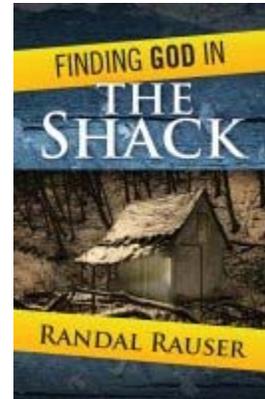


First chapter excerpt from the book "[Finding God in the Shack](#)" by Randal Rauser:



### **Why This Theologian Is Especially Fond of The Shack**

As a theologian, I have one big reason to be especially fond of [The Shack](#). To appreciate the source of my gratitude, I need to say a few words about academic theology over the last forty years. (Trust me, this will not be as painful as it sounds!)

Our story begins back in the year 1967 when Catholic theologian Karl Rahner published a little book called *The Trinity*. There, Rahner observed, “Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere ‘monotheists.’ We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”<sup>1</sup>

By calling Christians “almost mere monotheists” Rahner meant that their beliefs about God do not differ significantly from other forms of monotheism like Judaism and Islam. But how can this be if, as Christians claim, the very foundation of their belief in God is found in the doctrine of the Trinity? Rahner’s striking claim really shook up theologians as they pondered how it could be that the doctrine which is supposed to be at the heart of our faith was actually somewhere out on the periphery.

### **Does the Trinity Matter?**

Rather than simply take Rahner’s word for it, I would suggest that we test his thesis by way of a little thought experiment. Imagine that the pastor of a typical Baptist church became convinced that the Trinity was false. Instead of believing that God is three persons, he came to believe that God is one person who plays three roles: sometimes he acts as the Father, other times he acts as the Son, and yet other times as the Holy Spirit. This view is called modalism, and it has been considered a heresy by the Christian church since the third century.

Now if the doctrine of the Trinity really is important, we would expect that the pastor’s rejection of it in favor of modalism would send shockwaves throughout the church. But is this really what would happen? I doubt it! On the contrary, I suspect that as long as he continued to mention the Father, Son and Spirit, it wouldn’t matter if he believed they were all the same person. The church would continue on as it always had with its weekly services, Christmas pageants, potlucks, and various ministries. In contrast to this, if our Baptist pastor baptized an infant on Sunday, I bet you would have a church split by Monday! But surely this is strange: why would a peripheral question concerning the practice of baptism be in practice more important for the church’s identity than the supposedly essential doctrine of the Trinity?

Theologians knew that Rahner was right. Although we claim to be trinitarian Christians, this doctrine does not make a difference to the life of the church. But then the theologians faced the challenge of making the Trinity relevant again. They took up this challenge by doing what theologians do best: they wrote books. Lots of books. Lots and lots of books. Some were about the biblical basis of the Trinity. Others talked about the theological or philosophical dimensions of the Trinity. Still others discussed the historical development of the Trinity. And still others talked about the practical and pastoral implications of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these books were well worth reading. Indeed, some were good enough to qualify as modern classics. And yet, most were only ever read by other theologians which meant that had virtually no impact on the neighborhood church. As a result, we remain stalled in the same place where we were forty years ago: few pastors know how to preach the Trinity, fewer church goers know how to pray the Trinity, and almost no one knows what it would mean to live the Trinity.

At this point you might be wondering whether the doctrine of the Trinity ever made a difference to the church. The answer is yes, it did: the burning torch of Christian truth has burned much brighter in the past. To take one example, if we could hop in a time machine and travel back to the fourth century Roman Empire, we would have encountered a society that debated theology with the same vigor that Canadians today debate hockey. At that time, big questions were at stake as Christians debated a heretical view called Arianism which said that Jesus was God's greatest creation.

The fierce public debate between orthodox Christianity and Arianism so consumed the general public that average people would jump into theological debates at the slightest provocation. Strangers in the streets would get into fierce debates over various scriptural passages: for instance, how should we understand the claim that Jesus is God's "only begotten son" (John 3:16)? Did the text mean, as the Arians claimed, that Jesus was God's first creation? Or, as the orthodox Christians argued, was Jesus eternally begotten by and equal to God the Father? People of the time were passionate about these questions, for they recognized that the heart of Christianity was at stake.

