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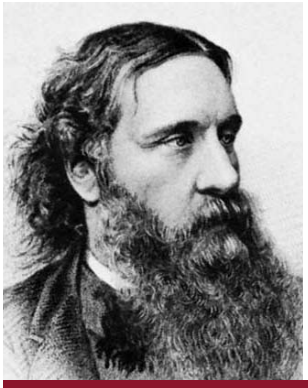

PROFILE IN FAITH

George MacDonald: An Original Thinker

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C.S. Lewis remarks, in *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, that he doubted whether he had ever written a book in which he did not quote George MacDonald. Lewis states that he made no secret of the fact that he regarded MacDonald as his master.[1] Lewis attests to a baptism of his imagination upon reading MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Similarly, G.K. Chesterton describes the impact of *The Princess and the Goblin* with the following words:

> *I for one can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed.*[2]

Admirers of Lewis may be familiar with these laudatory descriptions, but not as familiar with the person praised.

George MacDonald, a Victorian Scottish writer, produced 53 books of varied genre, including fiction, fantasy, sermons, poetry, novels, short stories, and essays. His work was well known in the latter part of the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. In comparison, MacDonald became relatively unknown during the following century. Biographers consider the decline of interest the result of a change in the modern appetite, which no longer found palatable the didactic style of the religious content of much of his work. MacDonald's son Greville observed that the theological slant became less appealing to an audience that was becoming less theological and that the reader no longer cared for the moral lessons or spiritual challenge inherent in his father's work.[3]

A deeply reverent and sincere Christian, MacDonald was accused of heresy on more than one occasion (and with good reason). His first pastorate was lost in part due to such charges. His life, thought, and work reveal a mystic concerned with widening the vision of others beyond this world; a writer who infused the mundane with the divine or revealed the divine in the mundane; a pastor whose pulpit lay beyond the bounds of the church; an unsystematic theologian; a loyal friend; and a loving husband and father. A complex man, yet childlike in his faith, MacDonald demonstrated a passionate love for God which his life displayed and which he exercised through unquestioning obedience; obedience being for MacDonald the very soul of knowledge and the essential key to Christian growth.

The religious convictions of MacDonald permeated both his life and work. Ronald MacDonald describes the integrity of his father's faith:

> *The ideals of his didactic novels were the motive of his own life…a life of literal, and, which is more, imaginative consistency with his doctrine….There has probably never been a writer whose work was a better expression of his personal character. This I am not engaged to prove; but I positively assert…that in his novels, his fantastic tales and allegories, and most vividly, perhaps, in his verse, one encounters…the same rich imagination, the same generous lover of God and man, the same consistent practiser of his own preaching, the same tender charity to the sinner with the same uncompromising hostility to the sin, which were known in daily use and by his own people counted upon more surely than sunshine.*[4]

Christ was the center of his life and work. MacDonald did not hold a position in a church for any significant length of time and consequently did not have a regular pulpit from which to deliver his sermons. Many of his

sermons were "delivered" through written form. His sermons are found in the following works: *Unspoken Sermons, 1st Series* (1867), *Unspoken Sermons, 2nd Series* (1885), *Unspoken Sermons, 3rd Series* (1889), *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870), and *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892).

The Making of an Original Thinker

George MacDonald was born and raised in the small village of Huntly, which is located in Aberdeenshire in the northeast of Scotland. He was born on December 10, 1824. He lived into the next century, dying in 1905. At the time of his birth, the Industrial Revolution had not reached his village and its economy was dependent upon agriculture and handicrafts. The Celt's love of poetry and music, his passionate nature, his loyalty to family and land, and his sincere piety all distinguished the heritage and life of MacDonald.

He grew up on a farm; his father and uncle ran a bleaching business for several years and farmed the land. In 1832, when MacDonald was eight years old, his mother died from tuberculosis. Helen MacKay MacDonald had been well educated, beautiful, and dearly loved by her husband. She left behind her husband and four sons; Charles, George, Alexander, and John Hill. This loss was alleviated for George when his father remarried seven years later.

