

Randal Rauser, *Finding God in The Shack* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster Publishing, 2009), paperback, xii pp. + 160 pp., ISBN: 978-1-60657-032-6, US\$14.99.

Randal Rauser has taken a bold step in writing this book. He begins by presenting the case for theologians, the need for reflective theological thinking in our world, and the justification that theology, rightly done, makes the wonder of God even more amazing. He gives as his motivation for writing this book, the fact that so many have found a profound experience with God through reading *The Shack* by William P. Young, and yet others have objected strongly to the theology the book appears to present. Thus, although the book is a novel, people who read it are finding theology there which either appeals to or repels them. Rauser states his concern that those who object to the book solve the problem by warning others not to read it. His own opinion is that the conversations concerning the book are so valuable, that whether or not we agree with the theological presentations found there, we cannot afford to dismiss ourselves from those conversations. He indicates that his intention in writing his book is to add some important background to the theological issues that are at stake in the current discussions of the novel (14). To do this, he examines the theological implications of the following six theoretical conversations overheard in a coffee shop : 1) the novel presents “a two-thirds female and ethnically diverse vision of God” (20), 2) “ it fails to distinguish the three persons” (14), 3)“all divine persons are submitted to one another and to the creation, and so all human persons should also be so submitted” (15), 4) “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” (15), 5)“how *The Shack* explains the atoning work of Christ” (16) and 6) “how far Christ's atoning work extends, and specifically whether it might save some who have never heard of Christ” (16).

In considering these theological ideas, Rauser shows that although *The Shack* is a novel, it presents theological truth in a way that draws everybody, not just theologians, into the conversation. He then proceeds to deal with each of the theoretical conversations he has listed, by examining the Scripture, and the theological discussions of the past. He presents the idea of God accommodating Himself to our level of understanding concluding that “God stoops down to our level and interacts with us as if he were a human being, *and he does it so we can come into relationship with him.*” (30 emphasis original) Secondly he examines the doctrine of the Trinity both from Scripture, and from

what appears in *The Shack* and comes to the conclusion that “the book opts for mystery rather than modalism” (53) and that “the tension between one and three that exists in *The Shack* is a sign of good biblical theology” (54). In relation to the question of the subordination in the Godhead, Rauser gives the reader pause for some serious thinking about how we relate to God in our every day lives, and even in our churches. While admitting that the image of God presented in *The Shack* could be freeing for those who have experienced abuse, for others who are already “dangerously over-familiar” with God it may reinforce their misconception of God's holiness and awesomeness (73). He also closely examines the whole range of biblical texts relating to authority and submission in the Godhead and comes to the conclusion, that if we exercised true servant leadership in all our areas of responsibility “we might find ourselves moving beyond the authority/submission debate altogether” (91). The fourth question Rauser approaches is the question of human suffering and the problem of evil. In examining *The Shack's* answer to this problem he shows that the book equally rejects the Calvinist's and the Open Theist's view of free will, and instead adopts “[t]he idea that free will is a greater good” (109). However, it does not espouse the idea that God is just make use of His creatures for his own glory, and instead indicates that although God will not necessarily explain the purpose for all of our suffering, if we will walk with Him in faith, he “will ultimately redeem each terrible event within an emerging picture of beauty in which there will no longer be mourning, crying or pain” (122-3). Having struggled with this most difficult of questions, Rauser goes on to consider the purpose of Christ's suffering. He notes that while *The Shack* indicates the need for salvation from sin, and the effectiveness of the atonement for this purpose, it appears to avoid the subject of salvation from God's wrath, which is not only an Old Testament image, but appears clearly in the New Testament – particularly in the book of Revelation (134-40). Finally on the subject of the extent of the atonement, he admits that “the book is not as concerned with delimiting the precise extent of the potential application of Christ's atonement as affirming that the atonement is the single means to reconciliation with God” (143). Having considered these six questions raised at the beginning of the book as examples of the objections people have raised to the theology of *The Shack*, Rauser finishes by considering the view of creation that is presented in the book, and concludes that while it presents a “vision of a renewed and restored creation” (156) which is biblically sound, it falls short of a truly biblical view of the redemption of creation by

including the killing and consumption of animals in the meals the Mack enjoys with the Trinity.

Randal Rauser has produced a very helpful companion to the novel *The Shack*. With great theological insight and a clear understanding of the issues, he has examined the theology of the book, and found it to be mostly quite biblical. He has indicated some areas where it might be misleading, or perhaps fall short of a fully biblical explanation, but in general he has given a favourable theological examination of the book. He has also included some major theological discussions, which go far beyond the novel itself, and for this reason his book is useful by itself without necessarily being a reference to *The Shack*. At the end of each chapter he has included questions for further discussion, making his book useful not only for small group study, but also for individual challenge and growth. The strength of Rauser's book, is the same as the strength he finds in *The Shack* itself, that it brings theological discussion into the market place.

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