1-1-1990

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George MacDonald and the Forgotten Father

Bruce Hindmarsh

George MacDonald (1824-1905) has been described variously as a Scottish novelist, short story writer, poet, preacher and homilist, essayist, critic, and translator. One thing he never claimed to be, however, was a theologian. In fact, he despised the business of creating theories about God. William Raeper reminds us that what theology MacDonald did lay any claim to was a very different sort from the dry, abstract stuff of the pedagogues who, ensconced in their ivory towers, were more concerned about their dusty tomes than about discovering God himself. No, MacDonald’s theology, like that of those who influenced him [notably F. D. Maurice], celebrated the rediscovery of God as Father, and sought to encourage an intuitive response to God and Christ through quickening his readers’ spirits . . . .

Hence, he really was a theologian after all, but of a very different stripe. He was a poetic theologian in the tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth. His was a romantic theology.

Critics have examined MacDonald from many perspectives. Some scrutinize his life and work by using Freudian or Jungian maps of the unconscious. Others, taking a more traditional approach, examine his work for its literary merit or its historical interest. My interest here is to offer a theological criticism of MacDonald. And to talk of MacDonald’s theology is to speak of the Fatherhood of God. Though MacDonald claimed that Fatherhood was at the core of the world few critics to date have demonstrated how central this belief was to his life and writing.

His vision of the universe was Father-centered, and his belief in the divine paternity ought to be discerned as the one great presupposition underlying all he did and everything he wrote. MacDonald’s convictions can be boiled down to this: born out of God the Father’s very heart, the whole universe is being transformed into a thing of holy beauty by a process of death and rebirth in the divine Son with the result that one great day the Father’s love will completely triumph and all things will be united in perfect oneness with Him. From this center emanate all the themes which uniquely mark MacDonald’s imaginative writings and life experiences. The result is a compelling vision of the universe which has a tremendous inner harmony about it.
Though it has been a widely held belief through the centuries, George MacDonald did not believe that God created the world *ex nihilo.* Rather, he believed that God created out of himself, as an expression of his loving nature. In MacDonald’s fantasy, *Lilith*, the figure who acts as the wise guide throughout the story is named Raven (symbolic of death), but Raven is a character of many selves. He is revealed midway through the tale to be also our forefather Adam and claims, “God created me—not out of Nothing, as say the unwise, but out of His own endless glory.”

MacDonald felt that God is love and that love by its nature must reach out, beyond itself to an other; love must have relationship in which to express its essence. Without mutuality between real persons love remains less than love. Therefore God is a Trinity of love, and out of this divine relationship he creates. To MacDonald it was logical that God, the loving Father of Jesus Christ, fathered also a world. With this in mind MacDonald writes, “God could not love, could not be love, without making things to love,” and he speculates “that God has never been contended to be alone even with the Son of his love,” the prime and perfect idea of humanity, but that he has from the first willed with his blessedness Thus Creator and Father mean the same thing to for it is out of himself God generated the universe. In his essay “Abba, Father!” MacDonald argues with himself: “But creation is not fatherhood,” only to conclude strongly: “Creation in the image of God, is.” Or again, he says, “The consequence [of being made rather than fathered] might be small where early fatherhood was concerned, but the very origin of my being—alas, if he be only a maker and not a father! Then am I only a machine, and not a child—not a man!”

As a result of this conviction MacDonald felt a strong union between God and creation. Yet this was not the oneness of monism: “Two at least are needed for oneness; and the greater the number of individuals, the greater, the lovelier, the richer, the diviner is the possible unity.” He saw creation as an act by God of separation from himself, a separation which makes possible individuality which itself makes possible a greater and more glorious union of persons. Thus, “to close the round of its procession in its return, so working the perfection of reunion—to shape in its own life the ring of eternity,” was the way MacDonald conceived the final end of the soul’s journey. His vision of the universe, rooted in the generation of the Father, was one in which the continuity between God and his creation is keenly felt.

Because of this continuity MacDonald believed that God could never abandon his offspring. All men are children of God by virtue of creation:
He fathered them. MacDonald deals strongly with the reality of evil and the holiness of God, but never—never does one feel that God is further than the next breath when walking in MacDonald’s world. It is [57] his Father’s world.

