George MacDonald on Evangelism: Reason, Emotion, or Obedience

David L. Neuhouser

How does one convince another person that the Christian Gospel is true? George MacDonald’s answer to that question is given in his many books, both fiction and nonfiction. He does not rely primarily on reason; although, he does use reason. However, he believes that reason alone is not enough to convince most people that Christianity is true or to bring them to a saving faith. Rather, he argues that the first step in the process should be the witness of obedient Christians who show practical love to other people. This kind of witness makes Christianity attractive to unbelievers and should make them curious to discover whether or not it is true. If it does, then the Christian can advise the unbeliever to read the Gospels to learn about the life and teaching of Jesus. Even if the reader does not know if the man Jesus ever existed, or if he did, who he was, MacDonald believed that two things would happen. First, honest readers would be attracted to the Jesus portrayed in the gospels. Second, they would be convicted that there is some truth that demands some action. If a person obeys that truth, it will lead to more truth and eventually, not only to the knowledge of the Gospel but to obedience to Christ. I will be quoting MacDonald extensively to support these claims.

First of all, why is it a problem for anyone to believe in God? If God is all-powerful and He wants me to know that he exists, why doesn’t He give me a miraculous sign so I could know for sure? The narrator in Robert Falconer comments, “The best that a miracle can do is to give hope: of the objects of faith it can give no proof; one spiritual testimony is worth a thousand [miracles].” [p. 252]. In the same novel, Robert says, “The Spirit of God is the teacher. My part is to tell the good news. Let that work as it can, as it will.” One of the characters in Castle Warlock further explains why miracles are not always given to the seeker.

Suppose some sign or wonder were granted you - one of two things, it seems to me likely, would follow: - you would either doubt it very soon after it had vanished, or it would grow to you as one of the common things of your daily life. But take it that a vision would make us sure, it follows either that God does not care about the kind of sureness it would give us, or that he does not care for our being made sure in that way. God will have us sure of a thing through knowing its source, the heart whence it comes; that is the only worthy assurance. To know, he will have us go in at the grand entrance of obedient faith.” [p. 160]

As the last sentence in this quotation indicates, obedience is the key to knowledge. But before we look at MacDonald’s ideas about obedience, we will consider his views about the use of reason.
MacDonald believed that arguing is more likely to antagonize an opponent than to convince. In the words of the vicar in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*,

> It is a principle of mine never to push anything over the edge. When I am successful in any argument, my one dread is of humiliating my opponent. Indeed I cannot bear it. It humiliates me. And if you want him to think about anything you must leave him room, and not give him such associations with the question that the very idea of it will be painful and irritating to him. Let him have a hand in the convincing of himself . . . the defeat of the intellect is not the object in fighting with the sword of the Spirit, but the acceptance of the heart. [p. 46-7]

If I had my way, I would never argue at all. I would spend my energy in setting forth what I believe – as like itself as I could represent it, and so leave it to work its own way, which if it be the right way, it must work in the right mind. [p. 155]

In fact, as he says in *Paul Faber*,

> The man who is anxious to hold every point will speedily bring a question to a mere dispute about trifles, leaving the real matter whose elements may appeal to the godlike in every man, out in the cold. Such a man having gained his paltry point, will crow like the bantam he is, while the other, who may be the greater, perhaps the better man, although in the wrong, is embittered by his smallness, and turns away with increased prejudice. [p. 156]

So, one must be very careful not to reason with another in such a way as to hinder rather than help even if our reasoning is sound.

Furthermore, reason cannot prove that Christianity is true. MacDonald said, “Not for a moment would I endeavour by argument to convince another of this, my opinion. If it be true, it is God’s work to show it, for logic cannot.” [*Dish of Orts*, p. 292] He says that it is impossible to prove that there is a God but also that it is just as impossible to prove that there is no God.

If you could prove that there is a God, that implies that you could go all around him, and buttress up his being with your human argument that he should exist. As soon might a child on his mother’s bosom, looking up into his mother’s face, write a treatise on what a woman was, and what a mother was. [*God’s Words to His Children*, p.116]

In *There and Back*, one of the characters says,

> “You cannot prove to me that you have a father!” says the blind sage, reasoning with the little child. “Why should I prove it?” answers the
concerning reason, MacDonald also makes the point that we accept many things without proof. We should not accept something if it can be proved wrong. However, just because something can not be proved true does not mean it is therefore not true.

