

'THE SHACK' FILM STIRS DEBATE AS DID PRECEDING BOOK

By Diana Chandler
Baptist Press

✘ NASHVILLE (BP) – A fictional and emotionally destroyed Mack Phillips answers a mysterious invitation to a remote, isolated cabin. There he finds a trinity of fatherly love in a woman named “Papa” whose cohorts teach Phillips forgiveness and the faith to run on water – literally.

It’s the synopsis of the movie “The Shack,” based on William Paul Young’s New York Times bestseller and award-winning book by the same title, that some described as a biblically sound parable. And as with the 2007 controversial book that sold more than 20 million copies, others are criticizing the movie as a farce that serves to deeply distort rather than affirm biblical truths.

Among critics of the film is Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. If the movie is anything like the book, he says, it is dangerous in its false portrayal of the Holy Spirit, even though the book is a fictional fantasy.

“We need to be clear. This depiction of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel is profoundly unbiblical,” Mohler told *Baptist Press*. “The Bible warns against any false depiction of God and calls it idolatry. Making that into a compelling story just compounds the theological danger, and when all of this is added to the creative storytelling power of Hollywood, it also becomes very seductive.”

James B. De Young, a Western Seminary professor who countered the book with his own 2010 book “Burning Down ‘The Shack’: How the Christian Bestseller is Deceiving Millions” has likewise criticized the film.

“If the film is a faithful portrayal of the events and the theology of the book,” DeYoung has told Christian News Network, “then every Christian should be gravely alarmed at the further advance of beliefs that smear the evangelical understanding of the truth of the Bible.”

The movie’s makers promote it as an educational depiction of the love of the true God, and offers free resources intended to be evangelistic and educational, including movie clips, a downloadable Scripture-laden discussion guide, bookmarks and flyers.

“Our discussion guide is designed to help you dive deeper into the themes of The Shack with members of your church, school, community and others,” the guide is described at theshackresources.com. “We’ve added Scripture verses and discussion questions to help you unpack each section. Feel free to follow the prompts or use this guide as a jumping off point for your own insights. You may present the movie clips in your service or group setting.”

Eugene Peterson, retired Presbyterian pastor and author of the award-winning "The Message" Bible, praised the book as comparable to the classic "Pilgrim's Progress," but Peterson is not listed among the movie's endorsers. Instead, top endorsements on the movie's website are offered by Dick Rolfe, co-founder and CEO of the Dove Foundation; Geoff Tunnicliffe, former head of the World Evangelical Alliance and Bob Waliszewski, director of Focus on the Family's (FOTF) media and culture department, among others.

"The film will do a lot to point a world desperately looking for answers to a God who loves and cares," Waliszewski said at theshackresources.com/endorsements, but did not review the film on FOTF's Plugged In movie review program he directs.

Mohler believes the movie is dangerous as entertainment as well as education, he told BP, because of the incredible power inherent in storytelling.

"There are many Christians who sadly may not be sufficiently grounded in biblical doctrine to understand just how unbiblical this movie is," Mohler said. "Secondly, they'll be many people who are not believers, who will go away believing that the movie depicts biblical Christianity, true Christianity. It creates a cultural conversation in which the bottom line issue is that the makers of this movie have sought to create an entertaining story at the expense of biblical truth."

In a 2010 review of the book on which the movie is based, Mohler points out the book's skewed presentation of the Trinity and its concepts of universalism, universal redemption and ultimate reconciliation. In the book "Jesus tells Mack: 'Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, my Beloved.'"

LifeWay Christian Resources no longer offers the book.

"We stopped carrying 'The Shack' a few years ago," LifeWay Director of Communications Carol Pipes emailed BP, "because although it is a work of fiction, the theology presented as integral to the story clearly conflicts with the Bible on many issues, especially in regards to the character and nature of The Trinity."

Mohler describes the book, and the movie to the extent that it aligns with the book, as the opposite of Pilgrim's Progress.

"It is not credible under any standard of Orthodox Christianity," Mohler said. "Pilgrim's Progress is a parable that affirms Scripture. The Shack you might say is a parable at the expense of Scripture."

The movie opens in wide release March 3, with a special March 2 preview showing, and stars Academy Award winner Octavia Spencer, Grammy Award winner Tim McGraw and Sam Worthington. Brad Cummings and Gil Netter (The Blind Side

and The Life of Pi) are producers; Stuart Hazeldine is the movie's director.