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Children of God and/or Justified Sinners: A New Look at George MacDonald and the Theology of the Reformers¹

Thomas Gerold

One of the favourite topics raised by George MacDonald was the expression of his aversion to some essentials of classical Protestant theology. In particular, he attacks the forensic understanding of justification and his “views on the atonement have been considered to be among his most controversial” (Dearborn 100). Therefore for many of his readers, the theology of the Reformation and George MacDonald’s own theology seem to be almost a contradiction.

Yet this is an oversimplified view of this matter. In this essay I want to show first that the reformers in the 16th century—especially Martin Luther—and MacDonald had on the one hand, at least in part, different theological models, but on the other hand they used these different models to express some central and similar theological insights. Both were concerned with the justification of man by God, and both were concerned with man’s relation to God. Even if their doctrines were partly different, at a deeper level the centre of their theologies were very similar. Perhaps we could even say, their theologies meet at their core. Therefore a deeper look at Luther’s and at MacDonald’s view of that matter makes sense. First, it helps us to understand MacDonald and the Reformers in a deeper way, and then it also serves to illuminate the questions, which were important for them.

1. The Forensic Justification

Introduction – An External Justification

One of the doctrines MacDonald fought against was the notion of forensic justification. In this doctrine legal terms and images are used to understand the justification of man: “God pronounces his verdict—that the sinner is righteous—in the heavenly court (in foro divino)” (McGrath 84). The sinner “is counted as righteous or pronounced to be righteous” (McGrath 84). This is Melancthon’s development of Luther’s conception that we are saved not by our own righteousness but by an “alien righteousness,” which is Christ’s (83-84). Yet the forensic understanding of the justification can be misunderstood in following way: we are justified by an external divine legal

transaction. Therefore we are acquitted before God's court and our sins are of no importance for our salvation anymore. And—and this is the misunderstanding—t might be said: "Well, if we are saved by faith alone, why to change our life? Why to do the hard work of fighting against our sins, if everything is solved by this legal transaction by Christ?" Or on the other hand, there might be the even deeper danger, of concentrating so much on thinking about one's faith that the practical integration of this faith in our life is neglected. MacDonald criticises everything, which can lead to such a misunderstanding of justification. He does this not only in his sermons, but also in his novels. For example, in the figure of Miss Charmichael in his novel *Donald Grant* her faith is described in this way:

She did not trouble herself about what God required of her, but would hold the doctrine that most certainly guaranteed her future welfare – which welfare consisted in going to a place she heard called heaven, and avoiding another they called hell. Her conscience towards God had very little to do with her opinions, and her heart still less. (76)

She represents a faith, which is merely intellectual, but has nothing to do with her life. That is the problem MacDonald fights against. But she is not really a personification of the doctrine of the justification by faith, but more a caricature of it. In this novel MacDonald attacks a caricature of this doctrine without looking very deeply at this doctrine itself. Therefore a deeper look at this doctrine—and not only at a caricature of it—is necessary to decide, how different MacDonald and the classical Protestant theologies really are.

We have to look back into the early 16th century to discover the true aims and the historical context of this doctrine. The exact centre of Martin Luther's theology is justification. The important thing is that man is justified by Christ and not by his own works. That frees him from his captivity in sin, from his self-centredness, and opens for him the way to God. The main thing is that God is really the acting one and not man. It is neither necessary nor possible to earn justification. It has to be freely given by God. For Luther it was obvious that true faith in Christ always leads to good works (Bayer 256-258). So the attacks by his opponents that he would support faith without works are wrong. His point is that man is justified by Christ. Then he can do good works and will do them.² God makes it possible. So for Luther faith changes the believer. If MacDonald criticises faith, which is "external rather than transformational" (Dearborn 108), MacDonald can not mean Luther himself. A one sided understanding of faith is surely not supported by a careful reading of Luther. Yet there is the forensic doctrine, which really

emphasises the external aspect of justification and, therefore, can be misunderstood in this way.

