

THE SHACK & CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Purpose:

To help Christians not just to conform to current trends in promoting *The Shack*.
To help Christians spiritually to discern what it is saying, and to reassess its worth.
To outline how Christians experience God, so that Young's message can be put into a truer context.

Outline

- Part I - The Phenomenon
- Part II - Assessing *The Shack*
- Part III - Visualising the Invisible
- Part IV - Re-formation or De-formation?
- Part V - The Christian Experience of God in Trinity
- Part VI - Enemy-Infiltrated Territory
- Part VII - *The Shack*: Concluding Points
- Part VIII - Two Suggestions

An Invitation to You

Part I - The Phenomenon

William Young's *The Shack* is a very unconventional Christian novel that is being increasingly widely read. By March 2009, five million copies were in print, and it was still the *New York Times*' No.1 best seller after six months.

1. Its Two Attractions

Its almost aggressive promotion by some Christians - a few, I suspect, merely out of loyalty to the Christian cause - would not account for its success without its two main attractions. These are -

- Its novelty
- Its answers

2. Its Two Aims

Its novel treatment and its offer of answers arise directly from William Young's two main aims which seem to be -

1. to introduce the Christian God, and
2. to answer Christian problems.

Introducing God

In the first, Young deals with the Christian belief in God-in-Trinity, i.e. three 'persons' traditionally known as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

(Note: Today's meaning of the word *person* as an autonomous individual is a much stronger translation of the word originally decided on in A.D.362, which was more like our *persona*. That is why, throughout this article, I have written *person* in inverted commas, since it is a technical term, and does *not* mean an individual.

Some prefer to speak of God being in three 'modes' of existence. Unfortunately, that is also unsatisfactory, because it too readily implies the heresy of 'modalism' that Christians have always rejected. God does not simply change modes - as when water changes into ice one day and steam the next.)

Answering Problems

Young's second aim is to tackle the issues and topics that arise from belief in a good God, and in particular God's relation to a world in which we suffer and experience evil. Young also comments helpfully on such issues as freedom, reality, relationships, law, grace and heaven.

Part II - Assessing *The Shack*

It is usual for an ordinary novel to be assessed simply on its sales rather than its merit.

Christians must on no account assess *The Shack* simply by the number of people who buy it or like it. Because it is primarily about *God*, Christians must assess it by

- Its Truth about God
- Its ability to convey it truly

1. The Truth

As God is its main topic, the worth and merit of *The Shack* must be judged by its truth not its popularity. This is the hub of this article. Because Jesus is *the Truth* [John 14:6], Truth matters, and the Truth about God matters most of all.

Partial Truth

Partial religious truths (or 'heresies' as they used to be called) are attractive and easy to hold on to. Leaders who promote them tend to become over-popular and their teachings create a 'following'. It is easy to promote heresy - a little exaggeration is all that is required. Heresy, it has been said, is when Christians claim for the whole what is only true of a part: 'half-truth' in other words.

Full Truth

The real Christian truth, however, is usually unpopular because it is less easy to grasp and to manage. Keeping to the Christian truth in its fullness often requires Christians to hold together contrasting truths in a creative tension and balance - and the history of the Church down the ages sadly demonstrates just how very difficult this can be!

(Think of the way Christians tends to emphasise first one side and then the other of such truths as: mercy-judgement, predestination-freewill, freedom-service, affirmation-denial, love-justice, faith-works, order-informality, reason-feeling, transcendence-immanence, deity-humanity, individual-corporate, social-spiritual, submission-independence, and so on.)

2. Testing for Truth

Many readers will recognise in their culture the two particular enemies of truth mentioned below (I have labelled them 'Numbers' and 'Extremism'). Christians, as I shall explain, need to be particularly alerted to them both when assessing and trying to discern the worth of *The Shack*.

First enemy: Numbers

It is now widely assumed that a film or a book is 'excellent' if a high number of people see it or read it. Such numbers may say more about the success of commercial manipulation than about the film's or the book's intrinsic worth.

Christians must, therefore, guard against 'going with the crowd' - even their own Christian crowd (!) - if in so doing they brush aside the necessary spiritual discipline of discernment. St. Paul's advice to the Thessalonians [5:19-22] is relevant:

***Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise the words of prophets,
but test everything;
hold fast to what is good;
abstain from every form of evil.***

Discernment, the need to ***test everything***, is central to the Christian life, not an optional fringe activity. It is not a negative thing (even if sometimes it comes to negative conclusions) for it is only by testing everything that Christians learn what they can wisely enjoy. If you set out to buy a car, you make sure it has first been tested. Once you know that it has, you feel free to enjoy it! It is its initial *testing* that keeps you from crashing due to faulty brakes.

In his Bible translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Paul's advice quoted above as:

***Don't be gullible.
Check out everything.***

One must assume that Peterson did ***Check out everything*** in his reading of *The Shack* before likening its importance to *Pilgrim's Progress* - as he does on the cover of the British edition.

On the back cover, *The Shack's* publisher expresses his profession's age-old hope:
You'll want everyone you know to read this book.

In discerning the value of *The Shack*, Christians need first to *disengage* themselves from such commercial assumptions and pressures. Beware of the total and indiscriminate language of ruthless sales-promotion. Is the Holy Spirit really wanting you to tell:

'Everyone you know...'

It is much more likely that the Holy Spirit wants you to share it with the person(s) of God's choice, in God's appointed time. That's the route to great blessing, but it requires discernment, obedience and sensitivity to find it and stick to it. It is the sort of response that Christians should aim for, but it requires turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the many powerful forces that are promoting Shackomania!

Second Enemy: Extremism

The second enemy of truth is exaggeration. The cultural and speech patterns of aggressively consumer societies mean that almost everything tends to be described in superlative terms for maximum impact and persuasion.

Recently, a bank cashier asked me to sign something. I scrawled my name.

'That's magnificent!', he exclaimed!

'What absolute drive!' I thought to myself - and I could scarcely restrain myself from telling him so! His was the sort of language that *I* would reserve for my first sight of the Sistine Chapel or St. Paul's cathedral!