We have a snapshot of the debate from Gregory of Nyssa, a bishop of the time. He wrote: "If in this city you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that 'the Father is greater, the Son is less.' If you suggest that a bath is desirable, you will be told that 'there was nothing before the Son was created.'"<sup>3</sup> In other words, theology was to be found everywhere. It found its way into every conversation, every situation. So prevalent was theological discussion that, as Gregory's weary tone suggests, even the bishops were getting worn out by the debate!

If Christians in the past could wear out their bishops with their theological bravado, why is it that today many Christians think theology is about as exciting as watching paint dry or attending a life insurance seminar? Or to turn the question around, how can we reignite that lost passion? And how can we get average Christians excited about the doctrine of the Trinity, so that it again returns to coffee shop conversations, morning devotions, and the heart of Christian worship?

### **Rediscovering the Trinity in The Shack**

While the answer to our question is surely complex, recently theology has been given a tremendous boost by, of all things, a novel. Not just any novel mind you, for William Paul Young's *The Shack* tells a most unlikely story! Not content simply to reintroduce the Trinity as a doctrine of mere peripheral interest, the book weaves the triune God into an engaging narrative. Along the way, it goes to the heart of the most horrifying case of evil and then makes the truly bold claim that God as triune is crucial to the process by which healing is coming to this world.

First, let's say a word about the story itself. *The Shack* opens with the narrator "Willie" reporting that he has recorded everything as his close friend Mack had instructed him. (Since the name Willie is an obvious reference to author William Young, some readers have assumed that the book is claiming to be a factual account. But Young has made it clear that the book is fictional, albeit with a significant portion of autobiography thrown in.) We then learn that a few years prior to Willie's writing Mack took three of his children camping. At the end of a wonderful weekend, his son was in a canoeing accident, and in the melee that ensued, his youngest daughter Missy disappeared. Within hours it became clear that she had been abducted by a serial killer known as the Little Lady-Killer. In a matter of hours, the FBI investigation converged on a remote shack where Missy's bloody dress was discovered, though her body was never found.

Fast-forward three-and-a-half years and Mack continues to struggle with "the Great Sadness." Then one day he receives an invitation in his mailbox to meet Papa (his wife's name for God) at the shack. Perplexed and intrigued, Mack secretly travels to the shack on a Friday evening and is met by an African-American woman named Papa, an Asian woman named Sarayu, and a Jewish man named Jesus: all told, a rather unconventional Trinity! Over the next two days Mack communes with the three as he comes to terms with the Great Sadness and embarks on the road to healing and reconciliation.

The book climaxes on Sunday morning when Papa (now in male form) takes Mack on a journey to the place where the killer buried Missy. Together they return her body to the shack for a proper burial, complete with an unforgettable memorial ceremony. After Mack shares a special communion service with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu, he falls asleep, only to wake up in the dark, cold cabin. Mack then travels back down the mountain where he gets into a serious car accident. As he slowly recovers in the hospital the memories of the weekend gradually return, prompting the question of whether it was just

a dream.

Yet when he has recovered, Mack confirms the truth of the weekend by taking Nan and the police to the grave where the Little Lady-Killer had buried Missy. (Apparently Mack's experience of relocating and burying Missy's body did not really occur.) This discovery ultimately provides forensic evidence which leads to the Little Lady-Killer's arrest and trial. The book ends with Mack transformed and transforming: having been reconciled with his children, wife, and abusive father, he now seeks to extend forgiveness to Missy's killer.

In the short time since its publication, *The Shack* has ignited the church's interest in the doctrine of the Trinity more than the dozens of theology books that have been published by academic theologians over the last forty years. It is wonderful (and a bit humbling) for the theologian to witness a doctrine that has long been locked in the seminary classroom now emerging as a topic of lively conversations at the local coffee shop, and all because of a novel! But while those conversations have not typically lacked for enthusiasm and conviction, many of them would benefit from some deeper background as to the theological issues at stake. It is to this end that the present book is aimed.

### **Conversations on *The Shack*: An Overview**

We will begin in chapter two of this book with one of the most controversial aspects of *The Shack*: the manifestation of God the Father as "Papa", a large African-American woman, and of the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu. This portrayal has yielded some startling, even fantastic charges (including the frenzied charge that *The Shack* promotes goddess worship!). But even if those charges are overblown, one might still wonder whether the depiction is appropriate and what it implies about our knowledge of God. In this chapter we shall explore these questions by inquiring into the way that the infinite God accommodates himself to our limited human minds, so that we can know him.