The Deeper Aim of this Doctrine

Why did it become the official doctrine of the Lutherans and therefore an important part of the Protestant doctrinal heritage? It should also be mentioned that there was a strong Lutheran influence on John Knox and on the Scottish reformation, because the first Protestants in Scotland were Lutherans (Edington 41). There is one likely reason for this importance of the forensic doctrine. If somebody understands justification as the notion that the justified sinner is really made righteous by his union with Christ and if he gets the help to overcome sin through Christ working in him, then it can be misunderstood as justification by works. Then there could be the misunderstanding that man is really saved by the works he has done through Christ. That is a misunderstanding because in both theological models the believer is saved by Christ. But to avoid this problem, the forensic model of justification is a possible solution. And for Luther it was very important to show that God himself is acting in the justification and never man himself (Rothen 179-180). So no doubt he would have preferred to err in this direction.

Furthermore it helps to solve an additional problem. Nobody is really completely free of sin. Even the best Christians were—and are—not free of sin. Not even those who were—and are—accepted as saints by some churches, as for example the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox, have ever been free from sin. In this context the model of justification by being made righteous through Christ, by whom we are united through faith, can even lead to the idea that nobody is justified. Nobody is without sin. Is that not a sign that nobody is justified by Christ? If justification worked in being made righteous by Christ, a good question would be why nobody is righteous. Of course that is only a problem if being made righteous has to be finished already. But if that mistake is made, it can lead to disastrous pastoral problems. It might lead to despair, because nobody is without sin. If somebody thinks he is not saved by Christ because he is a sinner, then it leads to despair. Luther's own difficulties before he discovered the doctrine of justification by faith and not by works showed this problem rather clearly. For Luther, himself, the central thing about forensic justification was exactly this: if we ourselves have a share in our justification, then it is not in good hands. But if God is responsible for it alone, then it is in good hands and we

can trust him. Despair is not necessary anymore. There is a surety of our salvation. This is the most important pastoral reason for his theological model, for if we know that we are saved by Christ, then we are free to live according to it. Then we can do good works, because we do not need to be preoccupied with our salvation (Wenz 160-167).

It is interesting that the forensic justification in Scottish Calvinism, in combination with a strong emphasis on double predestination, was not very successful in helping Christians there to be sure about their salvation. It became a more important question to decide whether one belonged to the elect. And therefore the fruits of their faith were very important. If somebody was not sure about his salvation, he had to think whether his faith brought enough fruits to be a justifying faith. If he was successful in that, it was a sign that he belonged to the saved. If not, it was likely for him that he had no chance for salvation. Of course that often led to years of doubt and searching for one's faith. Therefore this theological model had—at least partly—lost its central aim in the Scotland of MacDonald.³ In one of his sermons MacDonald mentions exactly this problem—that many Christians are much too concerned with examining themselves whether they truly believe in Christ and trust in the atonement (*Unspoken Sermons* 394). To be really afraid about one's salvation seems to have been a real problem in his time. An example is the little girl Annie in his novel *Alec Forbes of Howglen*. Annie is in despair after she hears a very disturbing sermon in the church. She tries to pray, yet she is not successful, because she is afraid of God. This is terrible for her and she is vexed by the question: “Was not the fact that she could not pray a certain proof that she was out of God's favour, and counted unworthy of his notice?” (116). This extreme fear shows the pastoral problem MacDonald and Luther were fighting against.

Dangers of the Forensic Justification

Therefore there are two excellent reasons for supporting the forensic model of justification, even if the second aim was not always successful. Yet there are also at least two similar grave dangers connected with it. MacDonald saw both of them. First, it leads to the danger of not understanding the relation of Christ and the believer deeply enough. A merely legal relation is rarely a very deep one. And some of the images used by the forensic model are legal ones. This is dangerous, because these terms could suggest that our relation to Christ is a very external one and does not include the deepest part of us. Therefore MacDonald was very critical towards the

usage of legal terms to describe our relation to God.

