

“Divine Relationality and Theodicy in *The Shack*” by Dr. John Sanders, Hendrix College, Conway, Arkansas.

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I was asked to give this paper because some readers see a number of themes in the *The Shack* by William Paul Young that correspond well with open theism. That is certainly correct though the author explicitly rejects two key elements of open theism and so remains squarely in what many call Arminianism and I refer to as free will theism. First, I will mention a number of teachings in the book that open theists heartily agree with. Then I will discuss the two areas where open theists must disagree. The questions I raise along the way all pertain to whether the author is logically consistent in what he says throughout the book. However, I wish to acknowledge that the author is not a professional theologian and is writing a piece of fiction so I want to cut him some slack. Mr. Young is present at this meeting and I look forward to any responses he may make to my comments. It is my hope that the questions raised in this paper will promote helpful dialogue on the important topics he addresses in *The Shack*.

Points of agreement:

1. It is wonderful that a book which portrays God as deeply relational, loving, and gracious has become so popular, especially among evangelicals.
2. The focus of the book is to explain what God is like and to counter many common stereotypes people have of God’s intentions, plans, and actions. In particular, the book addresses the problem of moral evil and what responsibility God bears for it. Along the way sin, grace, and redemption are discussed in ways that bear striking resemblance to what Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow say in *Unbounded Love*. A number of proponents of theological determinism on the internet rip the book for failing to emphasize God’s judgment on and anger at sinners. As with the debate on open theism, the Calvinists typically fail to realize that divine judgment is present but is handled in the context of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. He does emphasize the God as parent metaphor over the God as judge metaphor (119). God is more like a parent trying to get rebellious children to accept his reconciliation than a legal authority attempting to get us to feel guilty about what we have done (223).
3. The nature of God.
 - 3.1 The author affirms a social trinitarian model which emphasizes the intra-trinitarian relationships as the ontological framework for God’s relationships to creatures (89).
 - 3.2 God is “wholly other” and he is critical of overly anthropomorphizing God (98). Yet he says God is self-limiting, gets angry (119), and serves others (which seems quite anthropomorphic to me).
 - 3.3 Rejects divine strong impassibility (95-96,). God’ character does not change but God has changing emotional states. Yet, the author also says that God always

- lives in a state of fullness, of perpetual satisfaction (98). How does this square with creation gone awry?
4. God creates out of love and for love (97). The purpose of creation is for love so God took the risk of love.
 5. Humans have libertarian freedom within limits (94-95). Love does not force its will on the other (145, 190)
 6. God allows Mack to be angry and even to challenge God (81). God does not tell him to shut up but, rather, allows him to vent. God is extremely dialogical. This is a more Jewish understanding of God (e. g. Abraham, Moses, Habakkuk, etc.).
 7. The problem of evil.
 - 7.1 Creation has miscarried (123, 125). Evil was not part of God's plan (165). He affirms the free will defense (190-1) so God exercises general providential control rather than the meticulous providence of theological determinism.
 - 7.2 What are the ways in which God works with humans? Did God orchestrate his daughter's death as a judgment upon what he did to his father? (71) No. "Papa is not like that" (164). Did she have to die so that Mack would be changed? This is what some Christian friends told me was the purpose of the death of my older brother. But again, Young says, that is not how God works (185). Hence, he rejects meticulous providence. For Young, there are genuine tragedies. God works to bring good out of "unspeakable tragedies" but God does not "orchestrate the tragedies" (185). Much of what the author says about the problem of evil resonates well with what open theists have written (William Hasker's *The Triumph of Good Over Evil*, IVP, 2008 and Gregory Boyd, *Is God to Blame?* Baker, 2003).
 - 7.3 The basis for evil originates in our separation from God—our declaration of independence from God (136). Sin originates from improper relations (147). He thinks of sin primarily in relational terms rather than as a substance in humans.
 - 7.4 On natural evil he seems to affirm a "natural-order" theodicy rather than the view which ascribes all mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, etc. as results of human sin. (133)
 - 7.5 God does not want people to go to hell and God takes no pleasure in punishing people. Rather, God wants to cure us (119-120, 162-3). He points out that the gates to the heavenly city are always open (177). This sounds a bit like George MacDonald. If Young has the eschaton in mind here (he may be speaking metaphorically), is he hinting at the possibility of postmortem evangelization? However, on 182 he sounds more like an inclusivist in that God travels all roads (religions and political philosophies) to transform humans into those who love one another.
 - 7.6 God will be victorious in the end (125) and "There has never been a question that what I wanted from the beginning, I will get" (192). In what sense will God get what she wanted? Does the author mean that ultimately each and every human being will be redeemed and eternally enjoy the presence of God in the eschaton? He says "I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and