If a man say, “I cannot believe; I was not made to believe what I could not prove;” I reply, “Do you really say, ‘It is not true,’ because you have no proof? Ask yourself whether you do not turn from the idea because you prefer it should not be true. You accept a thousand things without proof, and a thousand things may be perfectly true, and have no proof. But if you cannot be sure, why therefore do you turn away? Is the thing assuredly false? Then you ought of course to turn away. Can you prove it false? You cannot. Again, why do you turn away? That a thing is not assuredly true, cannot be reason for turning from it, else farewell to all theory and all scientific research! Is the thing less good, less desirable, less worth believing in itself, that you cannot thus satisfy yourself concerning it? The very chance that such a thing may be true, the very fact that it cannot be disproved, is large reason for an honest and continuous, and unending search. Do you hold any door in your nature open for the possibility of a God having claim on you? … In right logical balance you must admit that a creative being who is good may exist. But the final question is always this: Have you acted, or rather, are you acting according to the conscience which is the one guide to truth, to all that is!” [There and Back, p. 228]

Thomas Wingfold, one of MacDonald’s ideal characters, gives this advice to a young woman who is concerned about a friend’s unbelief.

Now, pray, Miss Wylder, don't try by argument to convince the young man of anything. That were no good, even if you succeeded. Opinion is all that can result from argument, and his opinion concerning God, even if you got it set right, would not be knowledge of God, and would be worth nothing; while, if a man knows God, his opinion is either right, or on the nearest way to be right. . . Make his thoughts dwell on such a God as he
must feel would be worth having. Wake the notion of a God such as will draw him to wish there were such a God. . . Set in Richard's eye a God worth believing in, a God like the son of God, and he will go and look if haply such a God may be found; he will call upon him, and the God who is will hear and answer him. [*There and Back*, p. 226]

In spite of these reservations, MacDonald does use reason to argue that nature is a witness to the character of God. However, nature is helpful primarily as it reinforces what the life of Jesus tells us about God. “Whether the heavenly bodies teach us the nature of God], or whether we should read divinity worthy of the name in them at all, without the human revelation which healed men, I doubt much.” [*England’s Antiphon*, p. 279] The beauty of nature does show the loving nature of God.

In the shadows lay fine webs and laces of ice, so delicately lovely that one could not but be glad of the cold that made the water able to please itself by taking such graceful forms. And I wondered over again for the hundredth time what could be the principle which, in the wildest, most lawless, fantastically chaotic, apparently capricious work of nature, always kept it beautiful. The beauty of holiness must be at the heart of it somehow, I thought. Because our God is so free from stain, so loving, so unselfish, so good, so altogether what He wants us to be, so holy, therefore all His works declare Him in beauty; His fingers can touch nothing but to mould it into loveliness; and even the play of His elements is in grace and tenderness of form. [*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, p. 211]

The hero of *Robert Falconer* contemplates the beauty of nature and what it must imply about the beauty of the creator. This helps to overcome the negative witness of churchgoers about the nature of God.

Little did Robert think . . . that his soul was searching after One whose form was constantly presented to him, but as constantly obscured and made unlovely by the words without knowledge spoken in the religious assemblies of the land; that he was longing without knowing it on the Saturday for that from which on the Sunday he would be repelled without knowing it. Years passed before he drew nigh to the knowledge of what he sought. [p. 123]

The beauty of music as well as nature is a witness.
Who invented music? Someone must have made the delight of it possible! With his own share in its joy he had had nothing to do! Was Chance its grand inventor, its great ingenieur? Why or how should Chance love loveliness that was not, and make it be, that others might love it? Could it be a deaf God, or a being that did not care and would not listen, that invented music? No, music did not come of itself, neither could the source of it be devoid of music! [There and Back, p. 280-1]

His conclusion was that beauty does imply the existence of God as well as tell us something about the nature of God. “To say that there was no God behind the loveliness of things was to say there was no loveliness – nothing but a pretence of loveliness! The world was a painted thing! A toy for a doll! A phantasm!” [There and Back, p. 160]

He also argues that design implies a creator but adds another element to the usual proof by design. MacDonald’s argument is not just that the design in nature implies a Creator but the fact that nature awakes in us thought and feeling and therefore there must be thought and feeling behind it. This seems to me to be similar to C. S. Lewis’s argument that our experience of joy and of longing for more than we experience in this world is an indication that we were meant for another world. Both arguments claim that the beauty of nature wakes thought, feeling, longing in us and that this is an indication of something beyond nature.

“You will not allow thought on the face of nature! Am I right?”

“That is what I would say, sir,” answered Richard.

“We must look at that!” returned Wingfold…. “You would conceive the world as a sort of machine that goes for certain purposes – like a clock, for instance, whose duty it is to tell the time of the day? – Do I represent you truly?”

“So far, sir. Only one machine may have many uses!”

“True! A clock may do more for us than tell the time! It may tell how fast it is going, and wake solemn thought. But if you came upon a machine that constantly waked in you – not thoughts only, but the most delicate and indescribable feelings – what would you say then? Would you allow thought there?”