(Any society that gets used to using exalted language for trivial things, wrecks its ability to convey truth. This has disastrous implications, and Christians must combat the trend.)

Such verbal extremism is sufficiently wide-spread to make us wary of most commendations - including Christian ones - because we cannot know for sure whether the writer/speaker is using words fashionably and vaguely, or traditionally and accurately.

3. Not Revelation

Young's writing is clever and novel (pun intended!), but as we test for truth it is clear that he is *not* disclosing to the church, or world, truths which God has had to keep hidden from us for the last two-thousand years pending Mr. Young's arrival with his skills and insights!

Such deliberate sarcasm on my part is simply my device to alert Christians against reacting to *The Shack* as if it were some new revelation, or give their support to trends that might imply that it is.

Part III - Visualising the Invisible

Young gave himself an impossible task. His great problem is the one that has beset Christian writers about God since time began - it is exceedingly difficult to visualise the invisible!

Young gets full marks for attempting it. But there is a snag. He made it particularly difficult for himself by rejecting the standard solution used by the authors in Scripture, in attempting to visualise the invisible. Let me explain.

1. Pointer-Words

Scripture (except when describing the life of the God-incarnate in Jesus Christ) tends not to try to describe God, but uses numerous phrases or words that *point to* him.

Thus in Scripture God is likened in some ways to a **fortress**, in others ways God is likened to a **dove**, in other ways he is like a **light**, in other ways akin to a **farmer**, in other ways he resembles a **shepherd**, and so on - the list is almost endless.

[For example: *king, lord, lawgiver, judge, advocate, potter, father, vine-grower, husband, lover, singer, friend, builder, sower, harvester, thresher, metalworker, tent-maker, knitter, maker of clothes, gardener, house cleaner, instructor, teacher, composer, healer, helper, protector, comforter, saviour, rock, light, fire, lion, leopard, eagle, bear and a song*]

God is not actually a **fortress**, or actually a **dove**, or a **light**, a **farmer** or a **shepherd**. These words cannot, and so do not, *describe* the invisible God. Each is just a useful word-pointer to truths about him.

How pointer-words accumulate

It works like this:

God is likened to a **fortress** because we experience his might, his reliability and his protection. When he gets likened to a **hen**, we retain the truths conveyed to us by the use of the **fortress** pointer-word, but add to them the insight that God cares and 'mothers' us somewhat as a chicken does her chicks. (No **fortress** could do that!)

The **hen** image usefully balances and enlarges for us the impersonal **fortress** image - but not enough. By human standards, a **hen's** care is pretty basic!

So, just as the single pointer-word **fortress** needed the **hen** pointer-word to make it truer, so the insufficient pointer-word **hen** in its turn needs some enriching. This is the way by which pointer-words accumulate.

A good pointer-word to enrich the **hen** analogy would be, for instance, the pointer-word **shepherd** - because, unlike a **hen**, a **shepherd** acts as a midwife, a nurturer, a provider, a protector, a vet and a guide.

I have shown how pointer-words work. You are likely to have used them for years, but not to have read much about them before. In the main, they work very well indeed if people are familiar with them. In fact, 'the more the merrier' is an accurate comment on their usefulness.

However pointer-words do not work well if, by lack of reading or a failure in teaching, believers only encounter one or two. When this happens single images are often taken literally as straight-forward descriptions of the invisible realities, not merely as pointers to them! This, obviously, can be disastrous!

Even the richest and best-loved visible pointer-word is never the invisible reality that it points to - however useful and familiar the word may be - like *he*, or *Father*.

The First 'person' of the Trinity is not a being of male sexuality who has sired children. But nothing could shake my belief that he is truly my *Father* !

Understanding the different ways Christians use words is essential for discerning Christian Truth.

2. Multiple-pointers

This age-old technique of communicating invisible truths by multiple pointers has two enormous advantages:

- It **enriches**. The different word-pointers each add something.
- It is **self-correcting**. Pointer-words act as a balance to each other.

Let's take two familiar pointer-words to the Holy Spirit - *dove* and *fire*. Christians believe them to be true, useful and religiously real - but rarely photographically real.

(Interestingly, Luke [3:22] clarifies Mark's mention of the *dove* by inserting that the Holy Spirit was only *in bodily form like* one. Luke, wisely, did not want his readers to believe that the Holy Spirit is just a bird!

This pre-dates by two millennia one of my favourite anecdotes -

An oriental is said to have responded to Christian teaching thus:

'The Father I can understand.

The Son I can understand.

But the Holy Bird I cannot understand at all!')

As pointer-words we readily accept the Holy Spirit being likened both to a *dove* and to *fire*. The first points to the *gentleness* of the Holy Spirit and the second to his *power*.

It would be a half-truth, or heresy, to liken the Holy Spirit only to one or to the other. Both - at least - are needed to begin to grasp the Biblical teaching about the Spirit.

As before, this last principle is particularly relevant to assessing *The Shack*. William Young opts *not* to describe the 'persons' of the invisible God-in-Trinity by using a cluster of pointer-words or phrases.

3. The Single Image

The three 'persons' of the Trinity, Young describes as three individuals.

In the light of what I have outlined above, however brilliantly or imaginatively Young does this (and he does so with his considerable imagination and skills) its success must be limited - it cannot be otherwise. Young's refusal to use multiple word-pointers puts him in the position of someone opting to use only an acorn to describe a wood!

Such single images, however imaginatively and creatively they are used and stretched,

- cannot enrich,
- cannot be self-correcting.

I, personally, would find it fun and refreshing to have *as just one of many word-pointers* to the First person of the Trinity, a 'large beaming African-American woman'. Such a word-pointer could enrich and self-correct the limitations of the popular image of an old man with a beard floating in the sky. The two images - like *dove* and *fire* - could each enrich and correct the other.

BUT....

this is *not* what Young is doing.

By basically* using just one image, not many word-pointers, the 'large beaming African-American woman' tends to *become* the First 'person' of the Trinity - not just a helpful pointer.

(* I am aware of Young's attempts *not* to make her the only image of the First person of the Trinity, but responses to *The Shack* show that in the popular mind the African-American woman image is excessively strong, and possibly felt to be *The Shack's* central message.)