MacDonald was born and raised in an atmosphere of stern Calvinism where the divorce between men and God was deeply felt. The austere religion of his paternal grandmother dominated his early home life and bequeathed to him a cringing fear of God, a fear he was able to work through, however, as a young adult till his faith in the Father’s love became even the pivotal fact of his life. G. K. Chesterton could write of this change, “MacDonald has made for himself a sort of spiritual environment, a space and transparency of mystical light, which was quite exceptional in his national and denominational environment.”10 And his mysticism, as much as the other traits which marked him, was founded on the fact that in spite of seeing—more than most men—the horror of sin, he came to the conviction that there need be no shadow between the Creator and creation, because the Creator is Father and his creation is born out of his very heart.

One of the implications of MacDonald’s link between the father and the Creator is that his epistemology is always relational and consistently discerns the Father beyond the thing known. His books celebrate the knowledge of created things which penetrates to the essence of each thing and knows it as from self to self. He rejoiced in the haecity (this-ness) of things.

This too was a conviction arrived at by MacDonald as a young man. One might expect that such a man as MacDonald spent his University days at Aberdeen engrossed in the study of poetry and the great literature of the world. But though he did study theology and philosophy, and though he never ceased to read and write poetry, his major area of study was Chemistry. And the study of science, for a man with such a sensitive [58] nature and rich imagination, gave him much cause to contemplate the way in which things are known. He quickly tired of the knowledge which must analyze a thing in a detached way. His final word on such knowledge was that “Analysis is well, as death is well.”11 MacDonald saw science as knowledge gleaned with our backs to God; poetry, on the other hand, was face-to-face knowledge of things showing beyond “the face of far deeper things than they.” It is in “the face and form in which dwells revelation.” MacDonald was concerned for knowledge of rather than about things:

In what belongs to the deeper truths of nature and her mediation
between us and God, the appearances of nature are the truths of nature, far deeper than any scientific discoveries in and concerning them . . . . To know a primrose is a higher thing that to know all the botany of it—just as to know Christ is an infinitely higher thing than to know all theology.  

Thus it was that MacDonald never thought very highly of the characters in his stories who, not content to contemplate a flower, must greedily pluck up and possess the beauties they see. To selfishly pursue knowledge is to find that knowledge a dead thing. Thus, Mr. Vane in *Lilith* is not sure whether he is pursuing a metaphysical argument or regarding the scene of an activity when he finds himself entranced by the beauty of a radiant bird-butterfly which begins to guide him through the land of the seven dimensions. Yet as he watched this little glory a great longing awoke in Mr. Vane to “have it in my hand.” When he took it to himself, instantly “its light went out; all was dark as pitch; a dead book with boards outspread lay cold and heavy in my hand.” [It is] a picture of knowledge falling from the glory and splendour of poetic contemplation to the sterility of scientific analysis. It is the difference between meanings and facts. [59]

What MacDonald hoped for in the final triumph of the love of God was an epistemology which worked from the inside out. Regarding created things he says, “One day, I trust, we shall be able to enter into their secrets from within them—by natural contact between our heart and theirs.”  

But MacDonald’s epistemology also has a practical morality about it. “Obedience,” he says, “is the opened of eyes.” And the doing of one’s duty is always the first path out of confusion and into true knowledge for the characters that people MacDonald’s fiction. MacDonald’s portrayal of the unconscious mind in his fantasies *Lilith* and *Phantastes* powerfully communicates this relation of knowledge to morality. And in these dream worlds we feel that the confusion and uncertainty of the main characters as they grope for understanding deeper than they have ever known.  

In *Lilith*, Mr. Vane expresses to Raven his frustration in not knowing the truth of the spiritual world:

> “Enigma treading on enigma!” I exclaimed. “I did not come for to be asked riddles.”

> “No; but you came, and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true.”

Initially, Mr. Vane is a man without a home, without a name and without
a life in this spiritual world. Yet, he does in the end come to a more whole understanding of the spiritual truth as he himself grows in moral stature. His dream-like experiences, at first held together by the barest thread of plot and theme, grow into a wholeness of meaning as the story climaxes in his sleep of death in Adam’s house.

Anodos, the central character of *Phantastes*, also serves to illustrate this idea. His very name is a pun on its multiple meanings derived from Greek. It means both “pathless” and “a way up.” His wanderings in Fairy Land seem even more aimless than those of Vane in *Lilith*. Appropriately the book opens with the words, “I awoke one morning with the usual perplexity of mind which accompanies the return of consciousness”\(^\text{17}\) and such “pathlessness” characterizes his journey from the start. Yet in the seemingly disparate experiences he too grows in moral stature. He sets out to find his Ideal, but first finds he must wrestle with his Shadow. And also finds he must embrace humiliation, conquer giants, and finally yield up his own life before he comes finally to a true and whole knowledge of things. The progression of his tale does in fact turn out to be “a way up” as he grows in selflessness.