“Surely not that the machine was thinking!”

“Certainly not. But would you allow thought concerned in it? Would you allow that thought must have preceded and occasioned its existence? Would you allow that thought therefore must yet be interested in its power
to produce thought, and might, if it chose, minister to the continuance or enlargement of the power it had originated?"

“Perhaps I should be compelled to allow that much in regard to a clock even! – Are we coming to the Paley-argument, sir?” said Richard.

“I think not,” answered Wingfold. “My argument seems to me one of my own. It is not drawn from design but from operation: where a thing wakes thought and feeling, I say, must not thought and feeling be somewhere concerned in its origin?”

“Might not the thought and feeling come by association, as in the case of the clock suggesting the flight of time?”

“I think our associations can hardly be so multiform, or so delicate, as to have a share in bringing to us half of the thoughts and feelings that nature wakes in us. If they have such a share, they must have reference either to a fore-existence, or to relations hidden in our being, over which we have no control; and equally in such case are the thoughts and feeling waked in us, not by us. I do not want to argue; I am only suggesting that, if the world moves thought and feeling in those that regard it, thought and feeling are somehow concerned in the world. Even to wake old feelings, there must be a likeness to them in what wakes them, else how could it wake them? In a word, feeling must have put itself into the shape that awakes feeling. Then there is feeling in the thing that bears that shape, although itself it does not feel.” [There and Back, p. 147-8]

Another use of reason by MacDonald is his attempt to resolve the problem of evil but we don’t have enough time now to discuss his arguments on this point adequately. However, an idea of his approach to this problem can be found on pages 257-274 in The Vicar’s Daughter. A glimpse of his argument is, “And if we had it all pleasure, I know I should not care so much about what is better, and I would rather be good than have any other pleasure in the world, and so would you, though perhaps you do not know it yet. [Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood, p. 130] The problem of pain is a paradox but MacDonald is aware that our finite minds cannot understand all of reality. There are even paradoxes in mathematics and science. Therefore, in any account of an infinite God there will certainly be paradoxes.

If I knew of a theory in which was never an uncompleted arch or turret in whose circling wall was never a ragged breach, that theory I should know but to avoid: such gaps are the eternal windows through which the
dawn shall look in. A complete theory is a vault of stone around the theorist – whose very being yet depends on room to grow.” [Malcolm, p. 296].

Although MacDonald does use reason, it is not his primary method of evangelism. To use reason to convince the unbeliever is not the first duty of a Christian. Rather, the first duty is to live such Godlike lives that an unbeliever will be attracted and curious about the source of such goodness. Even powerful preaching will not be effective if Christians are not living an obedient life.

Oh! For the voice of a St. Paul or a St. John!” But it would be of little use: such men would have small chance of being heard. They would find the one-half of Christendom so intent upon saving souls instead of doing its duty, that the other half thought it all humbug. [Guild Court, p. 212-3].

In another novel, he says,

My own conviction is, that if a man would but bend his energies to live, if he would but try to be a true, that is, a godlike man, in all his dealings with his fellows a genuine neighbour and not a selfish unit he would open such channels for the flow of the spirit as no amount of even honest and so-called successful preaching could [Malcolm, p. 333].

While the obedient disciple of Jesus attracts others, by contrast, the person who claims to be a Christian but only is concerned about theological theories instead of obedience is a real hindrance to the spread of the Gospel. In a sermon, “The Truth in Jesus,” he said,

To let their light shine, not to force on them their interpretations of God’s designs, is the duty of Christians toward their fellows… Had you given yourselves to the understanding of His word that you might do it, and not to the quarrying from it of material wherewith to buttress your systems, in many a heart by this time would the name of the Lord be loved where now it remains unknown. [Unspoken Sermons, Series II, p. 404].

This witness of the life of the Christian may not convince everyone of the truth of Christianity but it should at least make them interested enough to investigate its truth claims.

Once a person has been attracted by the lives of Christians enough to be interested in finding out if Christianity is true (or for anyone who wants to know if it is true MacDonald’s advice is to read the Gospels, the story of Jesus. MacDonald believes that in doing this; the reader will be attracted to the life that is described there. In one of his
sermons, MacDonald said, “How shall faith be born but by the beholding of the faithful.” [Miracles of Our Lord, p. 306] “The poorest glimmer of His loveliness gives a dawn to our belief in a God.” [Paul Faber, Surgeon, p. 184]. “The reality of Christ's nature is not to be proved by argument. He must be beheld. .. Christ must prove himself to the human soul through being beheld.” [Orts, p. 206]. Even a suggestion of His loveliness will make a person more interested in discovering the truth.