the most loving outcome” (125). This sounds as though God can guarantee that each and every one of our acts results in ultimate good. But that would require theological determinism which Mr. Young clearly rejects. In the next paragraph he says, “If you could only see how all of this ends and what we will achieve without the violation of one human will...” Again, I’m not sure what is meant by this. Does this mean that the eschaton is the justification for each and every instance of evil? I agree that God will be vindicated in the eschaton but if the author means that every instance of evil will be made good then I disagree. However, Young does end this particular conversation by saying “We’re not justifying it. We are redeeming it” (127). Perhaps what Young has in mind is not that each and every act of evil will be justified. Rather, God is working to bring good out of it. But on this point, can God guarantee that each and every instance of moral evil will be redeemed and that, in the end, there will be no pointless evil that is pure loss? If God cannot guarantee how we humans react to instances of evil or even to divine grace, for that matter, then how can God guarantee that each and every instance will be redeemed? I affirm most of what the author has to say about the problem of evil but I would like some clarification on this point.

Two crucial points of divergence from open theism:

1. God and time. Mr. Young says that time, as humans experience it, presents no boundaries for the creator (172). The author seems to affirm divine atemporality. If so, then there is a significant logical contradiction to the major theme of the book—divine relationality. Young is similar to Phil Yancey on this point. Divine timelessness plays no real role in his theology. The book portrays the divine-human relations as temporal (before and after) in nature. But then it seems the author feels compelled to say, “Oh, I better say something about divine timelessness.” It has become customary to mention divine atemporality but it performs no significant theological work. Now I can’t be too harsh on Young for this since a great many theologians commit the same error. The problem is that a timeless being is strongly impassible (which the author rejects) and it is impossible for an atemporal being to experience grief or any changing emotional state (which the author affirms) since changing states require a before and an after—something an atemporal being simply does not have. Though I agree that God is not bound by time as we are, I fail to understand how an atemporal being has the types of experiences and relationships portrayed in the book. It is the type of logical contradiction that Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin avoided because they affirmed both divine atemporality and strong immutability (God has no changing emotional states or responses to creatures).
2. Mr. Young affirms that God has EDF (exhaustive definite foreknowledge) (90, 106, 161, 186-7, 206, 222). Yet, the author also says that God limits herself to facilitate a genuine give-and-receive relationship (106). While speaking with Mack God does not bring “to mind, as it were” the divine knowledge of all facts. Can God have selective ignorance in the sense that God is temporally unaware of

- what God knows to be the case? On 206 he says that because of God's EDF God has no expectations. How does this square with his other statements that God is grieved by the evil that takes place? On 123 he says that creation went down a path that God did not desire. So God has no expectations but does have unfulfilled desires? It seems to me that Mr. Young is here trying to say that he has no idea how to reconcile EDF with God having genuine give-and-receive relations with us. This seems to be logical contradiction.
3. The author's emphasis on divine responsiveness runs headlong into the brick wall of divine atemporality and exhaustive definite foreknowledge. One way out of these two logical contradictions would be for him to return to his statement that God is "wholly other" and therefore is beyond the limits of human logic. But if he takes that route then he undermines the entire project of his book which is to present a logically consistent understanding of God and God's relationship with us—particularly on the problem of evil. After all, throughout the book God is very adept at catching Mack in contradictory thoughts. Hence, I don't believe this is the route the author can take. Again, it seems to me that neither divine atemporality nor EDF help him make his case for the way God relates to us. In fact, he seems aware that these doctrines are genuine problems for his theology yet he feels compelled to affirm them. I think that is why he throws them in and then has to give undeveloped explanations as to why they don't contradict his main thesis.

In closing I want to say that I welcome the book and believe it has much good to offer. Finally, this sort of theological analysis of a book of fiction is why my wife says that I know how to ruin a good book!