MacDonald’s conviction that the world was his Father’s, born out of his very heart, led also to a belief that all things and events are a means of grace. Nothing escapes the compass of divine love. MacDonald uses the metaphor of a book: “The very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; as indeed, what on God’s earth is not?”\(^\text{18}\) It follows from his epistemology that MacDonald would conceive of the universe thus, for in it all is the presence of the Father. Creation came from the Father through the obedience of the Son: “The bond of the universe, the fact at the root of every vision . . . is the devotion of the Son to the Father. It is the life of the universe.”\(^\text{19}\)

Consequently, nature was imbued with a sacred quality for MacDonald. Chesterton style him as a sort of “St. Francis of Aberdeen” for seeing a halo around each flower and tree. MacDonald, in a poem considering the absence of angelic messengers in our times; suggests that creation can have this significance to us because of the coming of the Christ who revealed the Creator to be also a Father. “The lowliest corners of the earth” now serve as New Angels (the title of the poem):

\[
\text{Since in thy face, redeeming Lord, [61]}
\]
\[
\text{We saw the Father’s kind,}
\]
We need not much his rarer word—
Our eyes can read his mind.\textsuperscript{20}

MacDonald came to this belief in the sacramental quality of all creation with the help of the romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, or the German, Novalis. It was by their light that he journeyed away from his boyhood religion and back again. He came back to his religious roots with their insights and started all over. He wrote to his father of his discovery of an affirmative theology in which the beauty of God and his creation could be celebrated:

I love my Bible more—I am always finding out something new in it. All my teaching in youth seems useless to me. I must get it all from the Bible again . . . One of my greatest difficulties in consenting to think of religion was that I thought I should have to give up my beautiful thoughts and my love for the things God had made. But I find that the happiness springing from all things not in themselves sinful is much increased by religion. God is the God of the beautiful.\textsuperscript{21}

This celebration of the beauty of God in creation fills MacDonald’s stories. Never can a character pass a flower or tree, river or meadow, without feeling something alive or hearing a whispering voice like that which Anodos heard from the ancient Beech tree saying, “A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos.”

And this beauty is celebrated even in the darker side of life. One does not need to walk for very long in the enchanted woods of \textit{Phantastes} or \textit{Lilith}, or to fly at the \textit{Back of the North Wind} over London, or to sit in the cottage of the \textit{Wise Woman} before one realizes that MacDonald will not allow his characters—even the evil ones—any experiences which are not, if responded to correctly, a means of progressing towards God. To MacDonald God did not create and then abandon his world; God is present everywhere as the Providence ordering the circumstances of his children’s lives toward his own glorious ends. [62]

\textbf{Evil is a Face of the Good}

This sacramental nature of MacDonald’s universe is most apparent in his treatment of suffering and evil. MacDonald was no stranger to suffering. Tuberculosis took the lives of so many of his family that they called the disease “the family attendant.” He lost his mother before he was eight and his father when but a young man. Many of his siblings and even his own children
suffered from disease and unexpected death. Much of his adult life was spent in the insecurity of poverty, having no steady income, living hand-to-mouth, and depending on the philanthropy of others. At one point, in Manchester, it seemed the family would even have to split up in order to survive, yet they carried on. He knew the experience of failing as an author and as a preacher, and all his life he suffered from a tubercular lung condition that laid him up for months at a time, coughing up blood, too weak to move. In this experience of suffering his confidence in the father love of God remained unshakable. The suffering was but a means to a greater good. MacDonald believed what he put into the mouth of Anodos at the end of *Phantastes*, and “What we call evil, is only the best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.” In many ways MacDonald’s whole literary message could be summed up as a celebration of suffering, what C. S. Lewis called “good Death.”

**All Reality is Co-inherent**

“Co-inherence” is a term borrowed from Charles Williams for the interdependence of reality, the oneness in the diversity of the universe, and the inner-connectedness of things. All things are each to each, each in each, and each for each. One of the canons of Williams’ thought was that you can only really live in an other. MacDonald put it, “In God alone can man meet man.” As Williams drew much of his inspiration from MacDonald it is fitting to use his term “co-inheritance” to describe MacDonald’s world. And the co-inhering of things in his world comes as a consequence of the world deriving from a Father of love.