George enjoyed his childhood in the environment of a close and loving family. A delicate constitution, which would plague him throughout his adult life, prevented him from being as physically active as some of the other children, though he loved roaming the town and surrounding fields with schoolmates. He did well in school and at an early age began reading such titles as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost,* and Klopstock's *Messiah*. Michael Phillips refers to MacDonald as a "thinker, a juvenile mystic of sorts," who was fascinated with nature and the meaning of life from an early age.[5] Greville describes how his father's world differed from that of his playmates because "his keener vision everywhere disclosed fairyland and bewitchment, chivalry and devotion."[6]

The Wrath of God

Isabella Robertson, George's grandmother, insisted upon the children's attendance at the Missionar Kirk in Huntly. His grandmother was an example of a cold, dour, severe woman who had destroyed her son's violin at an early age, considering it a tool of Satan. She had left the Parish Church of Huntly for the more passionate and zealous Missionar's Congregational Church. A portion of George's early religious instruction could be described as strict and joyless. MacDonald retained several of the positive aspects of his religious upbringing, such as a fervent, evangelistic spirit, but he did from an early age begin to struggle with aspects of a strict Calvinist theology, questioning the legalism and the teachings on predestination. As he wrestled with questions concerning the nature and character of God, he was not left without positive input. Nature seemed to hint of a God of wonder; a God of creation; a God of joy and delight. Along with nature's testimony, the most important ingredient for George in the forming of a fuller and more positive impression of God at an early age was his father.

George MacDonald Sr. demonstrated warmth, understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Greville describes his grandfather as "of noble presence, well built and robust—a 'wyss' man…brave, patient, and generous; finely humorous, of strong literary tastes, and profound religious convictions." And he says his father's reverence for him was "absolute."[7] C.S. Lewis states:

> *An almost perfect relationship with his father was the root of all his wisdom. From his own father, he said, he first learned that Fatherhood must be at the core of the universe. He was thus prepared in an unusual way to teach that religion in which the relation of Father and Son is of all relations the most central.*[8]

As George MacDonald matured and faced periods of doubt in regard to his faith, it was to his father, both as a source of wisdom and as an example to model, that he turned.

The Young Thinker

In 1840, at the age of sixteen, George was sent to Aulton Grammar School in preparation for the Bursary Competition. He won twelfth place and was awarded the Fullarton Bursary, which granted him fourteen pounds a year. This allowed him to attend King's College, where he excelled in chemistry and natural philosophy. He desired to continue studies in medicine, but lack of funds prevented this. He was forced to miss the third session at university due to lack of funding, and spent the period cataloguing a library in the north of Scotland.

During this interim, he began reading Schiller, Goethe, and E.T.A. Hoffman. He was especially drawn to the German mystic, Novalis. Attracted to his sensitive treatment of nature, his fascination with death,

and the general melancholy of his work, MacDonald would later go on to translate Novalis' *Twelve Spiritual Songs*. Michael Phillips discusses how this period strengthened, rather than weakened, his struggling faith. Phillips describes how it gave him the room and boundaries for doubts, and that he returned to university having resolved certain issues. He no longer feared that God would judge him for his doubts or questions, and, more importantly, he felt convinced that his instincts in regard to God's character, goodness, and love were correct.[9]

He returned to the university in 1843, widening his study to include language and literature. He was an "ardent, if nervous, speaker in the Debating Society," and he enjoyed playing charades. He was also introspective, analytical, emotional, and moody. He demonstrated a complex personality, which revealed him playful and carefree one moment and pensive and withdrawn the next. One of his closest friends at King's, Robert Troup, wrote in 1898:

> *He was studious, quiet, sensitive, imaginative, frank, open, speaking freely what he thought. His love of truth was intense, only equaled by his scorn of meanness, his purity and his moral courage. So I have found him when I became acquainted with him….So I have found him ever since.*[10]

Troup also notes his silent and thoughtful moods and the consequential concern his friends expressed over MacDonald's spiritual state.

