Theology for the Sake of God's Children: Observations on George MacDonald's Theology in his Unspoken Sermons

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MacDonald’s attitude towards theology seems to be an unsolvable riddle. On the one hand he appears to attack it as much as he can, on the other he is a deep-thinking theologian, who worked on great theological topics such as the goodness of God and the atonement. So how does he reconcile these apparent contradictions? In this paper I will try to show why he has to be a theologian on the one hand but on the other has to be very critical towards some ways of approaching theology.

MacDonald’s demand for a practical faith in God himself is first considered; then his conception of theology as help for the development of a true child-father relation to God. Then, after a discussion of the limits of theology—which can never reach the fullness of God—MacDonald’s warnings against systems are examined in this respect, with the conclusion that theology is especially important in his thinking because he believes that everyone is personally responsible for their own conceptions about God.

Two closely interwoven topics need to be discussed in this context: firstly the importance of intellectual faith and secondly MacDonald’s view of theology. The intellectual side of faith is not in itself theology, but systematic thinking on God and his ways is. Because both questions are related they will be explored together.

The aim of the paper is a limited one, concentrating on MacDonald’s position rather than putting this position in its context, but neither his Calvinistic upbringing nor his close connections to A. J. Scott and F. D. Maurice should be forgotten.

1. The primacy of belief in God over belief about God

To understand MacDonald’s attitude towards theology if is first necessary to look at his way of understanding faith. He warns us that emphasizing Christ’s deeds and the ways in which he will save us, is not faith: “It is not faith that he did this, that his work wrought that” (*Unspoken Sermons* 393). It follows that all are for MacDonald wrong whose primary interest is in such matters and for whom the question of belief or unbelief is the most important matter. They are not right teachers of the people: “In teaching men, they have not taught them Christ, but taught them about Christ” (*U.S.* 520). So he attacks
the majority of the religious teachers of his time as wrong teachers.

Here MacDonald criticizes a very strong tradition in the Christian Church. The beginning of the Athanasian Creed is an example of this tradition: “Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” (*Book of Common Prayer*, n.pag.). Then follows a confession of the most important Trinitarian and Christological doctrines. So according to this creed you have to believe these doctrines to be saved. Christianity seems to be primarily a system of articles of belief. [13]

For MacDonald, emphasising systematic doctrine such as we find in the Athanasian Creed is overemphasizing teachings about Christ. “Is Christianity a system of articles of belief, let them be as correct as language can give them? Never” (*U.S.* 389). Christianity is firstly the real relation to God. It is complete trust and following of Christ. Man’s mere opinions about God do not make him a Christian (*U.S.* 393). For MacDonald it is much more important to believe in God than to believe things about God. The true question is not: “Do I believe or feel this thing right?” (*U.S.* 392). The true question the Christian has to ask is: “Have I left all to follow him?” (*U.S.* 392). It is firstly necessary for a man to give “himself to the living Lord” (*U.S.* 392). To do this man has to obey Christ and not to reason about him (*U.S.* 395-96). He has to do what he says. That is the only way to follow Christ. “It is not to follow him to take him in any way theoretically, to hold this or that theory about why he died, or wherein lay his atonement” (*U.S.* 371). But to follow him is to “believe in him practically” (*US.* 371). This practical faith, this being a follower of Christ, is according to MacDonald the only way to understand God and his ways: “such things can be revealed only to those who follow him in his active being and the principle of his life—who do as he did, live as he lived” (*U.S.* 371). So the intellectual side of the faith for MacDonald seems to be a secondary form of faith. It is only possible on the foundation of a practical one.

MacDonald’s emphasis on obedience as an important part of faith is a problem for the present day reader. It seems to regard the God-man relation primarily as a master-servant relation, which might have been understandable in a Victorian context, but is strange today. Because of this problem it is necessary to look deeper into the theological context of MacDonald’s concept of obedience.