A second problem—closely connected to the first one—is not to take the transforming aspect of faith seriously enough. The danger of developing a too theoretical faith and to confuse it with the true saving faith was, for MacDonald, a real problem. He fought against a too theoretical faith in nearly all his works. Theological questions had some importance for him. In some ways they are even of special importance for him, because for him it is not enough to trust in a church authority or a collection of confessions (Gerold 13-30). Yet the really important thing for him was a much deeper relation. Furthermore, in that, obedience towards God is especially important along with building a relation to the Father, opening oneself for a child-father-relation from man to God. That makes opening oneself for the sanctifying influence of Christ essential. It makes it necessary to accept Christ as one's teacher and master. Without this, faith is not possible. In that matter MacDonald is perhaps more influenced by Pietism and Methodism with their strong emphasis on sanctification and less by Luther and especially his successors of the Lutheran orthodoxy and especially the Federal Calvinists.

Faith as a Deep Union with Christ

Now it would be wrong to claim that MacDonald is fighting against the great founding father of Protestantism Martin Luther. Or that he would even have an aversion to him. We should not forget that MacDonald translated Luther's songs—and to translate poetry is really hard work—so he seems to have valued this great reformer very much (*Rampolli* 113-178). Moreover, even if MacDonald warns of an overemphasis on Luther and Calvin he does the same of the Apostles. So his warning is firstly a drawing the attention to Christ (Sadler 154) MacDonald fought against a one-sided interpretation, not in the first instance against Luther's theology. He declined to accept the forensic model, yet this was not firstly a denial, but an affirmation of a union, which is as deep as possible. That is not against Luther. There are interpretations of Luther's theology, which understand faith in Christ as a real and transforming union with him and which are so much closer to MacDonald's theology. An example is the Finnish interpretation of Luther (Wenz 149-196). Even the main tradition of the *Book of Concord* has to be understood in the context of a union with Christ in faith (Wenz 193). Furthermore, for Luther himself it was very important that the fruits of grace are made visible in one's life. He was not against good works; he was just against trying to be saved by them. That the justified sinner does many good

works was obvious for Luther. According to Luther's *De Captivitate Babylonica* baptism is really a death for sin (526.34–534.3). And a person who wants to live as a Christian should live as somebody who is dead to sin. And the second part of his important work *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* is not far from MacDonald. There Luther argues in this way: Christ has freely justified man. Now man who has got such a great gift should give himself as freely as Christ gave himself. This leads to a very high ethical ideal, which is deeply rooted in Luther's theology (20–34). This ideal makes all attacks against Martin Luther, that he himself understood his theology in the direction of cheap grace and not taking obedience towards Christ seriously enough, completely ridiculous. And also for Calvin a strong union between Christ and the believer was very important (*A Life of John Calvin* 165-168).

Yet Luther – and especially his successors—emphasised the forensic model. But that was firstly to avoid both possible misunderstandings discussed before. They wrote in a certain historical situation, and in this situation this emphasis made sense, especially in the context of the Roman Catholic overemphasis on works, which was common in the early 16th century and which led to abuses as indulgences and things like that. In this situation the forensic model made sense, because it was rather safe against the misunderstanding in the direction of a self-justification. For Luther it was extremely important that our salvation is worked out by God and not by ourselves, because it would not be a good idea to trust us with that. If everything depended on us, we would always have to be in fear of being lost. That is the aim of this model and to this aim MacDonald would not have said no. Yet for him this rather legalistic model was no solution. He discovered a different solution for why we can trust God that we are saved.

2. MacDonald's Conception

Children of God – MacDonald's Conception

Now MacDonald really fought against the forensic model. Yet does this mean he was against the deeper reasons for this doctrine? One of them is to show that man is freely justified by God, that he receives this gift not because he has earned it but as a free gift. MacDonald was not against its deeper aim. He never accepted something as human self-justification. He never thought that human beings could earn eternal life or forgiveness. He defends himself against the attack that he supports the doctrine of works (*Unspoken Sermons*

396). Merits resulting from good works can, for him, have no importance for man's salvation because, for MacDonald, "the notion of merits belong to a low development" (*The Hope of the Gospel* 185) of man. They have to accept that as a divine gift. So in deeper sense MacDonald and the Reformers agreed. Yet there is the question whether MacDonald found a theological model to express this basic conviction.