This has enormous repercussions because she comes very close indeed to becoming God, not just being one of twenty or thirty pointer-words or pointer-phrases suggesting what God is like.

I have very considerable fears that in practice this strong single image will undermine true belief more than encourage it or enrich it.

By opting to use a single image technique instead of numerous word-pointers in talking about God, Young's image of each 'person' of the Trinity cannot be modified and enriched by others in the way that word-pointers like *fortress*, *hen* and *shepherd* can be.

Part IV - Re-formation or De-formation?

If something is reformed it is likely to be good, if something gets deformed it is likely to be bad.

Is *The Shack's* teaching about God re-forming or de-forming? Does it make it more true, or less true? Is Young a welcome 'reformer' or unwittingly one who deforms Christian truth?

1. Impoverishment ?

Although in practice the author of *The Shack* may still manage to convey to Christians something both truthful and useful, the principle of using such single-images instead of multi-pointers is likely to result in half-truths or less, and may *reduce* our understanding of God - not enlarge it. It is this that makes me unenthusiastic about the promotion of *The Shack*.

To use just one individual to represent a 'person' of the Trinity may be clever and novel, but whatever the author's skills it has to be seen first and foremost as an appalling impoverishment. The author is well aware of this, so he stretches his three characters to the maximum, and in various ingenious ways, to try to offset it.

Cutting Down to Size

Unfortunately, his opting for single images involves him in an impoverishment process that inevitably gets progressively *worse* ! This is because in cutting the 'persons' of the Trinity down to human size, Young then has to diminish them still further by defining his trio's age, sex, race, style, ways of speech, and appearance. By limiting each 'person' of the Trinity to our everyday sort of being 'real', Young's three characters have to remain within their limited image. (What a terrible thing if you are attempting to tell people about God!)

Thus in the novel Jesus is a Hebrew, with a typical Jewish nose, of medium height, not handsome - even 'ugly', who enjoys working with his hands, likes mending things and wears jeans. Young reduces him down to an almost photographic reality of the nice Jew next door.

Because Jesus became 'one of us', believers have usually - and rightly - depicted Jesus as one of themselves - an Indian in India, an African in Africa, a European in Europe, and so on.

Christ 'real' - or the Real Christ?

Christ is utterly real, but Christians generally avoid shrinking him down to our everyday chap-next-door 'reality'. This frees Christians to be enriched by having a host of pointer-words and pointer-images to Christ.

Imagine, suspended high above the Sunday worshippers, a huge carved black Christ, with arms spread wide on a Cross. His hands and feet bear the scars of the nails. He is not wearing a loin cloth, but royal robes and a jewelled crown! The foot of the Cross rests not on a mock-up of the hill outside Jerusalem, but on the globe of our world. Coiled in agony at the foot of the globe is a mortally-injured dragon with the skull of death in one of its bleeding claws.

This is not the easy everyday mini-image of your nice young Jewish neighbour! Thank God, it is so much truer than that!

What I described above is the sort of rich multi-image that Christians can enjoy once they are freed from Young's urge to diminish the total Christ (incarnate, risen, ascended, and glorified) right down to human 'reality'.

2. Circle of Relationship?

Young presents the Trinity as a circle of relationship. If it was just one of many pointers it would be helpful, but Young rejects the many-pointer method (as I have had to stress) and presents it as a *single* - and therefore *only* - image of God's relationship in Trinity.

Other valid images, that cannot easily be married to his 'Circle of Relationship' concept, Young ignores or discards - even if they are prominent in Scripture. (Some would think that this makes his claim to be a 'theologian' questionable!)

Young's rejection of the use of multiple word-pointers lands him in trouble.

He has to reject every sense of **hierarchy** within the Trinity and, with it, **obedience** - since neither dovetails with his limited concept of 'a circle of relationships'.

Such a departure from Scripture is serious.

If there is never to be any sense of **hierarchy** or **obedience** -

- How can one account for Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and his enormous battle between his will and the cup that his Father was offering him?

*'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible;
remove this cup from me;
yet, not what I want,
but what you want.'* [Mark 14:36]

If there is no **hierarchy** or **obedience** within the Trinity -

- What are we to make of Jesus's repeated claims in John's Gospel [e.g. 4:34, 5:30, 12:49-50, 14:31, 17:4] to do, and to be restricted by, his Father's will?

It is difficult to think in terms of the Trinity *exclusively* in terms of a 'Circle of Relationship', when reading St. Paul's famous summary of Jesus's activity [Philippians 2:6-9]:

*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death
- even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him...*

3. The Holy Spirit

For me, Young's creation of the Asian woman, Sarayu, was too anaemic and sentimental to 'cut much ice' with me. But, to be fair, her gentleness tallied well with the Holy Spirit being given by the *breath* of Jesus [John 20:19ff], which I have found to be such an important text when talking to the fearful about the Holy Spirit.

Sarayu's gentle collecting of tears in a bottle has some point in Young's story, but it seems light years away from the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, where his '*dynamis*' gave us the powerful word 'dynamite' when the explosive first needed a name! What of the Holy Spirit's power which raised Jesus from the dead, and transformed the fearful to the fearless?

4. Fashion ?

To comment on everything in *The Shack* would be undesirable and impossible. Young leans towards fashionable trends in some Christian circles. The following ought not to escape your notice.

- Young seems to be deliberately vague at times. He dodges being dogmatic. To pander to other religions, he skates around the exclusiveness of Jesus. There are those who 'love' him who are Buddhists and Muslims.

If there are, I am so pleased, because it may well be the start of their journey towards acknowledging him as Lord. Young, in what I would term his 'salesmanship theology', avoids such precision where it will not be popular.

Young has Jesus say that he, Jesus, is not a Christian. One could argue for it being technically correct, but Young is not diligent about any verbal correctness. It is more likely that he is slyly downgrading Jesus's position to be a wishy-washy figure that somehow drifts in and out of all other religions like a genie from a lamp.

