Hi ****,

I was talking with *** and he mentioned that you watched a youtube video of Mark Driscoll evaluating *The Shack*, and that you were discouraged from using the book as a tool. I also listened to it, and wanted to make the following comments for your benefit. If this changes your opinion of the usefulness of The Shack as a tool, that would, admittedly, make me rather happy. But even if not, I ask that you carefully think about my evaluation of Driscoll on this, for your long term development and theological maturity. Driscoll gave three main critiques of the book:

1. Making an image of God, including, but not limited to promoting of, goddess worship.
2. Confusing the persons of the Trinity
3. Negating the hierarchy within the Trinity

1. Making an image of God: This was one of my concerns, too, going into the book. The conceptual presentations of the Trinity I prefer come from Augustine (the social Trinity) and also the Eastern Orthodox tradition and the Barthian stream of Reformed theology, where the Father reveals himself through the Son by the Spirit. As I read the book, I decided that, yes, the concept of the Trinity as "three people in relationship" that can sit around a dinner table was a limited and potentially misleading portrait, but still understandable for me. After all, Andrei Rublev’s painting of the Trinity in 1410 is something I can appreciate as a limited, symbolic depiction of realities that are far larger and more complex than what he could paint. And the author makes a lot of qualifications about why the Triune God manifests Himself in this limited way to the character Mac, that this is not an exhaustible way of understanding God, but simply a concession made to him. This is acceptable to me.

In addition, Driscoll makes the charge that because the Father appears as an African-American woman, and the Spirit appears as an Asian woman, the author is advocating goddess worship. Here is where I felt he was misrepresenting the book and critiquing a strawman in order to dismiss the book too quickly. In the book, there were a good number of qualifications placed on why the Father appears as a black woman. First, the Father (‘Papa’) says it is again a concession to Mac, no more valid than imagining God the Father as a white man. Notice that Michaelangelo painted God as a white bearded man on the vault of the Sistine Chapel. Most people just call that ‘fine art.’ But is this theologically accurate? Not at all; it is a limited representation, and while it is always potentially misleading, it is also potentially useful if we can appreciate it in a qualified and limited way. If Driscoll (or you) were to be consistent, you would have to also get rid of all other representations of God and Jesus in Christian artwork, including children’s bibles and so forth. Are you really willing to do this?

Second, the presentation of the Trinity in this way relates quite significantly to the theme of the book: suffering. God is presented as someone who is visibly represented by human beings who are connected to historical oppression and suffering. Who else can be connected emotionally and visibly to suffering – in the United States – than a black woman, a Middle Eastern man, and an Asian woman? There is also a representation of God’s wisdom as a Latina. Once again, I would not rush to condemn all this as goddess worship. For, right away, God is presented as someone who understands and suffers with the slavery and segregation faced by the black community, especially the paralyzing and helpless place that the women occupied while they tried to hold their families and communities together; the racial prejudice and hostility and skepticism faced by Middle Eastern immigrants especially after September 11th, and the Asian woman who suffered in dignities, reduction to sexually exotic objects, internment, overwork, and refugee trauma. The reason God appears this way to Mac is because He is saying that He is intimately involved in the suffering of His creation, of all humanity, and especially of Mac’s daughter who was murdered.

In fact, it is critical in the story that God the Father does not appear as a white man to Mac from the beginning. Mac’s own white father was abusive, and God uses this presentation of the black woman to distance Himself from that fallen image of Mac’s human father. Besides, Driscoll does not mention that the Father appears to Mac later as a white man, resembling his own earthly father, only after Mac makes peace with his father and forgives him. This shift is quite important to the whole story, and to a proper understanding of how to not take human experiences of fatherhood and project it onto God, and Driscoll passed it by without comment, perhaps because it completely undermines his rather groundless accusation of ‘goddess worship’.

But can I ask you to consider a deeper point? Why do many depictions of God the Father (or simply, God) make him out to be a white man? And in those cases, which are too numerous to count, why don’t Christians complain
that much? I and many others believe it is because we equate God with power, and the white man is also equated with power. This view of God as first and foremost raw power then leads to the view that God is unconditioned by any love or any character, really. This is why many Christians think they are obliged to say that God is capable of evil, and perhaps even does evil; since the world clearly has evil in it, and Christians feel they must somehow rationally connect everything to God’s unlimited power, we have apparently come to think that God is the author of everything, including evil. That theological model of God makes such a conclusion quite inescapable. A few Christians even feel they must make God the author of evil in order to defend this misguided view of His power.