In turning to the New Testament, MacDonald found a way to describe the relation between God and human persons. But while Luther looked especially at the epistles of St. Paul—especially to the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians (Bayer 69)—in order to find a solution, though, he looked at both letters very much too (Gerold, *Die Gotteskindschaft des Menschen* 87). MacDonald looked more closely at the Gospel, especially at the *Sermon of the Mount*. There he finds an image, which is not so much in danger of being misunderstood as a legalistic one. MacDonald's main image is the father-child-image. The relation between God and man is for him firstly a father-child-relation. That is founded upon parts of the *Sermon of the Mount*⁴, on Our Lord's prayer and on other parts of the New Testament such as the letter to the Galatians and the parable of the Lost son. So it really has a quite good biblical foundation. And therefore it is quite suitable that according to Kerry Dearborn one of the main criticisms of MacDonald, especially against the Federal Calvinistic theology, is this that it is "Legal rather than Filial" (Dearborn 103).

The Opportunities of MacDonald's Conception

But in which way does this understanding of the God-man-relation as father-child-relation help to solve the problem of man's justification? First, it shows the relation of God and man as one originated completely by God. God has created man as his child. So God is responsible for this; a human being can do nothing himself at all. The father calls the child into being, not the other way round.

Second, and perhaps even more important in this context, the father can do much more than his children and he does. In the context of prayer MacDonald compares human persons with children who ask their father for a penny to buy a birthday gift for their brother (*Unspoken Sermons* 250). Everything, which a human being can give, is given first by God. God is really acting. Everything is in God's hands. Man can do nothing without his divine Father. He cannot do more than Luther's justified sinner can do himself. The need to accept really everything from God is very similar in

both theological models.

Then the father-child-relation can make the challenges of sanctification very understandable. It is obvious that a child has to learn. MacDonald compares man's state today with the first steps of a child. The father is very pleased about them. Yet he will only be satisfied with the steps of a full grown man. So this explains, very well, how God can say yes to the sinful man, and is even pleased about his first steps, and yet expects much more from him. This image helps very much, on the one hand, to encourage the believer and, on the other hand, to take the challenges of a Christian life seriously. This was especially important for MacDonald who based parts of his writings on the *Sermon of the Mount* and so on the most challenging parts of the New Testament. And for him it was important at least to try to obey Christ's demands. For him it was no option to say that some of them would have no relevance for humanity today and that ignoring them would therefore be a possibility. For him it is necessary to do what Christ says to follow him. Yet even the bad child is still a child. So MacDonald can also take the relation originated by God himself alone, seriously, as also the need for personal sanctification by trying to obey Christ's commandments.

Perhaps the most important advantage of MacDonald's theological model is this: the relation between parents and their children is one of the deepest and closest possible human relations. That makes it a very suitable image to describe the even deeper relation between man and God. This relation is much deeper than all merely legal images. It invites to a personal union. And it makes real trust possible. And it also makes obvious that the relation to God is the most important human relation.

Centred on the Father or Centred on Christ?

There is one point that has to be explained more deeply. The theological model of the Reformers is a Christocentric one. MacDonald's theology is, first, centred on the Father. How is he able to integrate Christ in his theology? Can his theology explain Christ's role in the salvation of man? Or is he giving up the centre of Christian theology?

There are at least three important ways, in which MacDonald tries to understand Christ's relevance. First, his (and perhaps each primarily father-centred theology) is at least secondarily a Christ-centred one because there is no father without the son. For MacDonald, Christ really is the eternal Son of the Father. Both of them are together in an inseparable communion. He is obedient to the father from eternity, he wills God's will, he gives himself in

love to him. He is completely centred on the father. This relation to the father is the real life, which is made possible by Christ and which makes the only right relation to Christ possible, that which is to be completely centred on the father. To live this relation means everlasting life (*Unspoken Sermons* 296-312). Because Christ makes everlasting life possible, because he even makes creation possible, without him our humanity would not be possible (MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* 425-433).

Second, Christ is not only the one who makes this relation to God possible by giving himself to the father from eternity. He has also revealed this true life to us in giving himself visible for us on the cross.

Third, and this is the most important point, faith in Christ himself is extremely important for MacDonald.