Shift to another table in the coffee shop and one might hear an impassioned discussion on how the three persons constitute the one God. On this point some critics have argued that *The Shack*'s depiction of God is seriously flawed, for it fails to distinguish the three persons. We shall enter into the center of this debate in chapter three as we explore the intriguing way that the book wrestles with the unity and distinction of the Trinity, and ultimately how it distinguishes Sarayu and Jesus in accord with their particular missions as revealed in Scripture.

Turn to another conversation and one finds a heated debate in progress concerning questions of authority and submission. The question here concerns whether the Father is ultimately in charge of the Trinity so that the Son and Spirit eternally submit to him. Or could it be that the Father is as submitted to the Son and Spirit as they are to him? This is not a pointless question, for deciding whether there is authority and submission or mutual submission within God could have radical implications for how we organize our

relationships here on earth. After all, don't we want to be more like God? The view of *The Shack* is that all the divine persons are submitted to one another and to the creation, and so all human persons should also be so submitted. We shall wade into the midst of this debate in chapter four.

While the conversations thus far are important, it is those that we shall consider in the final three chapters which become for many people critical. In chapter five we will turn to ask how a God who is all-loving and all-powerful would allow the horrific murder of young Missy, a child of whom he says he is especially fond. The reason, it would seem, is that God allows Missy's death so that he can achieve some kind of greater good out of it. But what kind of "greater goods" would justify the murder of a little girl? Could it be that God allows evil for the sake of free will? And could it be that he allows evil to draw us to him while developing our moral character? Even if these answers provide a plausible general response to evil, we will feel the painful tension when we apply them to the specific death of young Missy.

Turn to another table wrestling with the problem of evil, and the life and death of Jesus Christ moves to center stage. Ultimately there is evil because creation is fallen and we are sick with sin. And so as a response, God has sent his Son to bring healing to this fallen creation. In chapter six we will consider how *The Shack* explains the atoning work of Christ, noting both what it does and does not affirm about the atonement. In particular, we will note how the book ignores (or bypasses) the language of God's wrath against sin. Indeed, in its place, it describes the Father as suffering with the Son. We will also consider the controversial question of how far Christ's atoning work extends, and specifically whether it might save some who have never heard of Christ.

As we said, the world is sick with sin and in need of the Great Physician. However, with a view of salvation as God rescuing souls for heaven, many Christians have missed the fullness of God's healing intent. And so in our final conversation we will consider the fullness of biblical salvation as extending to all creation. This vision is captured in the subtle way that the book depicts the renewal of the shack and the surrounding environs on Mack's unforgettable weekend. Evidently it is not only Mack that is being made new, but the entire creation as well.

One final word before we begin. Most people who have read or heard about *The Shack* are aware of the controversies that swirl around the book. Although I appreciate the passion of the critics, I have been saddened by a frequent lack of charity that has been shown to the book's author and its fans. And I have been especially disheartened by the advice of some influential Christian leaders not to read the book. It is true that *The Shack* asks some hard questions and occasionally takes positions with which we might well disagree. But surely the answer is not found in shielding people from the conversation, but rather in leading them through it.

After all, it is through wrestling with new ideas that one learns to deal with the nuance and complexity that characterizes an intellectually mature faith. *The Shack* will not

answer all our questions, nor does it aspire to. But we can be thankful that it has started a great conversation.

### **About the Author**

Randal Rauser is associate professor of historical theology at Taylor Seminary, Edmonton, Canada and was granted Taylor's first annual teaching award for Outstanding Service to Students in 2005. Dr. Rauser's career as both professor and author has been shaped by his passion for developing a biblically sound apologetic theology that meets the challenges of secular western culture. He is a popular speaker and gifted communicator who seeks to bring the truth of Scripture to bear on the real-life issues of today.

Rauser received his master's degree in Christian studies at Regent College, later earning a PhD at King's College London, where he focused on studying the doctrine of the Trinity. Dr. Rauser is the coauthor (with Daniel Hill) of *Christian Philosophy A-Z* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006) and author of *Faith Lacking Understanding* (Paternoster) and *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford University Press, Forthcoming). He has also authored several articles which have appeared in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Heythrop Journal*, and *Christian Scholars Review*. In keeping with his interest in the crossroads of theology and popular culture, Dr. Rauser's newest book, *Finding God in The Shack*, explores the theology set forth in *The Shack*.

### **Footnotes**

1. *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1970), 10-11.
2. For some examples of more practically oriented and accessible treatments see Millard Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005); Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
3. Cited in W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 174-5.