The importance of obedience is for MacDonald firstly based on Christ’s obedience towards God. He is, according to MacDonald—and according to the whole Christian tradition—obedient to the Father unto death (Phil. 2.8).
MacDonald’s emphasis on the obedience of Christ is especially shown in the Sermons *The Temptation in the Wilderness* and *The Eloi* (U.S. 84-121). But this obedience is no obedience for its own sake; it is obedience for the common aim of the Father and the Son to save the Father’s children. For MacDonald the Christian is in his obedience a yokefellow of Christ, sharing with him the common obedience, to help together in this obedience to help in the redemption of the world. (Cf. *The Hope of the Gospel*, 156-159). So, for MacDonald, Christ is not fulfilling the will of a self-seeking tyrant, but of a loving God, wanting to save his children. The obedience of man is to be understood in this context. It must not be forgotten that neither the relation between Christ and the Father nor between God and man are primarily relationships of obedience. It is for MacDonald firstly a relation of complete love. The Father is giving himself completely to his children, and the children have to give themselves completely to the Father. They are created for this aim. Besides, it is a relation of trust. The Father cares for his children. To look on the God-man-relation only under the aspect of obedience would be a very one-sided view of MacDonald’s theology. For him, love, faith and obedience are sides of the same prism (C.f. Donal Grant, chapter 40). They belong together and are a unity.

Another important aspect of MacDonald’s view of obedience is his view of mankind as God’s bad children. For example, in his sermon “Salvation from Sin,” [14] MacDonald mentions obedience in the context of human sin (*Hope of the Gospel* 9-27) We really are God’s children, but not perfect ones, we have to grow, and, for MacDonald, obedience to the Divine Father helps in this process of development. For MacDonald, God is educating his children. Obedience helps in this context, because it unites God and man in the same divine will. MacDonald thinks that this union leads to the development of man to a loving child of the Father.

MacDonald’s emphasizing of the obedience towards God is in no way used as a way to give himself a special authority. Because he is emphasizing direct obedience to God, he relativises all human authorities (*The Hope of the Gospel* 24). And he includes ecclesiastical authorities among the human ones. So MacDonald’s view is a safeguard against the abuse of religious authority. It is another question whether— especially in his literary works—he was always able to come up to his own standards.

There might remain the question, how such a direct obedience to God is possible? One solution might be the attempt always to follow the literal meaning of the Bible. But, important as the literal meaning is for MacDonald, he knows that the Bible has to be understood, and that constant searching
is necessary in the effort to follow Christ. Therefore MacDonald’s view of obedience is not identical with that which might be understood as obedience by the present day reader: it is not just doing what is written. A great deal of personal decision-making is necessary in his understanding of obedience to God.

So MacDonald’s conception of obedience is a complicated one, which has to be understood in its context. Yet obedience is an important part of his understanding of faith.

If we think of MacDonald’s emphasis on faith in Christ, we might have some doubts whether theology—at least in the sense of systematic theology—can have any importance for him. It can seem strange that he is discussing systematic theological questions in his sermons instead of only telling his readers to obey Christ.

2. Theology for the sake of God’s children

Yet MacDonald does help us to understand why he is writing about theological topics. He begins his sermon Abba Father by telling us why he is writing this sermon, which is filled with theological questions: “The hardest gladdest thing in the world is, to cry Father! from a full heart. I would help whom I may, to call thus upon the Father” (U.S. 275). MacDonald wants to enable his readers to call God “Father.” So he tries to help them develop a perfect child-father relation to God our true father. This is very important for MacDonald’s theology, because this child-father relation between man and God is, for MacDonald, the only natural man-God relation. He regards it as the form of relation that is directly wanted by God. But what has this to do with theology? He goes on: “There are things in all forms of the systematic teaching of Christianity to check this outgoing of the heart—with some to render it simply impossible.” (U.S. 275). So a bad theology makes the real child-father relation at least more difficult and perhaps even impossible. Therefore MacDonald has to write his sermon. He has to help readers overcome the obstacles created by other theologians. In this special sermon it is the doctrine of adoption, which—according to MacDonald—makes the child-father relationship impossible. So he discusses this doctrine through his own interpretation of Romans 8.15: “the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” [15] He presents a theology of “son-making” instead of “adoption” and of “creation in his own image” instead of “mere creation.” And if that is not systematic theology, what is?