When Mr. Vane follows Raven into the world of the seven dimensions, Raven shows him that he is not in a completely separate world from his own: the worlds interpenetrate one another. Hyacinths in Raven’s world are mysteriously among the strings inside the piano in Vane’s world; a tree stands somehow on the hearth of his kitchen and grows nearly straight up its chimney. Vane complains:

> “Two objects,” I said, “cannot exist in the same place at the same time!”
> “Can they not? I did not know!—I remember now they do teach that with you. It is a great mistake—one of the greatest ever wiseacre made!”

A little later Raven speaks to Vane about prayer and exclaims,

> “Look! look! There goes one!”
He pointed right up into the air. A snow-white pigeon was mounting, with quick and yet, quicker wing-flap, the unseen spiral of an ethereal stair. The line between spiritual and material, symbol and reality, idea and form, is in MacDonald’s universe so faint as to be almost invisible. It would perhaps be even better to say that the relationship between these is so intimate as to be, in fact, a union, a co-inherence of reality.

One of the most penetrating examples of this co-inherence is in MacDonald’s understanding of sexuality. Fatherhood, as a theological core, ought rightly to emphasize something generational not something sexual, and so it does in MacDonald. Yet, as many critics have noticed, the love of God the Father is artfully portrayed by MacDonald as the fulfilling and transcending of the human love of both father and mother. The images of Deity in his stories always embrace the best human traits of both sexes. The divine figures in most of his fantasy are women and in most of his novels are men, yet he does not construe the nature of God in a sexist way. It is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’s insights while grieving the loss of his wife:

It is arrogance in us to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry “masculine” when we see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them, to describe a man’s sensitiveness or tact or tenderness as “feminine.”

The ideal, Lewis thinks, ought to be reflected in a situation where “by a paradox, this carnival of sexuality leads us out beyond our sexes.”

As far back as he could look toward the origin of the Life of the universe, as far ahead as he could gaze toward the day when all things would be at an end—at each of the poles of our existence MacDonald saw the embracing love of the Father. God the Father was to MacDonald the source and goal of creation and redemption. From him all things proceed and to him all things return. This led MacDonald to think of God the Father as Home for “There are places you can go into, and places you can go out of; but the one place, if you do but find it, where you may go out and in both, is home.” Creation and redemption are lovingly initiated and brought to completion by the Father. And when the Son hands over the kingdom to the Father he shows that the Father is all in all. Life begins and ends with the Father.

MacDonald takes great pains to point out that we do not proceed from nothing to something. Our path is mysteriously round; we journey from God to God. We leave home with our destination being no less than to return
home once again. And MacDonald draws much inspiration in this concept of home from the seasons. Things return from whence they came. A flower dies in winter only to bloom again in summer. Things will finally be made right again. In his poem “Wild Flowers” he portrays in the death of a flower a returning of the life, sacramentally through the human mind, back to God its home:

Of Nature’s endless sacrifice,
Thus in life’s ascent ye rise;
Thus you leave the earth behind,
And pass into the human mind,
Pass with it up into God,
Whence ye came down through the clod—
Pass, and find yourselves at home
Where but life can go and come;
Where all life is in its nest,
At holy one with awful Best.²⁹

The idea of home recurs also in Lilith. Mr. Vane complains that Raven is too enigmatic when talking of “home,” and we may well agree, for Raven says seemingly contradictory things: first, that we never leave home, and second, that one day you will and must get home. But in this MacDonald is simply saying that we never leave the paternal care of God: born out of his heart, we will be inexorably drawn to him until we finally arrive, perfected in his love. Understandably then, the Prodigal Son was the favorite parable of MacDonald: the son who leaves home only to return.

The Father’s children will not, however, be forced to return home. MacDonald was condemned as heterodox in his own day for his universalism, for he believed that all creatures, including the Devil, would be finally redeemed. And he did, in fact believe that God’s father love would be universally successful. He did not, however, slip into determinism or antinomianism, for he strongly affirmed the freedom and obligation of man’s will in the presence of divine love. Yet he confidently hoped in the final triumph of the Father’s love regardless of how long it may Cake for the most rebellious will to come home. The response of our will does not for MacDonald determine whether or not God will love us, but it does determine how we will experience that love, whether as a vision of the beautiful or as an unquenchable fire.