God's Call

MacDonald received his master's degree in chemistry and physics in 1845. The period of 1845-1853 was especially significant in regard to the development of MacDonald's faith. He had been repelled by the surrounding worldliness and hypocrisy of the church, but he had found renewal and encouragement in the Gospels. The spring of 1847 witnessed a deepening of his Christian experience, marked by a stronger sense of joy. The teachings from youth faded into the background as the reading of Scripture and the teachings of Christ claimed more and more of his attention. He wrote to his father how he was in the habit of reading the Gospels every day and that if the Gospel was not true, he wished his maker to annihilate him, for nothing else was worth living for.[11]

In 1848, MacDonald made the decision to become a Congregationalist minister. He entered Highbury College in London, spending two years studying Greek and Latin classics, European biblical scholarship, and the Bible in its original languages. He graduated in 1850, fluent in Latin, Koine and Classical Greek, Hebrew, German, and French. An influential part of his experience at Highbury was the teaching of Professor John Godwin. Godwin held the Chair of Systematic Theology and New Testament Exegesis. Suspected of heretical tendencies, Greville remarks that "his mode of thought appears to have been independent with leanings towards Arminianism" and also that "it was for his exposition of the New Testament that my father was most indebted to him."[12]

Husband and Pastor

During his tutorship, MacDonald had met his future bride, Miss Louisa Powell. They were married on March 8, 1851. The Powells had found the young suitor "unconsciously persuasive" and had "recognized with sure instinct that a daughter given to this lover of God, this poet who opened the eyes of all who were not slaves to pharisaic convention, was in good keeping indeed."[13] Louisa was sharp-witted, perceptive, and honest. She was also extremely sensitive and throughout their marriage dealt with periods of depression and struggles with self-esteem. George, though, became increasingly dependent upon her for love and encouragement throughout their courtship and marriage. They enjoyed deep companionship in their marriage and lovingly raised eleven children together.

The year of his marriage found MacDonald accepting a position at the Trinity Congregational Church in Arundel. The church was attracted to its young pastor's sensitivity and humor, but time revealed a ruling minority who found some of the pastor's admonishments uncomfortable. Greville states:

> *My father's flaming words against mammon-worship and cruelty and self-seeking, were as thoroughgoing as the giving of himself to all who needed him….The poor understood him—as they did his Master; but the purse-proud resented his plain speaking and turned away.*[14]

The church expressed a desire for more doctrinal sermons and seemed to be unresponsive to MacDonald's call to be obedient and mirror the goodness of Christ in the mundane activities of life.

The parishioners were uncomfortable with MacDonald's emphasis upon the love of God and his treatment of the doctrine of hell. MacDonald had come to believe that the suffering of the damned compromised God's goodness and, thus, could not accept the Calvinist understanding of God's wrath and punishment.

He viewed suffering and punishment as God's instruments of purification. His emphasis upon the purgatorial nature of hell and the possibility of redemption beyond the grave reveals threads of universalism in his thinking and beliefs. (See the article on page 6 of this issue on the importance of theology.) MacDonald reveals his frustration with systems of thought to his father in a letter, dated April 15, 1851:

> *I firmly believe people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice. The word doctrine, as used in the Bible, means teaching of duty, not theory. I preached a sermon about this. We are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems—forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right. I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist. To no system would I subscribe.*[15]

Preacher Without a Pulpit

After being dismissed in 1853 by his congregation for heterodoxy, MacDonald shared his particular vision of the truth of the Gospel through lecturing and writing. The publication of *Phantastes* in 1858 propelled his literary career into a new direction and widened his circle of friends. Acquaintances included Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray, and significant friendships included those of Lady Byron, John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, and Frederick Denison Maurice. Maurice had been forced to resign from King's College due to the charge of heresy. In "A Thanksgiving for F. D. Maurice," MacDonald reveals his sympathetic leanings in the following verse:

> *He taught that hell itself is yet within*
> *The confines of thy kingdom; and its fires*
> *The endless conflict of thy love with sin,*
> *That even by horror works its pure desire.*[16]

After lecturing at the London Institute in 1859, MacDonald was invited by the Philosophical Institute of Edinburgh and the Royal Institution of Manchester to give a series of lectures. In the same year, he secured the Chair of English Language and Literature at Bedford College. He supported his family primarily with teaching and lecturing, though his family was often financially sustained by the charity of family and friends. He was asked to preach occasionally, but would never accept monetary compensation for preaching. Eventually he turned to writing novels at the encouragement of his publicist, and their success allowed for the financial provision of his family.

In the fall of 1872, George, Louisa, and Greville sailed for America. George lectured throughout the country. He was received enthusiastically and, aside from physical ailments, enjoyed the trip. *The Princess and the Goblin* was published in 1872, along with *The Vicar's Daughter* and *Wilfrid Cumbermede*. The publication of novels, sermons, and poetry continued up until 1897, with his last publication, *Salted with Fire*.

Prophet and Poet

MacDonald lived during an era marked by significant philosophical and religious developments that fueled doubts, inspired debates, and challenged traditionally held beliefs. Such developments included the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859; findings and new interpretations in geological studies; the application of German scientific historical methods and principles of literary criticism in biblical studies; and the growing interest in comparative religions. Some evangelicals demonstrated an inability to face the challenges squarely and consequently developed an anti-intellectual reputation. MacDonald's faith was relatively unshaken as he believed that all truth was God's truth. He sustained throughout his life an open and eager disposition towards the advancement of knowledge, which served him well in the wide variety of friendships he maintained.

MacDonald by temperament and experience was comfortable stepping outside the bounds of traditionally held beliefs. His extreme sensitivity to his early religious instruction, which he considered spiritless and life-denying, prompted him to question throughout his life tenets of Calvinism. He wrestled with whether certain doctrines caused the believer to take refuge in beliefs about Christ, rather than in Christ himself. As a romantic poet, he longed to render truth in fresh ways while he struggled with an inherent distrust of system. While aspects of his thinking flow outside the bounds of what evangelicals would consider biblical teaching, for the Christian reader of MacDonald there is still much to glean from his writings and life.

First of all, MacDonald's importance for the contemporary Christian lies in his impact on other Christian thinkers. An obvious example is C.S. Lewis. In order for the reader to fully appreciate Lewis's thought, he or she must be familiar with the thought of MacDonald. As mentioned earlier, Lewis claimed that he never wrote anything without quoting MacDonald.

An example is Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Lewis wrote the story specifically with MacDonald in mind

and, in fact, the story serves as a tribute to MacDonald.[17] The book describes a short trip to heaven made by some of the occupants of hell. During the trip, MacDonald serves as Lewis's guide and spiritual mentor. This is very appropriate, since Lewis boldly claimed MacDonald as his "master." Unfortunately, however, Lewis brings in MacDonald's understanding of a purgatorial nature of hell, along with the idea of post-mortem conversion. With an understanding of MacDonald's thought, the reader is able to discern the themes attributable to him and to appreciate the commonalities and differences between the two writers.

Even if one disagrees with aspects of MacDonald's theology, one can still appreciate the good in his work. In *The Pleasures of God*, John Piper describes this good, while recognizing that MacDonald "had thrown away the baby of much true biblical teaching with the bath water of a certain brand of gloomy, lifeless Calvinism."[18] Piper describes how the reader of MacDonald's stories comes away with a "new zeal to be pure" and that one can't help but be impressed by his "radical commitment" to following Christ. The source for the good one finds in reading MacDonald is best summarized by William H. Burnside:

> *Part of the attractiveness of George MacDonald's writings is the "natural" way his Christocentricity works out in his novels. Christ was the center of his life, God the most important theme. This is not contrived as an adjunct to his stories, but flows out of the center.…For George MacDonald, Christ, above all else, gave meaning and direction to his life.*[19]

Rolland Hein states that MacDonald's "strongest literary gift was to perceive and communicate the realities of Christ through myth" and that "it is this mythic component that makes his stories and tales continue to live today."[20] In short, there is much good to be gleaned by the reader, whether one is inspired through the Christ-like character of a protagonist in one of MacDonald's theological romances or one's longing for truth, goodness, and beauty is stirred by his masterful use and construction of myth.

