








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Gerold, Thomas. *Humanity as Children of God: The Theological Anthropology in George MacDonald* (*Die Gotteskindschaft des Menschen Die theologische Anthropologie bei George MacDonald*). Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007.

Gisela Kreglinger

This monograph on George MacDonald's theology, based on Gerold's doctoral dissertation, investigates systematically MacDonald's understanding of humanity in light of his decidedly Christian theological perspective. Gerold disentangles for us MacDonald's thought-provoking threads of theology and weaves them together into a colourful fabric that makes up MacDonald's theological framework. He does so without simplifying or reducing MacDonald's complex theology. Gerold relies primarily on MacDonald's sermons but he takes his insights also from his adult novels and at times his fiction and poetry. The focus of the book is on MacDonald's theological anthropology. Gerold begins his work by situating MacDonald's work in his historical context, devoting introductory chapters to MacDonald's life, his historical-theological context, and MacDonald's doctrine of God. A glance at Gerold's table of content indicates his comprehensive investigation into MacDonald's theology.

The book's title, *Humanity as Children of God: The Theological Anthropology in George MacDonald*, suggests Gerold's underlying thesis: MacDonald's theological anthropology is centred on understanding humanity as children of God the Father and their participation in the divine life as revealed and exemplified by Christ. What is impressive about this treatise is Gerold's insight into MacDonald's theology of participation ("Teilhabe") with its similarities to a "moral exemplarist" model of salvation and his critical evaluation of it (cf. his summary on page 160). In order to understand the issues at stake in this book, some brief comments on MacDonald's theology are necessary. MacDonald moved away from the traditional and rather rigid Scottish "penal substitution" model of the atonement popular in his day towards an understanding of salvation that would later be called the "moral exemplarist" model. It upholds that Christ's death on the cross was not to propitiate God's anger and punishment but is an expression of God's love and forgiveness towards his children. It emphasizes that salvation is not complete

unless consciously accepted and lived out in exemplary ways, following the example of Christ. In the “moral exemplarist” model as MacDonald endorsed it, salvation and sanctification are conflated and woven into an organic whole. Only as one is transformed into the likeness of Christ does salvation actually occur. The strength of this approach lies in its emphasis on both God’s unconditional and transforming love and human responsibility to work out one’s salvation by partaking in the life, suffering, and death of Christ. Divine and human action stand in a continual movement towards one another. However, as Gerold rightly points out, MacDonald’s approach also poses some serious challenges to theology and it is Gerold’s awareness of and critical engagement with them that makes his presentation of MacDonald’s theology so strong.

MacDonald’s focus on Jesus as the child who reveals the Father, and whose example one must follow, was surely an important corrective to his own time in which God was too often depicted as an impersonal judge and salvation too easily seen as a ticket to be obtained rather than a life to be lived. However, Gerold poses the question whether the lack of attention to Jesus’ priestly and kingly office, including his lack of reflection on Christ’s death on the cross, contributes to another imbalance in MacDonald’s work. In relation to his theological anthropology, Gerold raises the question of the relationship between divine and human action. He asks whether MacDonald is not too optimistic about the nature of evil, the human condition, and one’s ability to work out one’s salvation even within the realm of the Father’s providence in Jesus Christ. This concern carries itself into many aspects of MacDonald’s theological anthropology and the way he believes one can overcome the human predicament of sin and separation from God.

In chapters 10-13 Gerold shows us how MacDonald’s theology of participation in Christ’s life, suffering, and death works itself out in concrete forms. Human suffering, death to self, obedience to the Father, and faith in God are some of the important ways by which humanity can follow Christ’s example and grow into the life of salvation as revealed by Christ. Gerold points out that MacDonald’s theology of participation enables him to understand human suffering in light of Christ’s suffering and thereby give new meaning and dignity to an aspect of the human condition that is often hard to understand. And yet, Gerold does not call attention to the fact that such a theological perspective on human suffering must be held in tension with other biblical ideas about suffering. The Christian gospels speak about the advent the Kingdom of God being accompanied by healings, exorcisms, and

relief of suffering in general. MacDonald reflects on this in his collection of sermons called *Miracles of Our Lord*. The question arises to what extent these reflections informed MacDonald's theology of suffering as a whole.

Christ's advent is a decisive turning point in history where the impossible is made possible. Isaiah 53 and Galatians 3:13-14 suggest vicarious suffering as a way by which humankind is redeemed and justified. MacDonald, while rightly taking issue with the "penal substitution" idea, also rejects the idea of Christ's "vicarious sacrifice" (cf. his sermon "Righteousness" in *Unspoken Sermons*) and therefore his suffering, and death instead of humanity. This is problematic and shows where MacDonald's theology might be at odds with the Bible. It is surprising that Gerold did not point out the tension in MacDonald's theology at this point. A theology of participation offers a rich and helpful way for capturing the organic link between salvation and sanctification, but it must be supplemented with other metaphors that help draw out the *sui generis* nature of Christ's life, suffering, and death for humanity's salvation.

Gerold's study is an important theological treatise that provides a comprehensive overview of MacDonald's theology. He is able to discuss clearly and accessibly MacDonald's rich theology of participation in Christ. At times Gerold could have shown more awareness of the weaknesses and tensions that such a theology poses to a traditional understanding of christology and soteriology. Gerold's discussion is also not without significant omissions such as MacDonald's theological understanding of the imagination and story and their respective roles in how God reveals himself to his children. Kerry Dearborn's book *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* begins to address the central importance of the imagination for MacDonald's theology and therefore her book complements Gerold's treatise. What has not been addressed in any in-depth way, however, is a facet of MacDonald's theology that lies at the heart of his own vocation as a writer and theologian: the role of story in revelation. For MacDonald, a story can become a sacred literary space where God reveals himself to his children. One should not forget that MacDonald employs primarily story to communicate his faith. It is therefore necessary to explore this important facet of MacDonald's aesthetic theology. Despite these omissions, Gerold's work remains impressive because of its wide scope and its careful and critical engagement with his material. I highly recommend it for any reader interested in MacDonald's theology.