To reject the love of God is to reject the only reality there is; it is to begin to cease to exist. And we cannot even cease to exist of ourselves
for that depends upon the will of God. In the profound relation of God to his creation, he has willed us to life out of himself. There is only one life in the universe, and that is the life of God. And for MacDonald, to reject life is not to die but to become a *live death*, because only in God can one die a true death, for only under his divine initiative can we “go and come.” True death leads not to non-existence but to more life. To choose evil then is to survive only by leeching off life. Evil has no existence in itself. Through our choice of evil we move further from our Divine Home toward the state of *live deaths*, creatures unable to even extinguish themselves, able only to go on existing in willful separation from Life.

Lilith provides the best example of this. She is a very complex, dark figure in MacDonald’s tale, drawn from Jewish and pagan tradition, yet an original creation of his own. One of her several manifestations is that of a great white leech who lived off the blood of Mr. Vane and children she hunted. Perhaps the best interpretation of this figure comes in C. S. Lewis’s description of her as the real Ideal somehow spoiled. Lilith seeks to do God’s will in Lilith’s way. She lusts for power; hers is the primal sin of Lucifer: she wants to exist in her own right. She has a fist that is always clenched. Yet she cannot even die of her own choosing, but is made a *live death* by Mara (symbolizing repentance) in the House of Bitterness. Her final repentance does not occur within the story, but she does begin; and she lays down to sleep a true death in Adam’s house until she will completely repent and, it is hoped, be one of the last to rise at the great resurrection. And it is suggested that her Shadow, the most evil incarnation in all of MacDonald’s work (likely symbolizing the Devil), may one day be redeemed as well. He will be transformed from a brooding bat into the golden cock who will herald the dawn of the eternal day. Wistfully, MacDonald writes, “I listened. Far away—as in the heart of an aeonian silence, I heard the clear jubilant outcry of the golden throat.” Though it may take aeons, MacDonald believed that the father love of God would one day be triumphant over all.

MacDonald did not conceive of God as a doting grandfather, but as a father. There was no permissive lowering of the standards, no accommodation to sin, no moral laxity in MacDonald’s vision of God the Father. Rather, he affirmed the beauty of the Father’s holiness. God’s love was like a burning, purifying fire. God’s love was unrelenting in its demand for the holiness of his creatures, for only in that way would they experience his blessedness. Thus, God demands the uttermost farthing; he is inexorable; our God is a consuming fire. God is a fire whose inner center is a life giving
hearth, but whose outer circles burn.

It seems that MacDonald was able to adopt new theological convictions while reconciling himself in large measure to his religious roots. He retained, discarded and reframed aspects of what he was taught as a boy without throwing it all away. He did not simply react to the moral severity and sternness of his native religion by embracing a God who could not care less about righteousness. His was a more subtle and simple reconciliation. MacDonald understood that while Christ’s yoke was easy and his burden light, he also demanded that his disciples be nothing short of perfect as is their heavenly Father: [68]

He who will not let us out until we have paid the uttermost farthing, rejoices over the offer of the first golden grain in payment. Easy to please is He—hard indeed to satisfy.32 MacDonald offers us the highest example of response to this holy fatherhood in the final agony of the Son of God in the garden. He writes about these darkest of Jesus’ hours in his essay “The Hands of the Father.”33 In both the cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” and the prayer of committal, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit,” MacDonald sees a deep response of faith to the demand and succour of the Father.

This reconciliation of severity and solace reached back even to the Highland Scot in MacDonald’s soul. That his ancestral roots were very important to him, the setting of many of MacDonald’s novels indicates. He never ceased his whole life long to make the journey back to the small town of Huntly where he was born, to wander the moors, breathe the northern air and gaze out into the wild sea. And MacDonald’s ancestry was the soul of Scotland writ small. Ancestors from his clan fought bloody battles for their faith; they were people of intense—even dangerous—romance and passion. And theirs was a rich medieval tradition of poetry, colour, glory, flame, and beauty. G. K. Chesterton remarks that it was by a queer irony that this vivid people came “to ‘wear their blacks’ in a sort of endless funeral on an eternal Sabbath.”34 But MacDonald, he notes, was reconciled to this and to the sacramentalism which lay deeper within the heart of his Scottish ancestry:

To have got back to it [the sacramental], or forward to it, at one bound of boyhood, out of the black sabbath of a Calvinist town, was a miracle of imagination.35

It is to MacDonald’s credit that while rediscovering the beauty of the [69] love of his Father God he yielded up nothing of the holy and righteous character of that love which made the world, the result is that while
MacDonald’s imagination revelled in the abandon of sovereign love, his writing is also shot through with the beauty of holiness.

