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George MacDonald in the Pulpit

Glenn Edward Sadler


Readers of MacDonald’s recently reissued *Unspoken Sermons* (Sunrise Books) will perhaps be interested in two small paperbacks, containing selections from MacDonald’s spoken sermons. MacDonald spent much of his life, especially in the earlier years of his career, giving sermons to small interested groups (usually groups of women). During the struggling years in Manchester, before the publication of *Within and Without* (1855), he spoke frequently to his followers and, in fact, began his own “church” in Renshaw Street (see William Raeper’s *George MacDonald*, chapter 11, for an account of MacDonald’s days in Manchester).

What the editors of these small paperbacks have done is glean through periodical sources and contemporary reviews of MacDonald’s sermons which were reported in local newspapers. William Petersen, past editor/publisher of *Eternity* magazine, discovered in a complete set of *The Christian World Pulpit* (1870-1895) “some two dozen sermons” by MacDonald.

For those who like to read sermons and are interested in MacDonald’s contribution to biblical exegesis, this selected collections makes [end of page 41] interesting reading. As one might suspect, MacDonald was unorthodox in the content of his sermons as well as in his delivery. (Today his teachings would not seem all that heretical.) MacDonald’s special “message” was his understanding of the teachings of Christ and of his divine and human nature. MacDonald often commented that he felt where most followers of Christ go wrong is that they do not study Christ’s life close enough and depend too much on church-ology.

Classified by some as a Universalist (actually MacDonald was not in the strict meaning of the word), he had an intense feeling for what he called the divine family relationship, in particular, the evolutionary nature.
of sonship, the process of growing more like Christ (sanctification in more traditional terms). Aside from providing an excellent source of MacDonald’s beliefs, which one will find clearly defined in these paperbacks, his spoken sermons offer a candid portrait of the man himself.

Rugged, with his controversial beard and distinct Scots dialect (“but not amounting to a brogue”), MacDonald made in appearance as striking an impression as he did by his words. Audiences seemed to sense that here was a man who had a first-hand knowledge of what he was saying. An editor of the *Boston Congregationalist*, in a letter to his own paper, from London, gives an interesting description of George MacDonald in the pulpit. The writer records thus—in 1871—MacDonald’s preaching at [Hare Court Chapel?]:

The large audience-room was very full. Mr. MacDonald wore no gown nor bands—as Congregational ministers are quite apt to do here—and as is the usual custom in that pulpit—and had nothing in any way distinctively clerical in his look or manner. He is of little more than medium height, with a full and flowing dark beard and moustache, and quite long hair; an eminently handsome man, with a general look which suggest the [42] scholar . . . —the poet. His voice is rather husky—I fancied a little abnormally so, as he seemed to have a cold. His reading was, to me, very impressive—not that it was faultless, or in any vocal respect near perfection, but that the Scriptures selected were striking, and their rendering somehow singularly earnest. From the Old Testament he read the 5th of Amos, and from the New a portion of the Revelation of John, including the description, In the 14th chapter, of the treading of the great wine-press of the wrath of God, when the blood came out ‘even unto the horse-bridles,’ etc.; and there was something in his emphatic tones, his Scotch pronunciation—decided, but not amounting to a ‘brogue’—and his hirsute front, which gave him a weird seeming, something as if from among the herdmen of Tekoah, or the Isle that is called Patmos, one of the old prophets were come again to warn the wicked.

In reporting fashion, the writer summarizes MacDonald’s sermon, which he gave extemporaneously:

His sermon was founded upon 2 Peter 3:8. “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”. Having
read the text, he closed the Bible, and, learning over upon it, begun a discourse purely extempore, so far as visible notes were concerned, speaking somewhat thus: “The metaphysicians tell us, though I could never quite make sure that I understood it, while I have had an occasional glimmer of an idea what they mean by it, that there is no such thing as what we call time or space, to the Infinite. But this I can comprehend must be true, that in God’s eyes a thousand years and a single day must be alike, in that He can see with one glance all that goes to fill up and make out the one as easily as the other; that, as one might say, it is no harder for Him to cognize the one than the other. Well, if this be so, I think it must follow thence that God is never in a hurry. It comes to our unbelief in Him that we are so apt to have in such a hurry. “He that believeth shall not make haste.” If we look at the history of the material world, or the moral world, or the religious world, nothing is clearer than the God never was in a hurry, and that He can afford to wait.”

The writer continues to report the contents of MacDonald’s sermon, which was “about thirty-three minutes in length” and “was of a character essentially unreportable.” MacDonald’s delivery was, according to this reporter, “somehow fragmentary and twitchy, with frequent pauses, which—and his prayers had the same peculiarity—were a little displeasing at first, as suggesting a view to effect, but which gradually failed to give that idea as he warmed into his subject. I think my readers will agree [43] with me that there was very little tendency toward Universalism in the discourse; and that it rather confirms a report which I have heard, that Mr. MacDonald, if he ever learned in that direction, had seen the error of that way. I am sure he would be heard with deep interest in our American pulpits.”

Because the sermon here report is rather unusual (MacDonald did not generally preach such harsh sermons) and points strongly back to his Calvinistic background, it is of special interest (this particular sermon is not included in either of the recent paperbacks). MacDonald makes it quite clear, in his sermon, that it is not the fact of hell or damnation that he objects to but, rather, the harsh teaching that overlooks the goodness of God:

Now, friends, you want to be good, to be just, to be faithful, where lies your hope of deliverance? I do not speak to you—as a motive—of a hell, for I do not think you need it. But, do you know, I think from the extreme of the old-fashioned teaching
that God made men on purpose to damn them, some modern theologians are much exposed to the going over to a very dangerous opposite extreme, and teaching that God will not damn men at all! I do not seek to drive you towards goodness with this fear of God’s damnation, but let the man who persists in hardness and impenitence, and who goes on and on and out the world scorning and neglecting the mercy of our Heavenly Father, be sure that there will be for him a future condemnation terrible to bear. But you, who are tender-hearted, and who want to be true, and are trying to be, learn these two things from our text: never to be discouraged because good things get on so slowly here, and never to fall to do daily that good which lies next to your hand. Do not be in a hurry, but be diligent. Enter into the sublime patience of the Lord!

*Getting to Know Jesus* and *Proving the Unseen* are a noteworthy addition to the ongoing interest in MacDonald’s individualistic brand of theology. One could only wish that the editors of these paperbacks had added a more detailed discussion of MacDonald’s religious teachings. Certainly such a critique would have been useful and, in this particular publication, appropriate. [44]