- I suspect Young is (or wishes to appear) trendy. He apparently views tradition, authority and hierarchy almost only in negative terms.
For instance Mack joins Jesus in a meal. It is not, as one might expect, Coke and a burger, but they break bread and drink wine together. Young's unexpected choice enabled him, perhaps, to make a 'dig' at other Christian's by adding that it was done 'without any ritual, without ceremony' ?
Young missed the humour of Jesus saying 'It takes you back!'

- Some of Young's writing appears more impressive than it really is, and is not helped by his tendency to make dogmatic generalities.
'Religion is about having the right answers...'

Hang on a minute! Is it? Mine isn't! Whose definition of 'religion' is Young using anyway? Is he doing what Alice's Humpty Dumpty did, and using words to mean only what he wants them to mean?

Religion, teaches James, *that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.* [1:27, see also 1:26]

How is it that in one place Young regards religion as 'one of the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I [Jesus] care about' ? Elsewhere, he has the Holy Spirit say, 'Religion must use laws to empower itself and control the people they need in order to survive.' This comes oddly from the one who *empowers* the love, the allegiance, the worship and the witness of Christ's followers.

- Although Young can capture ordinary talk well, there are long passages of God's teaching that read like lecture notes. To give Young credit, his own assessment of such passages is pretty accurate. He has Mack (his main character) feeling 'the onset of information overload!', and suffering from his brain tank being more than full. As an M.E. sufferer and a very slow reader, this gained a written 'Oh Yes!' in the margin of my much-annotated copy!

With consumer, and other, forces inflating the importance of *The Shack*, much that I have opted to write should have a role in keeping it in its place, and in checking those who would unthinkingly view it as some great new revelation. It is most certainly nothing of the sort, much as its publisher would wish otherwise!

I have mixed reactions to the book. I have explained in some detail the shortcomings of the single-image style, since I believe that the majority of my readers may not have been familiar with them had I not highlighted them.

Oh Goodness!

There have always been two difficulties in writing about eternal goodness: sentimentality and boredom.

Christians will know that such things as smiling, embracing, winking, kissing, talking, relaxing, laughing can be the surface signs of massively deep and wonderful things. When they are described, however, they can strike the reader as sloppy sentimental gush, which can be nauseous rather than attractive. The problem has no easy solution. It is such a pity when we are trying to write about ultimate reality that we run out of powerful images, and can end up in a sort of Disneyland, which is our reality diluted - not our reality greatly enhanced. Chocolate box sentimentality is the enemy of Truth. [See the article - *Our Triviality: A Weapon for Evil* on this website.]

It is a pity that heavenly goodness is so difficult to portray. Bouncing stones across a lake seems so much weaker than our greatest earthly pleasures. If we are to enjoy God forever, it will be far, far greater than our greatest moments, not an endless eternity of our most trivial ones! Will it not include feelings and joys far greater than the first moment a mother holds her first-born? Will it not be more thrilling than sky-diving? More satisfying than the completion of our masterpiece - whether it is a hole-in-one, or making a four-tier wedding cake, doing a heart-transplant, scoring a goal in the final minute, or breaking an Olympic record?

Not doing much more than looking at the stars and skipping stones across lakes are pictures of eternity that will suggest to some that remaining here, in Time, is likely to be more fun! It was, therefore, a reassuring item to tell of Jesus wanting to land a trout just for the fun of it!

5. But Positively Speaking

Life's Pains

Among the book's most positive aspects are Young's treatment of life's pains and their possible healing. So often God is put in one mental compartment and our pains and hurts in another - and the two are presumed to be apart and unconnected.

The Shack brings the two together, out of their compartments, and it will perhaps enable some to envisage God coming miraculously through their locked doors, standing right in the midst of their fear, showing them his hands and his side, and giving them his peace. [See John 20:19ff.]

Forgiveness

So many peoples' lives are crushed between the guilt of yesterday and the fear of tomorrow, that almost any Christian contribution to a wider understanding and experience of forgiveness is to be welcomed. Young's understanding of the scope of guilt and forgiveness is very good. I pray that it will help and begin to heal many.

Forgiveness is possibly the most important pastoral need today, and it's working-through in the story of *The Shack* may - in the long-run - be *The Shack's* most important role.

Some of Young's sentences would form useful topics for teaching and discussion (see my suggestion in Section 8).

For example:

For you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him.

Forgiveness is not about forgetting...It is about letting go of another person's throat.

Forgiveness does not establish relationship.

So forgiveness does not require me to pretend what he did never happened?

Forgiveness in no way requires you to trust the one you forgive.

Forgiveness does not excuse anything.

Is it all right if I am still angry?

You may have to declare your forgiveness a hundred times the first day...

Perhaps the author's next task might be a non-fictional introduction to forgiveness - some two hundred and thirty pages shorter!

God alongside

Young's assumption that God cares and can be encountered will be a welcome message to those who feel or assume that he is distant or unconcerned. Young holds the widespread assumption that those whose fathers have damaged them find it impossible to relate to God as *Father*. I have always queried this assumption, and hope that those who act on it are doing so from a solid basis of truth and not just from a perpetuated assumption.

I have long thought that it may well be possible for some of those who have been damaged by their father to have the very *clearest idea* of what they would have wanted their ideal father to have been. Do they never think: 'If only my Father had been welcoming, warm, respectful, caring, listening, gentle, loving, encouraging, supporting, guiding,...'? And cannot Christians say 'I've met him! And he loves you too!'?

Part V - Notes on the Christian Experience of God in Trinity

I inserted this section into the article because I thought that it could be a good reminder, to Christian readers in particular, to have an overview of how Christians down the ages have generally experienced God-in-Trinity. This is the scene to which many feel that Young's novel is contributing so much, and is the context in which Young's contribution needs to be judged. Does it spoil it or does it enrich it?

What appears as something complex is simple enough if broken down as follows, but please only treat it as an outline.

1. Christian Experience - Its Range

Christian experiences of God range from the fringe to the full. This is true of most of our experiences. As I live under one of Heathrow's flight-paths, I'll take flying as an example.