MacDonald drew sublime portraits of goodness and holiness. There is a quality of “cool, morning innocence” about his fiction. But, because he saw the implications of God’s moral beauty for his creatures, he never tired of interrupting any plot to sermonize and make explicit the practical duty incumbent upon each reader because of the examples of his characters. That his followers, whether parishioners or readers, might take up their duty and obey God was the central concern of MacDonald’s preaching and writing.

This concern came not out of a cowering fear of God, but out of a recognition that God’s love is inexorably holy and will not rest until we—not just forgiven, but also transformed—become righteous people through and through. Again, MacDonald reminds us that God is like a Father,

that no keeping but a perfect one [of God’s law] will satisfy God, I hold with all my heart and strength; but that there is none else he cares for, is one of the lies of the enemy. What father is not pleased with the first tottering attempt of his little one to walk? What father would be satisfied with anything but the manly step of the full-grown son?36 God wants his wayward children to become adult sons bearing the likeness of their Elder brother, Christ himself. Lewis applies the words of Jeremy Taylor to MacDonald’s vision of God: “He threatens terrible things if we will not be happy.”

MacDonald rejected the doctrine of Christ’s vicarious atonement as vile for its suggestion of an easy grace in which we are declared rather than made holy.37 For MacDonald we must enter into Christ’s death and [70] resurrection for ourselves—though not of ourselves—and by so doing participate in Christ’s nature as the obedient, deferential Son of the Father. MacDonald felt it was the very nature of the Son to be humble, self-abnegating, human, childlike, obedient, and eternally dying to self. And He is the pattern for our education into the life of God.

MacDonald saw love as the root of the very being of God. Self-existent, creative love issues from the Father; self-abnegating, obedient love issues from the Son. The life of the Son is in his relation to the Father; the life of the Son is reflexive. And, this life is so much more than mere existence: it is, in fact, eternal life. This life of Christ which dies to self is to MacDonald the essence of the universe; we are saved and transformed by becoming united to this life. Thus MacDonald writes of the Son:
Meeting this relation, loving His Father with His whole being, He is not merely alive as born of God. Giving Himself with perfect will to God, choosing to die to Himself and live to God, He therein creates in Himself a new and higher life. Standing upon Himself, he was gained the power to awake life, the divine shadow of His own, in the hearts of us His brothers and sisters, who have come from the same birth-home as Himself, namely, the heart of His God and our God, His Father and our Father, but who, without our Elder Brother to do it first, would never have chosen that self-abjuration which is life, never have become alive to Him.

MacDonald’s soteriology is principally concerned with transformation through union with the life-through-death of the Son. MacDonald takes seriously the Scripture which tells us that we are to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1.4). And so, as C. S. Lewis says, “we must go in for the whole treatment.” MacDonald emphasizes that it is we ourselves who must be changed when he writes, “Christ is our righteousness, not that we should escape punishment, still less escape being righteous, but as the live potent creator of righteousness in us . . . . He is our righteousness, and that righteousness is no fiction, no pretence, no imputation.” MacDonald’s message in every book was what he perceived to be the heart of the Son of God himself: “The whole strife and labour and agony of the Son with every man, is to get him to die as he died.”

Thus, Anodos selflessly plunges after the werewolf-priest to stop the evil, murderous pagan ritual he observes toward the end of his journey in *Phantastes*. He kills the werewolf but dies his own sacrificial death in the process. As a result he rises from the dead to a higher ecstatic life of union with God and nature. In *Lilith* Mr. Vane refuses to sleep in Raven’s death-chamber right away, and so exhausts himself as he seeks to do good without being himself transformed. His efforts continually end in frustration. Only when he finally sleeps in death is he awakened to a higher life where he experiences deeper union with nature. He finds that creation itself has come to new life. Once a desert, it is now lush with a water that itself symbolizes tears, suffering, baptism, death and resurrection. And he finds, at long last, his home, the very City of God wherein dwells the Father.

*At the Back of the North Wind* also demonstrates this theme. It is perhaps MacDonald’s most successful integration of transformative, fantastic experiences back into a realistic setting. Diamond comes from the back of
the North Wind, symbolic of death and suffering, with a new quality of life which makes others think him rather simple. But his simplicity has a most unnerving wisdom and profundity about it that is understood by only a very few folk. In the midst of the squalor and hardship the London working man’s world, he is the “fool for Christ’s sake.” They call him “God’s child,” and MacDonald means for us to see the double entendre. [72]

And other examples of transformation through death and rebirth could be supplied from nearly all of MacDonald’s writings. More life through death; the way up is down: it was his central message.  

