

THE GOD OF THE SHACK

GENESIS 1:1-2:4

TRINITY SUNDAY 2017

MATTHEW 28:16-20

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ABOUT SEVEN YEARS AGO OR SO THE NOVEL *THE SHACK* WAS ALL THE RAGE.

Every minister in the Galax Ministerial Association was compelled to read it in order to deal with the issues it stirred up in the souls and minds of their congregations. The Shack has risen to prominence once again with the movie's release.

In the novel the main character, Mack, is a father whose daughter has been killed in a senseless murder. For years the man struggles with depression and loss of faith. One day he receives a note summoning him to the shack where his daughter died. The note is signed "Papa" the name his wife uses for God.

Although he believes the note to be a prank, Mack goes. When he arrives at the shack, it turns out that God had indeed summoned him and was waiting for him.

GOD MEETS MACK AS THREE "PERSONS".

The first he describes as a large African-American woman; the second is a "middle-eastern-looking" man whom Mack ironically thinks looks like an Arab; the third is a small-ever moving, wind-stirred, oriental woman whom Mack has trouble keeping in focus, much as many main line churches have trouble keeping the Holy Spirit in focus.

"Can this be God?" Mack wonders to himself. But surely there is only one God.

"Which one of you is God?" Mack shouts.

In unison, the three answer, "I am".

Mack has come face to face with the Trinity and all the problems which that doctrine presents. He has no choice but to wrestle with it. It has been thrust upon him.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY WAS THRUST UPON THE CHURCH AS WELL.

In one of his closing blessings, Paul wrote, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all".

At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, which I read this morning, Jesus commands his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of His Father and also of another Advocate whom the Father will send...all of whom have divine characteristics.

The Christian People of God have experienced the one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How can this be? We have wrestled with it ever since, even in popular novels like *The Shack*.

ONE BY ONE THE CHURCH FATHERS TOOK A CRACK AT UNTYING THIS GORDIAN KNOT.

Tertullian came up with the formula "one God in three persons". The Cappadocian Fathers spoke of "one God in three hypostases". Augustine after bemoaning how impossible it was to speak or even think of God as one in three or three in one wrote:

It is the Father only who is not of another. For the Son is born of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. But the Father is neither born of nor proceeds from another. And yet this should not occasion

in human thought any idea of disparity in the supreme Trinity. For the Son is equal to Him of whom he is born, just as the Holy Spirit is equal to Him from whom he proceeds.

I would repeat that but I doubt it would help. My first response was identical with Mack's when he confronted some very difficult ideas being put out by God in *The Shack*. He said, "Huh?!" Karl Barth's response was more eloquent; he wrote, "We always seem to be handling an intractable object with inadequate means."

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY PRESENTS UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS FOR THE HUMAN MIND.

It is the supreme mystery with which we must wrestle. But as the woman who represents God the Father in the novel put it, "Who would want to worship a God who can be fully comprehended?" ***Like it or not, the Triune God is the Christian God.*** We do not praise God as Elohim or Yahweh. We do not petition God as Allah. We know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... and it is to this God we pray.

As Christian thinkers struggled to say what they believed about God, they tended to make mistakes as one might imagine. Some stressed the oneness of God to the point that the three distinctions in the Trinity shrunk into insignificance. Some stressed the distinctions to a point which splintered the one God's unity, presenting God as some sort of board of directors consisting of one major and two minor associates. Since this all seems remote and impossible, we might wonder why the church's theologians tried- and are still trying to speak about the Trinity.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS REALLY.

From the beginning, Christians proclaimed the Good News that through Jesus all who believe in him will be saved, that is to say, will be given eternal life. Very quickly Christians came to believe that if Jesus was not truly man and truly God, then his death on the cross could not reconcile the world to God. But how can Jesus be God if there is only one God? Thus began the long journey to a full blown doctrine of God as Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. As I said earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity was thrust upon the Church.

SOME TRIED TO MAKE SENSE OF THE TRINITY BY SPEAKING OF IT IN TERMS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

God has revealed Himself to believers as their Creator, their Redeemer, and their Sanctifier. This type of doctrine is known as an economic doctrine of the Trinity. That is to say a doctrine stated in terms of God's work in and for the world. Others argued that not only does God relate to the world in these three ways, but that He was in Himself triune, that these three ways reflected something about God's very nature. This led to statements like that of Augustine which I read earlier.

ABOUT NOW I WANT TO SHOUT WITH MACK,

"Does any of this make any real difference?" Can we not just leave all this to the Tertullians, Augustines, and Barths of the world? Does it make any difference to the way we live? Does it impact human beings in any significant way?

The answer which "Papa" gives Mack in the novel is right on target. She says, "It makes all the difference in the world". She/He (it gets confusing) goes on to say that were not God Triune, God could not *by nature* be Love. Remember John wrote long ago, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them." If God were not by His very nature love, God could do something unloving. The possibility of an almighty Being doing an unloving thing is too terrible to contemplate.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. If God is Triune, than there are implications of that for us at a very basic level. Our

nature reflects in some way the nature of God. ***God's trinity thus affects our humanity.***

God is no monolith, no cold, solitary being. God is by nature communal. Relationships are integral to God's very nature. ***One could say that the one God is an eternally loving community.*** We then are by our very natures communal, societal. We are made for one another. We are most truly human when we are caught up in a network of loving relationships. The rugged individual idolized...the word means made into an idol...by our American culture is a false picture of what a human beings should be, of what human beings truly are.

THERE ARE EVEN POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRINITY.

In the ancient world the supreme ruler on earth (the Pharaoh, the Emperor, and the King) was viewed as the earthly representative of a supreme God who had no equal. This ruler then like this God could do anything he wanted unchecked by any morality, unchecked by the necessity of doing only the loving thing. The above idea of God as an eternally loving Trinity would not support such an idea of human rule. How might the world have been different if God as an eternally loving community been its model from the very beginning?

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the one day of the year when the uniquely Christian idea of God is celebrated. Trinity is the way God is; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Let us reflect this God in the living of our days.