Our experience of flying can range through five stages-

a. Ignorance of Flying

We begin life ignorant of flight. We are not born with the knowledge of it. We do not know of it by nature.

b. Knowing Flying

The knowledge of flight is something that we usually begin to experience from others, or from their explanations of what we encounter.

c. Interest in Flying

The next stage is to begin to become interested in planes & flying. This would involve learning a little more about them - even if it is only their passenger schedules.

d. Commitment to Flying

Then comes the time when you entrust yourself to the reality of flying - and fly somewhere. It is only the beginning of flying experience, because airlines use drinks, meals, movies and pretty girls deliberately to minimise the experience!

e. Total Partnership in Flying

I know from past personal experience that the reality of flying is only at its maximum when you are piloting a (light) aircraft. This involves total involvement, a thorough working-knowledge both of the aircraft and yourself, and not permitting any distractions. It is best described as a 'moment-by-moment working partnership'.

People relate to God over a similar range -

Ignorance.

Knowing.

Interest.

Commitment.

Total Partnership.

The Saints are the 'high-flyers'(!) of our Christian family. We remember them as examples because their 'moment-by-moment working partnership' with God has been, or is, noticeably so much better than ours.

Because God meets people at their point of need wherever they are, and welcomes all who begin to turn to him, any local gathering of Christians is, and should be, a very varied group, ranging from the ignorant, through the knowing, the interested and the committed, to those in moment-by-moment total partnership with God.

This constitutes the glory of the local church, but contributes considerably to its usual strains and to its weaknesses in terms of witness.

2. Christian Experience - Its Growth

There are four main patterns of Christian growth

- Staying Still(!)
- The Travelator process
- The Step process
- The Step & Travelator process

Staying Still!

This has an exclamation mark because it is obviously not growth at all. Unfortunately, it is the most common of the four!

It happens often in countries called 'Christian' or 'once Christian' that many families assume that 'Christian' is an inherited label, like one's nationality. Because their passports indicate that they are not required to do anything further about being, say, 'British' or 'American', it does not occur to them that the inherited description 'Christian' is any different. They are glad to have a free Passport to Heaven, and that's it!

Let's turn to the patterns of real growth.

Travelator Style

This is my image of one common pattern of Christian growth.

By the Travelator analogy I am not thinking of the flat ones in airports, but the gently sloping moving walkways in some large stores that enable us and our loaded trolley to get up a floor higher. It is an image of a spiritual journey that gains height smoothly. It is steady and unspectacular - but gets there! Like physical growth it is imperceptible on a day-to-day basis, but when you stand back, it can show a real development between the Christian 'child' and 'mature adult'. People whose growth is this pattern talk about it less because it does not have obvious highlights or be marked by special occasions.

The Step Style

Another pattern of spiritual growth is seemingly by a number of very clear, large steps. These are so clear and identifiable that they often have names, like Conversion, Second Blessing, Baptism in the Spirit, and so on. In some cases these big experiences synchronise with special events - Baptism, Confirmation, Anointing, Ordination, etc. Having experienced such steps, these Christians tend to chat about their Christian experience more - because it is clearer and more exciting than those whose spiritual growth climbs gradually like a Travelator. (Some, in their enthusiasm, try to reproduce their own exciting steps in others. This is not surprising given the glorious experience they themselves undeservedly enjoyed.)

The 'Both-And' Style

Having defined in black-and-white terms two patterns of growth, we are now in a position to say that for many their lives are marked by a mix of these two patterns. There are few Christians who only grow 'smoothly' and whose journeys are not marked by certain 'steps'. Similarly, there are few Christians who are blessed with 'steps' whose growth would be healthy were it without its steady uphill periods.

This mixture of the steady and the spectacular, of slopes and steps, is probably what we should expect, given the contrasting experiences of Jesus. One thinks, for instance, of his vivid spiritual experience at his Baptism and his long spiritual battle in the Wilderness that grew directly out of it. [Luke 3:21-22, 4:1-13]

I have outlined the **range** of Christian Experience in my analogy with flying, and the basic patterns of Christian **growth**. These are necessary to establish before hoping to understand the Christian experiences of the Trinity.

My next heading will be a surprise. In spite of appearances, it is very relevant - so don't skip it!

3. Christian Buildings

These happen to be very clear pointers to understanding the Christian experiences of God, because it is to these that groups of Christians go to encounter God together. Whenever Christians have enough money they build these shelters-for-worship in as appropriate and helpful a way as possible.

Although Christian buildings cover a wide spectrum, they display two trends. They tend either to veer towards the

- glorious,

or

- friendly.

(An ideal building includes both.)

This immediately tells us that Christians experience God in two different ways, and so they tend to celebrate their experiences of meeting him with two different styles. This naturally leads us to the next point.

4. God - Experienced in Two Ways

Here's an analogy. There's a headmaster called Mr. Williams, and he has a son, David. At one stage David attends his father's school. In class he experiences his father as the headmaster, but at home he experiences him as 'Dad'. Mr. Williams is truly both. David's friends next door enjoy romping around with Jim, as they call him, but do not know him as a Headmaster - although he is that for most of the time.

The analogy is useful as far as it goes (but it fails by falling into different 'modes'- see page 2 - if taken too literally).

God can be experienced a little like Mr. Williams, in contrasting ways -

- As distant and formal
- As close and informal

Those who know God best, know him fully across the spectrum of experience - somewhat as the young David Williams, in my analogy above, knew his father most truly from his wider experience of him.

That God is experienced across such a range explains the otherwise inexplicable spectrum of Christian styles, whether of language, dress, music, prayer, worship, meeting, building - or everything else!

Yet once this distinction is realised, everything from Christian architecture to music, language, pattern of worship, style of praying - even to 'passing the Peace' - falls neatly into place.

This experience of God is no modern theory. The Jewish hymnbook (the Psalms) of 1,000 years before Christ sang to celebrate and remember both aspects of God's being and the range of our experience of him.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
[Psalm 19:1]
The Lord is my shepherd... he makes me lie down in green pastures; [Psalm 23:1-2]

Such contrasts appear still in Christian singing some 3,000 years later. The older generation's singing ranged from the awesome 'Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven...' to the warm 'Come into my heart Lord Jesus there is room in my heart for thee.' Contemporary writers continue to produce words that speak both of God's transcendence and his nearness. There is the well-titled 'Indescribable' ('From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea, creation's revealing your majesty...') Then, much closer to home, is the warm invitation: 'Jesus be the centre...the fire in my heart.'

