday, I was interested to see that Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, autographed my book with “Grace says your name in Three-Part Harmony! You Matter!” My sermon was about kindness, goodness, and gentleness—three of the Apostle Paul’s “Fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul Young was referring to the Trinity.



The Shack isn't "religious," "preachy," or "churchy," or even overtly "Christian," and that's part of the problem some have with it. I think that's part of its genius:²

- Like Rick Warren's *What On Earth Am I Here For?* *The Shack* has sold over 20 million copies, because it wrestles theologically with questions that people are actually asking, and then leads them to Jesus.
- Like C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*,³ *The Shack* is accessible to persons both secular and religious because it meets us where we live, takes us into a biblical worldview that we don't see coming, and then surprises us with Joy.

As Paul Young says in his epilogue comments, "Most of us have our own grief, broken dreams, and damaged hearts, each of us with our unique losses, our own 'shack.' I pray that you find the same grace there that I did, and that the abiding presence of Papa, Jesus, and Saraya [the Holy Spirit character] will fill up your inside emptiness with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

Shack or no shack, I pray the same for you!

Dave



² After all, our Lord Himself wasn't all that popular with "the church crowd."

³ And to a lesser extent, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.