This passion for Christ and for radical discipleship propelled MacDonald to serve as a type of prophet to his generation. The themes in MacDonald's writing and the topics of his sermons reflect a deep concern for fellow believers, as he witnessed many Victorian Christians assenting intellectually to beliefs while failing to live out the demands of Christian discipleship. He believed that too much attention was given to theological discussion, and not enough to spiritual disciplines that would increase not merely intellectual knowledge, but also one's desire and ability to love others.

The development of his theology is directly impacted by his emphasis upon the practical value of truth above mere theory. This remained a lifelong theme for MacDonald and led him away from biblical orthodoxy at points, as it has others in the history of the church. His belief that it was better to err in one's knowledge than in one's practice, since "to the man who gives himself to the living Lord, every belief will necessarily come right; the Lord himself will see that his disciple believe aright concerning him,"[21] failed to recognize the consistent teaching of Scripture that a knowledge of the truth is foundational to godly living. Orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right practice), and orthopathy (right feelings) must be held together, difficult though it may be.

MacDonald's distrust in theological systems increased as he felt many people took refuge in a system of belief rather than in Christ himself, hence avoiding the call to radical discipleship. His concern is well-founded, as this has been a perennial problem in the history of the church and one that none of us can escape. Each of us has a system of thought, whether recognized and articulated or not, and we can easily rest in it instead of Christ himself. MacDonald helps us surmount this danger and points us to the heart of true discipleship when he says we must, "refuse, abandon, deny self altogether as a ruling, or determining, or originating element in us" as we seek our highest calling, which is willing God's will.[22] He reminds us that our faith should be deep and spirit-transforming, and that our final goal is not information, but transformation through our knowledge of the Lord that we might increasingly enjoy and reflect our Savior.

MacDonald experienced many emotional, spiritual, and physical hardships in his life, yet he remained constant in his trust in the Lord. He remained confident that everything he experienced in life came directly from the hand of God. Every pleasure and pain worked as an essential part of God's redemptive plan for his life. Whether in the role of sage, popular lecturer, gifted poet, prolific novelist, or respected Christian teacher, MacDonald's thought and work reflect a heart and mind captured by the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 25.

2. G.K. Chesterton, foreword to *George MacDonald and His Wife* by Greville MacDonald, 9.

3. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1924), 374.

4. Ronald MacDonald, *A Northern Window* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1911, repr., Eureka, Ca.: Sunrise books, 1989), 24-25.

5. Michael R. Phillips, *George MacDonald: Scotland's Beloved Storyteller* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Bethany House, 1987), 37-38.

6. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 51.

7. Ibid., 30-31.

8. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 13.

9. Philips, *George MacDonald: Scotland's Beloved Storyteller*, 118-20.

10. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 76.

11. Sadler, ed., *The Letters of George MacDonald*, 16.

12. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 113-14.

13. Ibid., 116.

14. Ibid., 156.

15. Ibid., 155.

16. Ibid., 398.

17. George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Wheather, Il.: Crossway Books, 1994), 305-7.

18. John Piper, *The Pleasure of God* (Portland, Or.: Multnomah Press, 1991), 170-71.

19. William H. Burnside, *Profit and Loss in Modernizing George MacDonald*, VII 9 (1988): 123.

20. Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* (Chicago, Il.: Cornerstone Press Chicago, 1998), 54.

21. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: Second Series* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1885; repr., Eureka, Ca.: Sunrise Books, 1995), 242.

22. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons: Second Series*, 214.

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