MacDonald’s christology is quite complex. Because of his strong identification of Christ with humanity, his christology comes close at times to implying like Origen that Christ was God’s first and most glorious creation, rather than “in very nature God.” God and the Son seem to be held in an uneasy apposition at times. Or, if we grant MacDonald an orthodox christology, then the link between God in Christ and humanity seems perilously close to monism. But these implications were never teased out by MacDonald himself. His sentiments regarding Christ always remained orthodox, and he certainly affirmed the full deity of the Son while rejecting outright any monistic doctrine.

For MacDonald, the main distinction between us and Christ is that he is Elder. In his essay, “The Creation in Christ,” he contends that the universe finds its original in Christ; he is “the human God, the divine, the only Man.” Moreover, in his essay, “The Child in the Midst,” MacDonald even argues that childhood is an aspect of the divine nature. God is Father of us as much, it seems, as of Jesus; we both find our origin in his heart. For MacDonald, the distinction between Christ’s sonship and ours is not terribly emphatic. His is by nature; ours comes by labour. His is perfected; ours, imperfect at present, grows steadily into his perfection.

The cornerstone of MacDonald’s understanding of Christ’s atonement was the unity in will between the Father and the Son. He writes: The worst heresy, next to that of dividing religion and righteousness, is to divide, the Father from the Son—in thought or feeling or action or intent; to represent the Son as doing that which the Father does not do himself. [73]  

Or again, de-emphasizing anything vicarious in the atonement, I believe that Jesus Christ is our atonement; that through Him we are reconciled to, made one with God. There is not one word in the New Testament about reconciling God to us; it is we that
have to be reconciled to God.\textsuperscript{44}

It seems that for MacDonald the chief problem which is overcome in Christ is not so much punishment for sin, but the problem of the One and the Many. Whether this then implies that the locus of sin is somehow in God, with the creation of individuality as an act of separation from himself to be overcome, is an unanswered question.\textsuperscript{45} Certainly, the ecstatic state in MacDonald’s fiction is usually an oceanic, Nirvana-like union with all things; but he is, nevertheless, always quick to point out that oneness comes not by sameness but by means of individuality—it takes more than one for true oneness. Thus MacDonald conceives of Christ as the obedient, dying Son in reference to the Father; in reference to us, he is our elder brother, and is in himself our very atonement—“at one, meant.”

In his essay “Abba, Father!” MacDonald says of the doctrine of adoption, “To myself, in the morning of childhood, the evil doctrine was a mist through which the light came struggling, a cloud-phantom of repellent mein—requiring maturer thought and truer knowledge to dissipate it.”\textsuperscript{46} He goes on to describe the anguish and suffering he went through, feeling that if one must be adopted, then one is either a cosmic orphan or a bastard in one’s natural state. This MacDonald could not believe to be true of the Father who was also Creator. He argues that \textit{huiothesia} is better translated as son-making or son-placing rather than as adoption. From this he argues that we are all God’s children on the basis of creation; it remains for us to become sons through a process of maturation.\textsuperscript{47}[74]

This maturation process in MacDonald can be considered a kind of spiritual theory of evolution. Curdie, in \textit{The Princess and Curdie}, is given by the divine-like grandmother Irene the ability to feel the bestial self in each person’s hand which he touches. Thus he is able to discern whether an individual is on the way to becoming beast or child. The Little Ones and the Bags in \textit{Lilith} also demonstrates a spiritual evolution and devolution. The Little Ones need water for without water there can be no tears and without the suffering that brings tears they cannot mature. The Bags, on the other hand, represent the brute self that a Little One becomes if he chooses to live self-centeredly.

This spiritual evolution was conceived by MacDonald on an even more cosmic scale, for he believed that all of Nature was in a process of becoming more alive. Trees would become sentient, animals would become conscious, and each creature would move on up into humanity and into God. Thus the ancient Beech holding Anodos in a warm feminine embrace says,
"There is an old prophecy in our woods that one day we shall be be men and women like you."\(^{48}\)

The transformation wrought by death in us leads always to more life, time and again in MacDonald’s fiction this is pictured as awaking from a dream-filled sleep. And in our waking we begin to live our dream. Thus MacDonald’s favorite quote was that from Novalis which says, “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.” Our dreams—the deepest reality—can and must be reconciled to our waking selves, and death is the gateway between these two worlds. The implications for an age that has begun to think in psychological terms are legion. And certainly, MacDonald means us to understand that it is the experience of suffering which reconciles us to the longings and fears which lay buried in the unconscious catacombs of our lives. But he also means it \(^{75}\) literally—true physical death leads to more life.