5. The Fact of Trinity

No Problem!

The most difficult thing about the Trinity is not its reality, but the regularity with which it is presented to be a major problem!

Anything can be a problem if you look at it in the wrong way!

I expect that a surgeon at work could view someone's eating as a massively complex problem. But for most of us eating is not a problem, it is simply enjoying food!

In a similar way, for the non-specialist, the Trinity is not a problem, it is simply the way we enjoy God (and, incidentally, how God enjoys us!).

The truth and reality of The Holy Trinity is to be known, experienced, enjoyed, affirmed, celebrated, caught and taught.

[Theologians, if they have nothing better to do, can try and work out precisely how God can be one-in-three and three-in-one. They would probably begin with these nine propositions from the New Testament:

There is one God (Mark 12:29, etc.)

The Father is God (John 6:27, etc.)

The Son (Word) is God (John 1:1, etc.)

The Holy Spirit is God (Mark 3:29, etc.)

The Three are Separate (I Peter 1:2, Matthew 28:19)

The Father is personal (John 15:9, etc.)

The Son is personal (Mark 14:62, etc.)
The Holy Spirit is personal (Matthew 28:19, etc.)]

The rest of us Christians can get by quite satisfactorily by noting the following simple facts.

Is One Enough?

Christmas celebrates the fact that the Creator-God revealed to us what he is like in human terms in the birth and life of Jesus Christ. As the famous verse begins *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, ...* [John 3:16]

Jesus constantly related to God. It was he whom Jesus experienced as 'Father'. It was he to whom Jesus prayed. It was he whom Jesus obeyed. It was he about whom Jesus taught. It was he whom Jesus revealed. It was Jesus's terrible feeling of God the Father's absence that prompted his so-called 'Cry of Dereliction' from the Cross. [Matthew 27:46]

There is no need to dwell further on any of these points because it is virtually impossible even to mention them without thinking repeatedly of there being more than one party involved. Any rigidly single unity simply does not square with these events, facts and interpretations. They are crying out for some sort of duality - at least some sort of twosome.

Two Plus?

Once we have been forced by the facts to break-out of a totally and rigidly *singular* concept of God, both the events and our interpretations of them most naturally require something of a 'three-some' - a trinity rather than simply a duality.

For instance, at Jesus's Baptism

- the Father affirms
- Jesus, and
- there is symbolic descent from Father to Son of one termed the 'Holy Spirit'.

It is this same 'Spirit' who then drives Jesus into the wilderness. It is by him that Jesus delivers people from evil domination. [Matthew 12:28]

Jesus teaches that in his name the Father will send the Spirit [see John 14:26] to the disciples and remind them of what Jesus taught them.

At Pentecost, the Old Testament prophecy that God would *pour out* [his] *Spirit upon all flesh* comes true [Acts 2:17 ff.]. Who/What is 'poured out' is not Jesus himself, but someone who makes us like Jesus, and is therefore 'Holy'.

This small, but almost random, cluster of some Biblical themes and events most naturally leads readers (and hearers) to stretch towards the Trinity.

Where is the problem?

Christian discipleship does not require that we understand exactly *how* God can be Trinitarian, but the goal of discipleship is to experience fully the Trinitarian God of the Christian Scriptures.

A verse in I Peter 1:2 shows one way of looking at our relationships with God-in-Trinity.

The verse, incidentally, sets us a good example: it neither turns the Trinity into a 'problem', nor grapples to solve it. It simply applies it to help us understand our Christian lives better.

*...chosen and destined by God the Father
and sanctified by the Spirit
to be obedient to Jesus Christ...*

(Those who stress the importance of the Holy Spirit have not always given such weight to the Spirit's role in making us **holy**, and equipping us for **obedience**.)

6. The Experience of Trinity Today

To grow in the religious life you have to begin somewhere. There are, surprisingly, *four* rather than three main ways in which God is experienced.

(The role of the head and the heart in our relationship to God do not usually keep in step with one another. It should be noted, but it is beyond the scope of this outline to enlarge on it.)

The Experience of God the Creator

Many people have experience of God through aspects of his creation.

Some experience this on the proverbial 'mountain top', others in the wonders of nature's design, others in nature's more personal aspects, in e.g. the creation and new life of a child.

(There are others, of course, who either do not see anything of God in his Creation because they do not look, or because their awareness of the darker sides of nature does not commend God to them.)

This experience, when positive, can be strong on the reality and majesty of God, and 'wonder' is a common response.

Although this experience can be 'religious', it does not, by itself, warrant a 'Christian' label since it does not in any obvious way relate closely to Jesus the Christ either for inspiration, for obedience or for worship.

Such an experience is open to almost anyone, whatever their religious convictions or lack of them. People are likely to describe it in a wide range of language, and to explain it in a wide range of interpretations. (The theological content of the experiences of being moved by a sunset can be - forgive the pun - extremely cloudy!)

Experiencing God the Son

For other people, their first experience of God comes as a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. This may be in his role as Healer, Deliverer or Saviour. (Because Jesus meets us at our point of need he can be experienced as healer or deliverer before he is experienced as Saviour - although the theology of some would deny this.)

This experience of God is much 'nearer', and much more personal, than encountering him in nature. As a result, folk generally witness to it using much warmer and more personal language, and tend to opt for Christian worship which is most like that.

Some experience Jesus Christ as a growth of their general awareness of God, for others it comes as a bolt from the blue which often requires a complete change-around of their lives. This is sometimes called 'conversion'. St. Paul's experience was a vivid example - and contrasts with St. Peter's.

(The complete turn-around nature of 'conversion' means that the word should never be used casually. It is quite inappropriate to equate St. Paul's life-changing experience of 'conversion' with that of a Christian whose loyalty to Christ remains unchanged, but who merely adjusts from one denomination to another without any complete turn-around - at any level.)

Because an experience of Christ is so Christ-focused for believers, the term 'Christian' with its essential Christ-centredness takes on a completely new significance. They often react strongly, and rightly, against its casual use to mean mere decency and good-neighbourliness.