The Role of Faith in MacDonald's Conception

This eternal Father-Son-relation is of importance for each human being. But has faith in Christ any relevance for one's salvation or not? For MacDonald it has. Faith in Christ is important for him. But MacDonald is very careful to avoid a too theoretical understanding of faith. For him faith is only possible together with obedience (towards Christ or towards the Father) and love. For him "love and faith and obedience are sides of the same prism" (*Donald Grant* 89) So he sees all three of them as one unity, which is for MacDonald an escape from looking too closely at the individual role of each of them. That is a pity from the point of view of a systematic theologian, yet it might sometimes be a rather good solution from a practical point of view. In particular, MacDonald emphasises the obedience to Christ. No faith without obedience is possible. For him it is really necessary to do what Christ says. That makes something like a union with Christ possible. This opening to Christ in obedience makes it possible for Christ to help man with his grace. The union with Christ through faith makes the salvation of man possible. This conception is in some way similar to John Calvin's conception of a union between Christ and man through faith (McGrath 165-168). This emphasis on a union between Christ and the believer in Calvin's theology became also very important for the Scottish 19th century theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, who stands for the mystical side of Scottish Calvinism (Horrocks 75). MacDonald who met Thomas Erskine himself and was very much influenced by A. J. Scott and F. D. Maurice (who were both very strongly influenced by Erskine) is a part of this tradition. Erskine understood faith as "a total existential response of human being to the revelation of God

in Christ” (Horrocks 70). The term “total existential response” can be used very well to describe MacDonald’s understanding of faith. Furthermore, MacDonald is very near to those who emphasised not only the justification doctrine but also the sanctification, e.g., the German Pietists or John Wesley. For them both were also inseparable, and it is quite interesting that Wesley, for whom sanctification was extremely important, was criticized himself for emphasising this point too much and not concentrating enough on justification by faith alone. Some even called him a Pelagian (Outler 63). Yet in his sermon *The Righteousness of Faith* he tells the sinner clearly: You are saved “not because thou art righteous, but because Jesus Christ hath atoned for thy sins” (Wesley 216). So trying to take both aspects seriously really seems to be a difficult endeavour, which always is in danger of being misunderstood.

Therefore, MacDonald is inside of one of the two strings of understanding justification in Protestantism. He belonged surely to the part that emphasised the effective justification, even if he rather neglected the forensic one. But both of them are not contradictions. They supplement each other. And MacDonald’s own occupation with Luther—the translations and the obvious influence in his other writing—make sense in this context.

Perhaps the real difference between Luther and MacDonald is this, that Luther—and many in the Protestant tradition—accepted a combination of forensic and of effective justification. For them the sinner had to be justified by Christ’s deed on the cross, but they knew as well, that of course the believer would be changed by God’s grace. So both elements were important for them. For MacDonald, effective justification is extremely important, but he has problems accepting the forensic aspect of it. First, he denies that Christ can take man’s punishment on himself. That makes no sense for MacDonald because punishment has to change the sinner, and that is possible only if the punished person is the sinner himself. Second, and this is even more important, for MacDonald it is not necessary that the wrath of the divine Father is pacified. As father he is always in a father-child-relation to his children. And these children are children from the beginning; they are created as children. Therefore God has loved them since the beginning of the world. The fall of man has not changed this love. And therefore Christ’s death has, for MacDonald, not changed the relation from the divine Father to his children. The divine acceptance of God’s human children is explained by MacDonald through his understanding of man as child of God. His theological model explains why man in all his weaknesses and while being a

sinner can still be accepted by God. Therefore the forensic aspect of Christ's death on the cross is no longer necessary for him. Luther's great question "How is it possible that I as a sinner can be justified?" was already solved for him. God's fatherhood was already the solution and the parable of the lost son one of the biblical foundations of his theology.⁵

The Role of the Cross

MacDonald's real problem is perhaps this: he has problems taking the cross seriously enough. Which role can Christ's death yet have for him? For him it is the most extreme expression of Christ's living, not for himself, but for the Father, of Christ's perfect love, of his giving himself to others. As such it is important for Christ's own being, because it expresses this, and it reveals him to all human beings. And with the Son it reveals through him also the Father, who can only be understood through the Father. In this emphasis, on the revelation of the father through the Son, he is again very close to Luther and so to one of the greatest reformatory insights, which shows that any other way to Christ than through Christ is a vain endeavour. Of course for MacDonald—and that is an important insight—the whole life of Christ and not only his death are important for this central revelation. But in consistently trying to find God through Christ in all his sermons MacDonald follows Luther's path and is clearly in his tradition. Here he follows one of the two most important insights of the Christian faith: Christ is the only way to the father. Even if for MacDonald this way is open not only to Christians, because everybody is a child of God, it is made possible by the eternal son only and that is Christ.