Abba Father is not unusual in this way. In MacDonald’s Sermon Self Denial he makes the same point even more clearly. He says about any person
who attempts through belief to become a good child of the Father: “He cannot come close to him, cannot truly know his will, while his notion of him is in any point that of a false god” (U.S. 383). Wrong thinking about God can be a problem. It must not remain. And MacDonald tries to help his reader to overcome the effect of such doctrines.

The doctrine of adoption is, for MacDonald, not the only bad and dangerous doctrine. Although, for him, it makes the true child-father-relation impossible, it is perhaps no direct attack on the goodness of God. But there “are so-called doctrines long accepted of good people, which how any man can love God and hold, except indeed by fast closing of the spiritual eyes, I find it hard to understand.” (U.S. 382). MacDonald here is especially attacking some forms of understanding of the atonement (U.S. 385). He writes of the doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice: “One of my earliest recollections is of beginning to be at strife with the false system here assailed” (U.S. 385-86). Being at strife with a certain theological system is—at the least—being to some extent engaged in systematic theology. And this seems to be one of the chief motives underlying his *Unspoken Sermons*: to contend with wrong systems, not for mere opinion’s sake, but for helping readers in the development of their true relation to God. Discussing some theorists of the atonement he says about them: “They do their unintentional worst to stop all growth, all life. From such and their false teaching I would gladly help to deliver the true-hearted” (U.S. 521). Later he says:

A faith, for instance, that God does not forgive me because he loves me, but because he loves Jesus Christ, cannot save me because it is a falsehood against God: if the thing were true, such a preaching would be the preaching of a God that was not love […] Such a faith would damn, not save a man; for it would bind him to a God who was anything but perfect. (U.S. 400-01)

So here a theological question gains real importance.

A quotation from MacDonald’s sermon *The Child in the Midst* helps us to see how important the problem of wrong teaching was for his view of the so-called theologians:

How terribly, then, have the theologians misrepresented God in the measures of the low and showy, not the lofty and simple humanities! Nearly all of them represent him as a great King on a grand throne, thinking how grand he is, and making it the business of his being and the end of his universe to keep up his glory, wielding the bolts of a Jupiter against them that take his name in vain. They would not allow this, but follow out what they say, and
Here MacDonald speaks about “the theologians” who have misrepresented God and therefore made the child-father-relation impossible. It is obvious that this and some of his other attacks against theology are attacks against the theological mainstream of his time and not against each possible theology. He would not, for example, have attacked the theology of F.D. Maurice. [16]

These examples help us to understand why theology—at least according to MacDonald—should help the reader become fully a child of God. So MacDonald is undertaking theology out of a practical interest. This is not “practical” as understood too often today in a theological context: helping the reader become a successful priest or teacher. MacDonald is helping his readers on the way to their salvation. He is trying to help them become perfect children of God. Surely this is an intention every Christian theology should have? Perhaps his theology is unusual only because he has not forgotten this high aim.

3. The limits of theology

To know the limits of theology seems to be very important for MacDonald. Sometimes he even seems prepared to take the risk of implying that theology seems to be understood as worthless rather than that it should be given too much importance.

We have seen that for MacDonald the intellectual side of faith, which is the theologian’s field, is not the saving faith. Therefore theology is much less important than it would be if holding a right doctrine were enough. For MacDonald, even good theology is not enough. Yet if theology helps to remove obstacles then it has its value. It is then a help on the way to becoming a true Christian and a true child of God. That is very much, although less than other viewpoints might attribute to it.