But in my opinion, and in the opinion of many others like Barth, Rahner, Torrance, von Balthazar, Grenz, Hart, etc., this has been a flaw in a good deal of western theology. A true Trinitarian theology places love as first and foremost in God’s nature, in God’s very Being, and in particular in God’s love and respect for humanity, and therefore any power that the Triune God exercises must flow consistently from His loving nature. Love is first, power is second. This makes the Triune God immune to accusations of causing evil, and not simply because I insist on it in a loud voice, but because it is logically impossible for this Triune God to be behind the evil caused by humanity. I can name scholars and theologians who also think this way if you like.

My point being that if you make the Trinity merely a historical appendage to the church’s confession, an appendage that has no real importance as we think through the issues of evil and suffering, then you risk collapsing the Triune God into the great Aristotelian Singularity: a being with no nature or character that comes before His power, who is therefore capable of using His power for good or evil, who can then easily be said to do so, and who would therefore be, in fact, directly responsible for all the evil and suffering of the world. If you present this Singularity to *** and others, I can almost guarantee that you will lose them. Their response to the Singularity will reflect any pent-up anger at other factors, including the white men that they might perceive, rightly or wrongly, to be responsible for the oppression in the world.

From here, let me address Driscoll’s criticism #3, because it is tied to critique #1.

3. Hierarchy: Driscoll says that William Young is incorrect that hierarchy is a response only to sin, therefore it doesn’t exist within the Trinity itself. I don’t recall this statement in the book, and I doubt that this would be a matter of much significance for non-Christians anyway. But in any case, I don’t feel particularly perturbed by any kind of statement like this. Here is why: Theologians readily acknowledge that human words have connotations and meanings that are partially, but not entirely, consistent with the realities that they are trying to point to within God Himself. For example, in what sense is God the Father really a ‘Father’ to the Son? Certainly not in the way that Arius made it out to be: that at a certain point in time, God begat the Son who was a created being and therefore God became a divine Father. Nor is it that the Father is ‘male’ as far as we can understand what it means to be, strictly speaking, ‘male’. But in what sense, then, does Scripture mean that God the Father is a Father to the Son of God? I don’t wish to discuss that vast question here, of course. My point here is simply that human words must therefore be used in a conditional, qualified, and limited way when they are used to describe God.

Driscoll does not do that here, and that is a problem. He claims that we can surely say that ‘hierarchy’ exists within the Trinity. That is a claim made by some others, so he is not alone in that kind of move. And I would tend to agree with him that William Young may be on a different kind of shaky ground by denying it altogether. But Driscoll makes quite a strong claim by asserting it so strongly, and in the way he backs it up, where he is utterly wrong.

We are all aware, of course, that there are biblical verses that speak of the Son handing the kingdom over to the Father (1 Cor.15:24), the Son doing only what the Father is doing (Jn.5), etc. However, what does this mean? When the biblical data also tells us that the Son is the exact radiance of the Father (Heb.1:4) and when the Son is said to be His fullness, the fullness of Deity in bodily form (Col.1, 2), and when Jesus continually speaks of the Father’s indwelling him in oneness by the Spirit (Jn.14), in what sense is this ‘hierarchy’? This is not a hierarchy that we human beings have ever experienced on the human level. It seems more appropriate to say that these relations and this conjoined way of acting are simply the result of the ontology of the Trinity: The Father simply and always reveals himself through his Word/Son and by the Spirit.

But Driscoll goes much too far in this direction by taking another false step, which I mentioned, above. He says that the hierarchy in the Trinity is actually the basis for children obeying their parents, wives submitting to husbands,
Christians submitting to pastors, and citizens submitting to government officials. Unfortunately, Driscoll is completely wrong on this point.

No New Testament author takes the supposed ‘hierarchy’ in the Trinity as a model for any other human relationship. The Son’s supposed ‘deference to the Father’ is not a model for anyone’s deference to anyone else. For example, Jesus in Matthew 23:8 – 11 reverses hierarchy and flattens it out. Jesus does not rebuild hierarchy upon the earth: ‘But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant.’ The implications of this statement and the trajectory here could not be more different from Driscoll. In fact, the greater truth that Driscoll needs to wrestle with is, if all believers are equally in Christ and seated with Christ on the throne (Eph.2:4 – 7), whether power differentials between Christians are acceptable at all.