Yet for MacDonald the revealing function of Christ is perhaps too central. That is problematic. Everything which could be misunderstood as a legalistic system is wrong for MacDonald. The deeper familiar model of father and child is, for him, the only suitable one to express the relation between God and man, not a model working with legal terms. This is a real advantage of this model. Yet MacDonald is not able to emphasise Christ's death enough. It is the most important expression of God's love and it is the peak of God's revelation. That is huge, yet it does not really change the human situation. This aspect of Christ's revelation is taken much more seriously by the theology of the reformers. For them Christ is really saving us by his deed while in MacDonald's theology man is saved already by being a child of God. This is the great and deciding difference between them. And it is a real weakness of MacDonald's theology not to have emphasised this aspect much

more. So his theology has strengths and weaknesses.

3. A Solution for Today – To Work with Both Conceptions

MacDonald's theology and the theology of the reformers try to answer similar questions. Both are sometimes very close to each other. Both emphasise the union between Christ and man. They try to show that our salvation is a gift. They try to help the Christian to live as such. Yet there are some differences between them. The conception of Luther and his successors is much more successful in explaining the role of the cross. It shows more deeply that Christ has really saved us; that his death makes a real change for us. Yet MacDonald is able to show even more clearly with his emphasis of the father-child-relation between God and human persons to show the intensity and depth of this union. It is a union which is deeper than any other relation. Yet he has problems explaining the importance of Christ's death on the cross.

Both theological models are deeply rooted in Scripture. Both explain aspects of our relation to God. A good solution for today could be to work with both conceptions. This is possible in the knowledge that the justification of man by God is such a great and glorious thing that it never can be understood completely in human terms. Therefore it is quite understandable that we have to use different systems to understand it and especially to express this mystery in our human terms. In the Bible both images are also used. Both might help us to live in this relation. And to live as child of God and as justified sinner is much more important than all theological conceptions explaining this great mystery.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Jane Lee, Melbourne, for correcting as a native speaker my language and Joshua Pong, Hong Kong, for searching for me some quotations from MacDonald's novels in the Johannesen edition.
2. A very good example is *Luther's Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (1520), one of his main works. In the first part he is emphasising that we are saved by Christ and not by ourselves; in the second that this influences our life very much.
3. This development started with the great founding father of Scottish Protestantism John Knox (Bell 46-47). But also John Calvin himself used the practical syllogism (McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* 241).
4. Nearly all Sermons of *The Hope of the Gospel* are based on a sentence of the *Sermon of the Mount*. One exception is the last one, which is based on the Letter to the Romans (also an influence on Luther).

5. It is quite interesting to look at Maurice's view of Luther. According to Maurice Luther's "assertion of the right and duty to believe in God who justifies was the great blow, the deadly blow, to those who make faith consist in assent to propositions." ("Letter from F. D. Maurice to the Bishop of Argyll", Cambridge 26th of May, 1870, 615). Yet Maurice criticizes: "When Luther and still more Melancthon, succumbed to propositions in their later days, when assent to the doctrine of justification was substituted for belief in the Justifier, Protestantism went into the lean, sickly and yet contentious stages of its existence, only to emerge from that into indifference – a mere denial of Romanism. (615).

It is rather likely that MacDonald would have supported as well Maurice's praise as his criticism of Luther and the later developments in Protestantism. And it is likely that he – for whom each man was a child of God – would have also supported Maurice's wish: "The reformation that we want is the same rise out of assents into faith as in the sixteenth century; only it must be into faith in a God who has redeemed mankind, in whom I may trust because I am a man, and that I may vindicate my rights as a man." (615). Yet it is unlikely that MacDonald would have emphasised so much the term "rights," because his strong usage of the father-child-image suggests a much stronger link between God and man.

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