Why does MacDonald emphasize so strongly that opinions about God are not sufficient and therefore theology is not the main point? Why does he not emphasize the importance of the theology that does convince him when he is thinking and writing about theology? He lived in an ecclesiastical environment that did not have the problem of theological questions being seen as not important enough. Therefore he only had to attack the “main opponent” Perhaps he would have acted differently in our age where so much of the intellectual foundation of the Christian faith is given up that it becomes difficult to follow Christ.

A second limitation of theology is the limitation of language: “All high things can be spoken only in figures; these figures, having to do with matters too
high for them, cannot fit intellectually; they can be interpreted truly, understood aright, only by such as have the spiritual fact in themselves” (U.S. 376). Each figure, each symbol, “must come short of the glorious meaning itself holds” (U.S. 376). Another of MacDonald’s analogies might make this even more intelligible: “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are the heavenly things higher than the earthly signs of them, let the signs be good as ever sign may be” (U.S. 377). This has very much to do with the limits of theology. Our words belong to the earthly signs, with which we try to understand the heavenly things. Words are the theologian’s most important tools. Without them he cannot work. He is completely dependent on them. But they are—as MacDonald has seen—only able to suggest something of heavenly reality. We have in this context only a shadow speech. Therefore only a very limited theology is possible. Even the best theological study falls short of the fullness of the Divine reality. MacDonald uses this shadow speech himself, but at the same he stresses that it is only a shadow speech (U.S. 418).\(^2\) He wants the Christian to avoid being constrained by the limitations that speech and therefore theology might bring, closing him off from the greatness of God. [17]

In this context we have to look also at MacDonald’s usage of the term “system.” Sometimes he uses the term in a wholly positive way. He does this when he speaks about divine systems rather than human systems, for example when he is speaking about the “whole system of divine education” (U.S. 138). This usage of “system” does not have much to do with theology, yet it is frequent in the *Unspoken Sermons* so has to be mentioned. And although MacDonald never seems to discuss divine systems himself, if there are such things they can be contemplated, even if not very successfully.

Where MacDonald speaks about systems made by men he is often rather critical towards them. For example he writes in his sermon “The Mirrors of the Lord” that St. Paul: “knew nothing of the so-called Christian systems that change the glory of the perfect God into the likeness of the low intellects and dull consciences of men” (U.S. 449). The so-called Christian systems mentioned here are wrong systems, but the fact that systems might be wrong is not MacDonald’s only problem with them. He has some more fundamental problems. Firstly he seems to have a problem with the possibility of distancing oneself from a truth by making it a part of a system. A divine truth for MacDonald has something to do with the man himself. It means something about his relationship to God. If he makes it part of a system, he loses his direct contact with it. So MacDonald criticizes the “moral philosopher who regards duties only as facts of his system” (U.S. 472-73). He might be a perfect moral
philosopher, but by using the duties only as part of a system, he uses them in a wrong way. But this is not only a potential problem for the moral philosopher. It could be a problem—perhaps even a worse one—for the theologian too. Systems seem to be finished and perfected. Therefore they make openness towards God difficult or even impossible. Here MacDonald follows F.D. Maurice (Prickett 9). But despite his warnings about systems, MacDonald does not seem to want “systematic theology” to be excluded. He wants to make sure that the Christian remains open for Christ, the only real teacher. He wants the Christian to be open to the real divine reality and not only to its earthly shadow: the words that attempt to describe it.

4. The radical need for our own theological thinking

There is one aspect of MacDonald’s convictions that in some ways makes theology for him more important than for many other Christian thinkers. For many laypeople, it does not seem important to think about theological questions for themselves. It is enough to look on the confessions or dogmas of the Church or to ask the pastor. There are people who have authority and others simply have to listen to them. For MacDonald that is not enough: “They must yield no claim to authority over their belief made by man or community, by church any more than by synagogue. That alone is for them to believe which the Lord reveals their souls as true” (Hope 148). This revelation does not mean that God would have to tell it to his people in a spectacular supernatural way. For MacDonald, each right insight into God is a revelation. By calling it God’s revelation instead of man’s religious experience, he wishes to show that God is the initiator, not man: God wishes to reveal himself directly to each single individual.