The great hope and joy shot through MacDonald’s life and work was that this reconciliation, this death, leads higher to this experience which MacDonald most often called “more life.” Thus, in his tale, *The Golden Key* Mossy encounters the Old Man:

> “You have tasted of death now,” said the Old Man. “Is it good?”
> “It is good,” said Mossy. “It is better than life.”
> “No,” said the Old Man; “It is only more life.”\(^{49}\)

And this “more life” Mossy goes on to experience. He finds his friend Tangle to be a beauty and delight; and they together find and ascend a staircase:

> They climbed out of the earth; and, still climbing rose above it. They were in the rainbow. Far abroad, over ocean and land, they could see through its transparent walls the earth beneath their feet. Stairs beside stairs wound up together, and beautiful beings of all ages climbed along with them. They knew that they were going up to the country whence the shadows fall.\(^{50}\)

And his message of ‘more life’ was one with which he was able to comfort many suffering and grieving souls.

In his art as much as in his personal obedience and experience of suffering MacDonald died all his life. In this he abandoned himself utterly to the Father’s love. His world was Father-centred. He clung to the faith that “It is enough that God is and that he shall do rightly.” I have no doubt but that when he died quietly on September 17, 1905, he himself went Home to his Father’s house, a transformed and holy son.
Endnotes

8. Ibid, p.117.
10. Introduction by Chesterton to Greville MacDonald, George MacDonald and His Wife (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924), p.12.
12. “The Voice of Job,” p.196. Theological systems were to MacDonald a dead thing. As a boy growing up in northern Scotland he had a cruel schoolmaster who punished students with the utmost brutality. Yet this same individual prayed with them a half-hour each day, taught them a Scripture lesson, and on Saturdays, drilled them on the memorization of the Shorter Catechism which began, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” MacDonald later remarked in Alec Forbes of Howglen that “For my part, I wish the spiritual engineers who constructed it had, after laying the grandest foundation-stone that truth could afford them, glorified God by going no further.”
15. As W. H. Auden points out, his dream symmetry in these tales seems almost perfect: “But his greatest gift is what one might call his dream realism, his exact and profound knowledge of dream causality, dream logic, dream change, dream morality: when one reads him, the illusion of participating in a real dream is perfect . . .” From W. H. Auden, “Introduction,” in The Visionary Novels of George MacDonald: Lilith, Phantastes, edited by Anne Fremantle (Noonday Press, 1954), pp. v-x. [77]
16. Lilith, p.45.
18. The Portent, 1864, pp. 82, 83, as quoted in Greville MacDonald, p.73.
21. From a letter to his father quoted in Greville MacDonald, p.108.
22. Later in life the financial woes of the MacDonald’s subsided, and though there were still many anxieties over making ends meet, their position in society was far from mean.
23. Phantastes, p.185.
25. Ibid., p.25.
28. MacDonald, Lilith, p.15.
32. Donal Grant, XLII.
37. Though MacDonald eschewed any theological system, and refused to be pinned down as representing a particular theory of the atonement, it seems his beliefs most resemble a moral-example view of the atonement. Christ, our Elder brother does not so much “do for us” as he does “do before us.” He does what it is his nature to do and becomes incarnate to show us that this is also what we must do.
39. As quoted by Rolland Hein in the introduction to Creation in Christ, p.11.
44. “Justice,” Creation in Christ, p.78.
45. See “Life,” pp.138 ff., where MacDonald’s discussion of creation, redemption,
and consummation is concerned primarily with themes of separation and division, and oneness and union.


47. Though MacDonald sees the process as moving from childhood to sonship, he does rejoice in the innocence of childhood as a thing divine in itself. An adult son must still be a child.


50. Ibid., p.35. Staircases recur as a dominant image in MacDonald’s fiction. He was always fascinated by them in real life. On a trip through Europe he made his party stop at every cathedral they came across so that he could climb, though in poor health, the stairs of the bell tower to the very top. Note also the staircase in The Princess and the Goblin which leads to the divine figure Irene. [79]