Experiencing God the Father

When Noel Coward was asked about God he replied: 'We have never been properly introduced!' The more Jesus is known, loved and trusted, the sooner we allow him to introduce God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit to us, each for a deeper and more knowing relationship.

Although the Lord's Prayer that begins *Our Father...* is the most often said, its reality is the least experienced.

There are many reasons for this lack in Christian experience.

The main one is that when a person experiences God they generally stay with their good initial experience of him and assume that there is no more. Believers get stuck.

Many Christians allow their love and enthusiasm to become so Jesus-centred, and feel that their experience is so full that they do not realise that their belief in God-in-Trinity is not matched by any real *experience* of God-in-Trinity.

Tom Smail famously wrote a book entitled *The Forgotten Father*. As I worked with him for some years, I recall his exposition of Jesus's unexpected words: *I will not pray to the Father*

for you... Tom's ministry was to enable listeners to learn and to experience Jesus's reason - *for the Father himself loves you.* [John 16:26]

For many Christians, it was a life-changing step forward. It is all too rarely experienced, and some may be helped by *The Shack's* pointing them in that direction.

Experiencing God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit of God seems to work at two levels, or if you like, in two concentric circles.

First, he works widely and in a general way in God's creation, then in inspiring creativity among people.

His central role, however, is to point us to Jesus and to God the Father, and to inspire and speak through the Holy Scriptures which teach us so much about them.

Strictly speaking there is a difference between the 'usual' and the 'normal'. Dentists experience far too many mouths full of 'usual' teeth and far too few that are 'normal', i.e. that conform to nature's *norm*.

Such a distinction is useful also in Christian things. It is not the usual Christian experience, but it is '*normal* Christianity' to experience the Spirit, and to *daily increase in the Holy Spirit more and more* (as the 1662 Prayer Book assumes in its service of Confirmation.)

No Forgotten Spirit

While the tragedy of the 'Forgotten Father' has had little said or done to right it, the tragedy of the 'Forgotten Spirit' began to be righted a century ago by the faithful witness of the Pentecostalist churches, and latterly by the world-wide happening variously termed the 'Charismatic Movement' or simply 'the Renewal'.

While this Movement is popularly thought to centre on the Holy Spirit, where it is most authentic the Holy Spirit discourages such a focus on himself, and his inspiration commonly results in Christians experiencing more deeply the Father, the Son, and appreciating more fully the Scriptures and Sacraments that draw us closer to them, and the communities in which they are most fully experienced.

7. Some Outlines of Christian Experience

Here are just three paradigms of Christian experience. There are, obviously, massive over-simplifications but, provided they are treated as such, they can be of use.

Outline 1

The first is to describe the experience of the Trinity as in some sense -

Father	God above us	Sustaining us as creator
Jesus	God alongside	Supporting us as friend
Holy Spirit	God within	Leading and empowering us as guide

Outline 2

This is based on the fact that people *grow* in their knowledge and love of God, and Christians do not enjoy any full knowledge of God-in-Trinity at one go. They often meet one of the 'persons' at a time. Here are four patterns:

i) Creator God

This pattern is the most common and has little to it.

ii) Jesus Christ (Father)

This is quite common, with Jesus the most real, and the Father a mere shadow.

iii) Jesus Christ Father (Spirit)

This is a richer experience when the Father is experienced more fully, with the Spirit but a shadow.

iv) Jesus Christ Father Spirit

This is the 'norm' of Christian experience. The meeting of God-in-Trinity in full. Often this only takes place over decades.

The Christian Streams

This full experience is understood and nurtured in the three Christian streams

Evangelical	Catholic	Pentecostal
(Jesus Christ)	(God the Father)	(God the Holy Spirit)

Christians experience God in Trinity at best when their local church is enriched and balanced by holding the core of all three traditions together.

Outline 3

This outline relates the Trinity to us in terms of our past, present and future.

The reason for this is that so many have their present overshadowed

- by guilt from the past
- by fears of the future

In this outline of God's relating to us,

For our Past - A real experience of Jesus begins to deal with our guilt.

For our Future - A real experience of the Father begins to deal with our fears.

The Holy Spirit can make this forgiveness and freedom ever more real to us in our Present, and come to free-it-up, to make us holy and equip us to obey and serve.

These three outlines serve to show that God-in-Trinity is not just theoretical theology, but points to God's divine dynamic in our lives of almost tangible reality and relevance.

Part VI - Enemy Infiltrated Territory

Our T.V. news reminds us all too often of the danger of soldiers moving into territory which has been infiltrated by the enemy. Normal relaxed behaviour and reactions are quite out of the question. *Extreme* vigilance is necessary, reminding us of the passage in I Peter 5:8 [King James's Version] -

***Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil
as a roaring lion walketh about
seeking whom he may devour.***

1. Under Pressure

In my article *Evangelism: The Spiritual Key* I noted how Christians are 'under pressure'. Christ himself was *tempted*, Judas and Ananias *succumbed* to it. St. Paul was *hindered* by these forces, and St. Peter's thinking was *distorted* by them. Other disciples were either *tempted, corrupted, attacked, deceived, accused, condemned, ensnared, made to sin, made ill* or *imprisoned* by the direct or indirect influence of these forces.

If the Christian disciples lived in a world of such forces - in spite of their Lord's victory won over them - it would be contrary to Scripture, reason and experience to behave as if our lives existed in territory that was not enemy infiltrated.

Not all forces are on God's side. Those who are against him work to prevent his Gospel in every way. They *blind* people to it. St. Paul was sent to *open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light*.

My point in introducing this theme at this point is to offset the widespread assumption among Christians that the world is spiritually neutral, and that all we have to do is to promote Christian material to be doing the Spirit's work. This is not so.

2. The Wrong End of the Stick

Christian material needs to be produced with meticulous care because those who come across it will be under considerable pressure to ignore it or twist it. 'Getting hold of the wrong end of the stick' happens so very frequently because people are under spiritual pressure and blinded against getting the *right* end of it!

