

The Trinity is not in The Shack

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Pentecost is the decisive manifestation of the Holy Trinity. At Theophany the Father's voice is heard, telling us that Jesus Christ is His beloved Son who does His will. The Holy Spirit confirms the Father's Word. Now, at Pentecost, all the promises Jesus made are fulfilled. The apostles, armed with the Spirit, are ready to go forth to make Him known and to baptize in the name of the Trinity.

The Nicene Creed states fundamental truths about the Persons of the Trinity. It tells us that they are equal, yet there is a hierarchy because the Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him. It describes something all three Persons share: they are worshipped and glorified. But it also describes things that are particular to each of the Persons. The Father is in heaven with the Son at His right hand; the Son became Man; the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets.

"The Shack" by William Paul Young is a fictional tale about a man called Mack who is angry and sad because his daughter was murdered. He meets the author's imagined version of the three Persons of the Trinity. During a weekend of intimate conversations with them, he gains comfort and a deeper understanding of God's ways.

The book's trinity bears no relation to the Triune God, or to the teachings of the Creed. God the Father (in the book a motherly Afro-American woman who is called "Papa") tells Mack, "We don't need power over the other...Hierarchy would make no sense among us." But Christ's obedience to His Father is not based on power, but on trust and love. To assert that hierarchy must be and always is based on one person having power over another is simply wrong.

"The Shack" also muddles the distinctive acts of each Person of the Trinity. Papa's wrists bear scars, and Mack says to Papa, "I'm so sorry that you, that Jesus, had to die." But Scripture tells us that Jesus, not the Father or the Spirit, died on the cross. By diluting this truth, the book could undermine an uninformed reader's comprehension of the depth of Jesus' love for us. He not only shared our earthly life but willingly died shamefully, painfully and alone so that we could have eternal life!

Some have praised this book for its down-to-earth way of depicting God and His purposes. But presenting the almighty Lord as a pal with whom we can be familiar and casual is dangerous. We are not God's equals; we are His creatures. Nor are we in a position to demand explanations from Him, as Mack does.

Readers also say the book comforted them in sorrow. But we have real stories of real people to inspire us in dark times. Mother Maria Skobtsova and Father Arseny are just two Orthodox believers who struggled with great loss and undeserved suffering, yet forgave their persecutors and persevered in trusting God.

Troparion of Pentecost

Blessed art Thou, O Christ our God,
Who hast revealed the fishermen as most wise
By sending down upon them the Holy Spirit -
Through them Thou didst draw the world into Thy net.
O Lover of Man, glory to Thee!

Most of all, we have the Trinity, not an imagined one but the One shown to us through Jesus Christ, who as we remember on the day of Pentecost can make even simple fishermen "most wise."