The same is true in Paul, in the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians. Was Paul at variance with Jesus by reestablishing ‘hierarchy’? Or is he simply to be ‘held in tension’ with Jesus? The three relationships described in Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9 involve relations of power where the person in power is limited by Christian ethics, beginning with his ability to abuse his speech. (1) The husband (5:25 – 33) is not to accuse his wife, thereby separating himself emotionally from her in violation of the head-body unity of marriage; but he is reminded that Jesus washes his wife with the word. That is, Jesus speaks to the church not to condemn her, but to express his unity with her in love and build her up. (2) The father (6:4) is not to exasperate, anger, or embitter his children but to teach them patiently. (3) The master (6:9) is to ‘do the same’ as the slave in what the slave was commanded (!), i.e. respect, fear, serve with sincerity, and additionally, ‘to give up threatening.’ One can imagine that any power relationship, not just these three, would follow this pattern. In my case, I am not only a husband and father, but also a landlord, a supervisor, and one day I will be a caretaker of elderly parents. This Ephesians passage is helpful because it assumes that power is still a fundamental reality in human relations that we inherit from the world. Yet in every case, power is subverted for a distinctly Christian purpose, especially but not exclusively regarding how we speak.

Furthermore, in the church, the wife, child, or slave have recourse if they need to address the sin of the husband, parent, or master. What happens if the latter is not behaving according to the vision of Ephesians 5 – 6? How should reconciliation be carried out? If we bring Jesus’ process for reconciliation in Matthew 18:15 – 17 together with Ephesians 5 – 6, we get a very important insight. According to Matthew 18, they can confront their counterpart in private (18:15), then with one or two witnesses (18:16), and then before the church (18:17) for not repenting in a way commensurate with what reconciliation in Christ requires. Power abuses are to be addressed quickly by church leaders. This humbles and transforms the system of power hierarchies of parent-child, husband-wife, and other relationships that the church always inherits from the world.

Incidentally, the only real action that church leaders can take towards those who are persistently ‘insubordinate’ or disobedient is to sadly but firmly discontinue full Christian fellowship (1 Cor.5) and basically re-evangelize that person. In other words, the only real ‘power’ the church has is to remove its own presence and re-engage the person from another vantage point.

This means that ‘hierarchy’ is a misleading way to characterize the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians, and that’s probably why the New Testament does not reinforce any kind of human hierarchy by connecting it to some ‘hierarchy’ in God. (1) Children are simply told to obey their parents while they are children, and are not given a model for that all (Eph.6:1 – 4), presumably because one day they will outgrow it, something that no ‘model’ or ‘analogy’ takes into account. (2) Wives submitting to their husbands is not modeled after the Son’s supposed deference to the Father, but to the church’s oneness with Christ, which is a response to Christ’s physical, public sacrifice for the church and verbal nurture of it (Eph.5:18 – 33). (3) When Paul used bondslavery as a limited analogy, he immediately qualified it and expressed his discomfort with it (Rom.6:19), and later banished the fictitious ‘spirit of slavery leading to fear again’ lest it be imported into Christian thinking about God through the use of that analogy (Rom.8:14). (4) Christians submitting to pastors (‘elders’ in biblical language) is never equated to the Son’s supposed deference to the Father, for that would compromise the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; Christians are called to submit to the word of the Lord which teachers and elders can only steward; the authority resides not in the person speaking but in the word spoken, and elders and teachers cannot call people to an obedience beyond what the New Testament commands, since that would interfere with the obedience they owe directly to Christ. And finally, (5) citizens submitting to government officials (e.g. Romans 13, 1 Peter 2, 1 Timothy
2) is never, ever equated to the Son’s deference to the Father; for the relationship between church and state is actually one of very uneasy tension and delegitimation and protest and questioning (e.g. the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19 is demonstrative, as are many scenes in Acts), not legitimation and renewed allegiance.

Thus, contrary to what Driscoll suggests, the biblical writers consistently avoid drawing any kind of parallel between a ‘hierarchy’ within God and any hierarchy among human beings. What would Driscoll say to the conspicuous absence of any such connection? Especially when making that connection would have been so easy? Consider how easily cult leaders construct those kinds of ideas to reinforce their own authority.