If we allow anything to be open to misunderstanding, every advantage will be made of it by the ruthless forces that work against God's Kingdom.

Casualness is a luxury Christians cannot afford. The argument that *The Shack* is not a theological treatise and therefore what it says about God does not matter much, is dangerous nonsense. It claims to be, quite simply, about God - and should be assessed as such.

Some will feel that my writing is an over-reaction against *The Shack*. But what I am aware of is that if you promote something into which the whole Truth is not tightly and rigorously bound, then it will quickly get split apart.

In assessing *The Shack* Christians must ask not whether they enjoy such creative writing, but whether it is suitable, accurate and precise enough to withstand the pressures on readers that are active to distort the Gospel.

If people are under pressure to 'get hold of the wrong end of the stick', we dare not promote any material that is widely open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding - as I believe *The Shack* to be. (I have, of course, to leave readers to make their own minds up about that.)

The responsibility of misinterpreting the Truth about God lies mostly with those who promote material that lends itself to it. If God is misunderstood, it will not be the major responsibility of the readers, but of those who encouraged them to read a misleading book.

We owe it to readers - and to our Lord - to provide no grounds for misunderstanding God. Our task is the spreading of Good News - true and undistorted.

For Christians our strongest motive for ensuring that God's name is hallowed and not misunderstood is, of course, not theological correctness for its own sake, but simply because we love him.

That last sentence originally concluded this section. I was pleased with it because - writing as a former public-speaker - it 'sounded right' as an ending! On re-reading it, however, I thought that readers might take it simply as a rhetorical tug of the heart-strings or sheer sentimentality. It is neither.

Imagine a person you love dearly - parent, spouse or child. Then imagine that a novelist has written a book centred on them for everyone to read. I'll imagine that a novelist writes about my wife Rosemary. I may or make not like or enjoy the imaginary story, but I would have to allow the author a large measure of freedom to be creative in his own style.

But, on the other hand, if the author called his character 'Rosemary Richards', I would expect to meet the Rosemary Richards I know within his fictional story.

If I felt that the Rosemary I was reading about *conflicted* with the Rosemary I know and love - so that people world-wide were believing things of her that I knew were not true - I would protest loud and long! I would do everything possible to 'clear her name'. Such feelings would arise from my love of the one being written about.

The parallel is obvious.

Do not be surprised if, on occasion, you feel similar thoughts about the God whom you love - they are likely to be Spirit-given.

Do not be afraid to respond truly to them.

Hallowed be Your Name is a major theme of our Faith.

Part VII - *The Shack* : Some Conclusions

1. Since it is about God, it must not be assessed merely by the numbers who buy it, but by its success in conveying the Truth about God.
 2. Its success may speak more loudly about the failure of the Christian family worldwide to communicate their experiences of God, than it does about the merits of Young's writing.
 3. Although fiction, human nature being what it is, it will be read by many as fact.
 4. The pastoral danger (as is often the case with writing) lies not simply with what is written, but with that much-more-powerful factor - what people *think* it says!
 5. To express the 'persons' of the invisible God by opting to use a single-image technique is fraught with difficulties.
 6. Images of God which would otherwise be helpful, can diminish or distort our understanding of God if they are used alone without the corrective balance and enrichment of multiple-pointers.
 7. There is a real danger that the wise and rich traditional 'pointer' to God as a 'Father' will not be enriched and balanced by Young's writings, but undermined or even rejected.
 8. For Christians, if this happens, *The Shack* will not benefit them long-term, but tend to undermine their beliefs.
 9. While unbelievers may be sentimentally attracted to God as literally a Mother (for that is how some will read it) it is not a firm foundation for faith, since, like Father Christmas, it will need to be unlearned.
 10. Something is not 'new' because an individual or Christian group have only just discovered it. Whatever Christian truths *The Shack* enshrines, and whatever Christian experiences it seems to engender, they need to be placed in the much wider context of God's Scriptural revelation and Christian experience.
 11. Because novelty is attractive, it does not make it true.
 12. Christians must be extremely careful to ensure that the truths of God that they promote are presented with sufficient care to withstand an alien environment, and not bring him dishonour by being unnecessarily misinterpreted and misunderstood.
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Part VIII - Two Suggestions

1. Book of Testimonies

Encountering God

Given the needs that *The Shack* has made so widely known, perhaps Christians should put pressure on the Christian Publishing fraternity to produce a book of testimonies called e.g. *Encountering God* - with three selections of Christian testimonies. These would be divided between those that have predominantly experienced Jesus Christ, others who have predominantly experienced the Father, and yet others, the Holy Spirit. (The word 'predominantly' is necessary because no authentic experience of one alone is possible.)

The Power of Testimony

Christian testimony can break through as many - if not more - barriers as Christian fiction, with power and reliability. Personal witness can be more exciting than stories that are invented, be much more relevant and have a 'ring of truth' that readers - Christian and non-Christian alike - can recognise.

Such a book of Christian testimonies would give all readers a reliable and rich witness to God-in-Trinity, and could be enthusiastically promoted without major misgivings or reservations.

2. Work Book

As long as Christians promote *The Shack* it would be good if a workbook was produced that individuals and groups could use to steer them in following up the major themes it raises.

This could be of considerable use pastorally and evangelistically, and would enable readers to use the book positively, and in far less danger of misunderstanding than if they were left to develop the themes in their own way.

Since writing that paragraph, I have had Trish Pickard's Independent Book Study on *The Shack* commended. She says that *The Shack* 'must be lined up with what the Bible teaches, for it to be a fact.' She has compiled a comprehensive Biblical workbook, and may be contacted at prayerdigm.bookstudy@yahoo.com

An Invitation to You

My writing always tries to unite Christians, not to add to their already too-numerous divisions.

I realise that the stance I have taken on *The Shack* is contrary to some Christian leaders whom I respect.

Because of this, if any readers feel that the 12 points listed in my **Conclusion** (Section 7 above) are invalid or have little basis, if they care to send a succinct point-by-point reply to them, I will consider adding the most useful contribution I receive at the end of my article. Material should take up no more than one page (or about 350 words).

Responses should be sent by email via the webmaster at helpforchristians.co.uk