

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: True Spirituality
Number: 9
Text: John 17:17
Date: March 22, 2009 (a.m.)

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THE SHACK AND THE WORD OF GOD

In addition to recasting the doctrine of God to suit his own fancies, the author of *The Shack* has an axe to grind against the Scriptures. It should be noted that when the Bible is alluded to in *The Shack*, it is almost always done in a negative light. The central character in the novel, Mack rejects the view that the Bible is God's final word. "In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects...Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book" (pp. 65-66). Young would prefer a God who communicates with us in our thoughts rather than on paper (i.e., the Bible) (p. 195). Realizing the subjectivity of such revelation he assures us that we will "begin to better recognize [the Holy Spirit's] voice as we continue to grow our relationship" (p. 196). The centrality and sufficiency of Scripture is openly questioned. Instead God now communicates through an endless variety of ways, all of which are in the arena of personal experiences. "You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours" (p. 195), says Sarayu (who is portrayed as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit). "You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa's goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us" (p. 198). He may reveal Himself savingly through stories that merely and loosely parallel the story of Jesus' sacrifice (p. 185). The Jesus of the NT took an entirely different approach. John 17 has come to be known as the high priestly prayer of our Lord. We have here the only long prayer of the Lord Jesus that is recorded. We know that He prayed often and for long periods of time. During His earthly life He prayed with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7); He prayed at His baptism (Luke 3:21); at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-29); in the hills (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12); in solitary places (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18); at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36, 39, 42, 44; Mark 14:32, 35, 39; Luke 22:41-45). He prayed for Simon Peter that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32); He interceded for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12); He always lives to make intercession for His people (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34). Here we have recorded the prayer of the second Person of the Trinity to the Father, and we enter into the Holy of Holies. "The prayer which Christ made for us," said Augustin, "He hath also made known to us. Being so great a Master, not only what He saith in discoursing to the disciples, but also what He saith to the Father in praying for them, is their edification."¹ The chapter opens with the Lord Jesus praying for Himself, for His being glorified (vv. 1-5); the rest of the prayer concerns His own. He prays that the Father would keep them, and since they are to remain in the world, He prays for their protection. Because they are to be His witnesses, they must be sanctified. They are to be kept through the name of the Father, and Christ prays that His people partake of the Father's holiness. This work of holiness or sanctification is to be accomplished *in* the truth (or *through* the truth). This is Christ's request; this is what He prays for; this is the desire of His heart.

I. THE REQUEST: *SANCTIFY THEM*

The word translated *sanctify* is HAGIAZŌ, “to sanctify, to set apart and dedicate.”² This is the same word that is translated “Holy” in v. 11 in reference to the Father. Contrary to what most people think, the word does not have reference to inward cleansing, still less to the eradication of the sin nature. Note how Jesus uses the word in 17:19 (cf. also John 10:36). The word stresses *separation*. What does this involve?

A. Set Apart By God.

The believer is set apart by God, *in* time (in our experience) and *before* time (in God’s decree) (Ephesians 1:4). Sanctification is actually the fruition of election (James 1:18).

B. Purged By Degrees.

Sanctification, in one sense, takes place at the moment of belief (I Corinthians 6:11; II Thessalonians 2:13); but the word also refers to the *process* of sanctification. We are not only accounted as holy, but we are being made holy. “No one is a believer who is not holy,” wrote Calvin, “and no one is holy who is not a believer.”³ Sanctification, therefore, is the renovation of the Christian by which God delivers His child, who has been justified by faith in Christ more and more from his native depravity and transforms him into His own image (by the Word and the Spirit). This renovation refers not only to outward acts, but to man’s nature (I Thessalonians 5:23), which includes the mind and will (Ephesians 4:22 – 24) as well as his desires (Galatians 5:24).

C. Endowed With God’s Image and Likeness.

Not only is the believer cleansed from sin and its guilt (positionally via justification), the believer is adorned with grace (Ephesians 5:26 – 27). “The Church’s honour,” comments Manton, “lieth not in pomp and outward ornament, but in holiness.”⁴

D. It is the Work of God.

The prayer is made to God the Father. The New Testament tells us that the Triune God is involved in this work. “To them that are *sanctified* by God *the Father*” (Jude 1), *the Son* “gave himself for the church, that he might *sanctify* and cleanse it, (Ephesians 5:25, 26), and “God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through *sanctification* of *The Spirit*” (II Thessalonians 2:13).