Perhaps because the biblical writers were faithful to Jesus’ original command, and understood something fairly simple: If the world’s hierarchies were a reflection of a ‘hierarchy’ in God, this would indelibly connect the two, either by making human hierarchy a result of God’s direct causality, or by giving the Christian a new lens to look at it, as an analogy of something eternal. This reinforcement would make resistance to any of these hierarchies a matter of disobedience. And this would once again tend to make God the author of oppressive regimes, because no regime is absolutely immune from that reality; He would be complicit in human evil by encouraging people to simply and rather naively submit to unjust rule; and He would be the banner that those in power could wave defensively against those who point out that oppression and injustice is a perennial and enduring human problem. That has happened too many times before.

I suspect Young says that there is no ‘hierarchy’ in God because we postmoderns equate ‘hierarchy’ with coercive power, and not without reason. There may indeed be a ‘hierarchy’ – but of love, where the Father loves the Son first, in the Spirit, and perhaps even in a way that eternally gives rise to the Spirit, as some Trinitarian theologians have suggested; and perhaps the Father thereby extends that first love resting upon the Son to the creation by the Spirit as well. This would have been a more faithful way of reasoning through the use of the word ‘hierarchy.’ But this may have been too much to ask readers to understand.

The difficulty here is Driscoll’s tendency to see God primarily as a God of power. He builds a doctrine of hierarchical power out of the Trinity, which is entirely baseless – for before the creation, God can only demonstrate love within Himself, not power; therefore love is primary and power is not. Driscoll’s view makes power relations of utmost importance for Christians to obey, which then serves to rebuild a very false image of the church and of God upon human power relations, which again links God to the evil committed by those in power. This is all a tragic mistake. Therefore, on biblical, ethical, and theological grounds, I could not object more strongly to Driscoll’s view on the matter.

Finally, Driscoll’s second point:

2. Confusing the persons of the Trinity, such that the Father died on the cross. It may be that Driscoll is concerned about the cross-scar stigmata on the hands of the Father, which, it is true, is not a historically orthodox way of describing the Father’s experience of Jesus’ death. However, I distinctly remember the Father fondly saying something like this about Jesus’ death on the cross: ‘No one will ever really know what that boy went through…’ I think what the author meant was that the Father and the Spirit also suffered while Jesus died on the cross. There wasn’t any confusion about which person of the Trinity actually died. So, there wasn’t any confusion I walked away with at any point in the book.

Driscoll is exaggerating any propensity here towards the heresy called Modalism, which is the view that God communicates Himself in three modes of being that are sequential and not simultaneous. The book displays the most critical facets of Trinitarian persons and relations: The persons clearly exist simultaneously, not sequentially; and therefore there is actual relationship going on within the being of God. In fact, it is this quality of relationship – the joy, the communication, the adoration – between the persons of the Trinity that persuades Mac to open himself up to receive that love, too.

In that, William Young is completely right, in my opinion, in starting from human suffering and taking us to the Trinity and the Triune love within God. That is the only real response to – and notice I said ‘response to’ and not ‘justification of’ – evil and suffering. For the task of Christian theology must never be to rationalize sin and evil all the way back to the will of God, as if ‘God needed evil and suffering to show how good He is,’ or ‘God caused it for a larger purpose,’ which amounts to saying, ‘The ends justifies the means.’ For if we do that, then we would be
laying sin and evil at the doorstep of God Himself. Evil and suffering are brought on by humanity, and that is as far back as we can trace it. Certainly God can show His love and redemptive purposes in the face of the evil and suffering in the world, but that is because He loves us even after the fact of sin. God can show how good He is without the evil and suffering. From the Christian and Trinitarian point of view, that is the ultimate, and correct, response to human suffering. God does not justify evil and suffering; He justifies us and brings us into His own inner life, and repudiates the evil and suffering as being without foundation.

I’m not saying that I can completely endorse everything in *The Shack* without some qualification or further explanation. But in its limited way, I think *The Shack* communicates what is most important when engaging with suffering and power and evil, by the selection of three oppressed races and two women to represent the Persons of the Trinity. And in the end, it is the Trinity that is the only hopeful response to a world broken by evil and suffering. The doctrine of the Trinity is the great treasure of Christian theology. This doctrine enables us to put forward a wholly different God than the omnicausal Singularity – which is an image of God most assuredly made in the image of man: notably, the powerful but morally flawed imperialistic white man of recent history.

Best,
Mako