MacDonald does not apparently want to say that everything with authority is teaching without any worth. But for him all Christians must think about ecclesiastical teachings before accepting them. For example, they must think out for themselves whether any doctrine implies a darkness in God. If for them a certain doctrine seems wrong, they must doubt and think on it. If then they become sure the doctrine is wrong, they must not accept it. It may be that a searcher for Christ is wrong in his or her doubts. But even those doubts may yet be necessary to discover God’s truth:—truth the existence of which might never be suspected without a long process of searching, and would be unattainable if the Christian accepted the doctrine merely for authority’s sake. There is a “natural process of doubt and inquiry, which we were intended to go through by him who would have us understand” (U.S. 276). So human inquiry in
God and his ways is not only permitted by God, but for MacDonald even seems to be directly required by God. Such a “devout and honest scepticism on God’s side” (U.S. 276), which according to MacDonald “is absolutely necessary” for the believer, makes theology much more strenuous than it would be for the believer who only has to accept each doctrine for authority’s sake. This view protests against a theology that would merely tell people what they have to believe, but it makes necessary a theology that tries to help people discover God’s truth for themselves, which is exactly what MacDonald is trying to do. Of course, thinking about God works only in the context of a developing child-father relation to God. It cannot work as a mere intellectual endeavour. But it includes the intellectual side as a small but essential element. Without the necessity of this element MacDonald’s own writings would make no sense. His attacks against wrong teachings would not be understandable.

5. MacDonald’s view of theology—a contribution for the view of theology today

MacDonald can help the present day Christian to understand the place of theology in the Christian life. His warnings against an intellectualist misunderstanding of Christianity have lost nothing of their importance. It is still for many not self-evident that the Christian faith is firstly faith in Christ and not in doctrines about him. Thus it is as necessary today as in his own time to help people for whom the way to a relation to God seems to be closed by problematic teachings. This means that theology is as necessary today as in the nineteenth century. We may not have to fight today against precisely the same teachings as in the nineteenth century, but they are not so very different MacDonald can help the theologian today to remember the practical interest of theology. Theology has to help the reader on his way to a perfect relation with God. It must not be confined within an academic ivory tower. Theological writings must have relevance for the Christian reader. MacDonald’s Unspoken Sermons have this relevance. At least to try to have such relevance is the duty of the theological writer today.

In the context of the practical aim of MacDonald’s Unspoken Sermons we can understand another important part of his thinking: his warning not to confound God and His ways with our words: with our teachings about Him. The divine reality is so much more than our words about Him. We must not enclose ourselves in our systems, but always remain open for the glory of God, which is much more—not less—than everything we can say with our words. To emphasize this point is as important today as it was in MacDonald’s time. So
his *Unspoken Sermons* are a real help for his [19] readers today. And they are a help for the theological writer today not to forget his true aim of helping his readers on their way to God.

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**Notes**

1. For example F. D. Maurice lost his chair at King’s College London because his teaching on the eternal death was seen by some—especially by principle Jelf—as heretical (Maurice, F. 163-209). We might think too of the Evangelical Party’s emphasis on doctrine, or of the importance of doctrine for the strong Tractarian wing of the Church of England.

2. MacDonald speaks in the context of his discussion of the Father’s and the Son’s part in the creation of his “shadow-speech” and his “shadow-understanding.”

3. A vivid example of such a faith can be found in Miss Charmichael in MacDonald’s novel *Donal Grant* (75-77). She believes everything that is taught by the Church of her Fathers.

4. There is, of course, a place for books for the specialist. These may prepare others to write with their help on something more suited for the “average reader.” But the theologian, even if writing primarily for the specialist, must never forget the relevance of his works. He should never forget his duty to help others on their way to God. [20]