II. THE MEANS: THROUGH THY TRUTH⁵

“Truth,” declared John Howe, “is the means of holiness.”⁶ What is this *truth*? The word occurs over 182 times in the New Testament, 82 times in John’s writings, so this alone shows that the Bible places great emphasis upon truth. Sometimes the word simply refers to the plain facts of a case (Matthew 5:33; Luke 22:59). Most of the time, however, the word is used of God and righteous conduct. Truth is manifest in the Son (John 14:6; II Corinthians 11:10; Ephesians 4:12). He speaks Truth (John 8:30, 45, 46; 16:7). The Spirit is Truth (I John 5:6) and is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; I John 4:6). God’s judgment is according to truth (Romans 2:2). The Gospel is truth (Galatians 2:5, 14; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5). Note also how the *absence* of truth is described. There is no truth in the devil (John 8:44). Paul described the wicked as “holding down the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). They exchanged the truth for a lie (Romans 1:25), disobey the truth (Romans 2:8; Galatians 5:7), do not have the truth (I Timothy 6:5), lie against the truth (James 3:14), and wander from the truth (James 5:19). Truth, therefore, is connected with righteousness. The truth of Scripture is *not* the same thing as “truth” in other spheres. God’s truth always is related to God’s character. Truth leads to godliness (Titus 1:1).

III. THE REASON: THY WORD IS TRUTH

This expression, “Thy word is truth,” is found in the Old Testament. “Thy law is the truth” (Psalm 119:142), “thou are God, and thy words be true” (II Samuel 7:28). “The phrase,” notes Westcott, “occurs in one of the Jewish prayers for the new year. ‘Purify our hearts to serve thee in truth. Thou, O God, art Truth (Jeremiah 10:10) and Thy Word is Truth and standeth forever.’”⁷ Please note the words of Calvin, “There are fanatics who indulge in much useless prattle about *sanctification*, but who neglect *the truth* of God, by which he consecrated himself to us. Again, as there are others who chatter quite foolishly about *the truth*, and yet disregard *the word*, Christ expressly says that *the truth* by which God sanctifies his sons, is not to be found any where else than in *the word*.”⁸ It is by means of the Word that Christians grow (I Peter 2:2). “When men neglect and condemn the word of God, they dam up the fountains of holiness.”⁹ Note this: truth *separates* from error, and, therefore, from evil. Error leads to evil conduct. The relationship between the two petitions of Christ underscores this: “Keep them from the evil one” (v. 15) and “Sanctify them by thy truth” (17:17). The latter secures the former.

CONCLUSION: *The Shack* is an extremely dangerous book. It not only paints a distorted picture of God, one that mutilates the Gospel in the process, but undermines the Bible and substitutes a distinctive New Age Version in its place. The incarnation of God the Father (the big African Woman) called “Papa” tells Mack, “Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare” (p. 227). We are living in a time when many Christians turn to their feelings as the barometer for determining divine guidance. How often do we hear things like “I felt the presence of the Lord,” or “I could feel the Holy Spirit saying to me...” The Apostles did not talk like that. They did not resort to appealing to the sensual and emotionalism in their testimony about Christ. They did NOT urge people to listen to the voice of God in the various cultural influences of the times, or to their own experiences. On the contrary, they pointed people away from such things (II Peter 1:16-21). The “God” of *The Shack* is a New Age guru urging people to get in touch with their feelings as a way to hear the voice of God – just the direct opposite of the writers of the New Testament. Their faith in Christ was rooted and grounded in the truth of God’s Word and NOT in their feelings.

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* IV (Baker, 1977), p. 171.

² More fully stated, the verb HAGIAZŌ means “to set apart from the world by actual sanctification of life, so that in heart and mind, in thoughts, words, and deeds, one begins to live more and more in accordance with the law of God.” Cf. W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Baker, 1954), p. 361.

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 43.

⁴ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* X (Marantha, N.D.), p. 412.

⁵ The Greek text is EN TE ALETHEIA which may be rendered in the truth, or by the truth, or through the truth. IT is in the sphere of God’s truth that is meant. Truth is the element in which the sanctification takes place.

⁶ *The Works of the Reverend John Howe (1630 – 1705)* I (Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 249.

⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Baker, 1980), p. 254.

⁸ *Commentary on the Gospel According to John II*, trans. W. Pringle (Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 179 – 18.

⁹ Thomas Manton, op. cit., p. 426.