MacDonald’s personal testimony about his early struggle with doubt was given in a letter to his father. “My error seems to be always searching for faith in place of contemplating the truths of the gospel which produce faith.” [Greville MacDonald, p.92-3]

Take then your New Testament as if you had never seen it before, and read – to find out. If in him [Jesus] you fail to meet God, then go to your consciousness of the race, your metaphysics, your Plato, your Spinoza. Till then this point remains: there was a Man who said he knew him, and that if you would give heed to him you too should know him. The record left of him is indeed scanty, yet enough to disclose what manner of man he was – his principles, his way of looking at things, his thoughts of his Father and his brethren and the relations between them, of man’s business in life, his destiny, and his hopes. [Thomas Wingfold, p. 90]

This point is expanded in the following passage from The Vicar’s Daughter.

“Suppose you had forgotten what some friend of your childhood was like . . . suppose you could not recall a feature of her face . . . and suppose that, while you were very miserable about it, you remembered all at once that you had a portrait of her in an old desk you had not opened for years: what would you do?”

“Go and get it,” she answered . . .

“Then why shouldn’t you do so now? You have such a portrait of Jesus, far truer and more complete than any other kind of portrait can be, - the portrait his own deeds and words give us of him.”

“I see what you mean; but that is all about long ago, and I want him now. That is in a book, and I want him in my heart.”

“How are you to get him into your heart? How could you have him there except by knowing him? . . . “No doubt,” I went on, “he can speak to your heart without the record, and, I think, is speaking to you now in this very want of him you feel. But how could he show himself to you otherwise than by helping you to understand the revelation of himself which it cost him such labor to afford? If the story were millions of years
old, so long as it was true, it would be all the same as if it had been ended only yesterday; for, being what he represented himself, he never can change. To know what he was then, is to know what he is now.”

“But if I knew him so, that wouldn’t be to have him with me.”

“No; but in that knowledge he might come to you. It is by the door of that knowledge that his Spirit, which is himself, comes into the soul. You would at least be more able to pray to him: you would know what kind of a being you had to cry to. You would thus come nearer to him and no one ever drew nigh to him to whom he did not also draw nigh. If you would but read the story as if you had never read it before, as if you were reading the history of a man you heard of for the first time.” [p. 342-3]

Another widely read Scot, William Barclay states the same principle, “When we are confronted with Christ, we see in him the altogether lovely and the altogether wise; that conviction is the witness of God in our hearts.” [p. 197.]

Another result of an open-minded reading of the Gospels is that it will convict one of some duty that one should do. This happens even though the reader does not at that point know whether a man called Jesus ever lived. The teachings carry their own conviction.

This brings us to one of the major themes in all of MacDonald’s works and that is that obedience is the one and only path to knowledge. Obedience as a path to knowledge occurs in every area of learning. He even uses mathematics as an example. If a student wants to understand the algorithm for long division, he must obey the rules and actually do problems and then eventually it will be possible to understand why it works. In the same way, if one wants to know if Christianity is true or not, one must go to the Gospels and read about the life and teachings of Christ. The way to learn anything is the old way, . . . as old as the conscience - that of obedience to any and every law of personal duty. But if you have ever seen the Lord, if only from afar – if you have any vaguest suspicion that the Jew Jesus, who professed to have come from God, was a better man than other men, one of your first duties must be to open your ears to his words, and see whether they commend themselves to you as true; then, if they do, to obey them with your whole strength and might, upheld by the hope of the vision promised in them to the obedient. [The Marquis of Lossie, p. 255]

An objection to the claim that the path to truth is obedience is that before we can obey the truth, we must know the truth. We must know before we can obey. MacDonald answers
this objection in a conversation between a devout Christian and her unbelieving friend in *Weighed and Wanting*.

“Yes, yes! But how is one to know what is true, my dear? There are so many differing claims to the quality.”

“I have been told, and I believe it with all my heart,” replied Hester, “that the only way to know what is true is to do what is true.”

“But you must know what is true before you can begin to do what is true.”

“Everybody knows something that is true to do – that is, something he ought to lose no time in setting about. The true thing to any man is the thing that must not be let alone but done. It is much easier to know what is true to do than what is true to think. But those who do the one will come to know the other – and none else, I believe. [P, 373]

Many use the friend’s excuse that they don’t know where to begin. MacDonald claims that is a poor excuse; that everyone knows some things they should be doing but aren’t. These things often seem like little things, such as a kind word or deed to someone near us, but they are essential things on the path to greater knowledge. Obedience leading to knowledge is reiterated in many of MacDonald’s books.

To every man I say, “Do the truth you know and you shall learn the truth you need to know.” [*Dish of Orts*, p. 76] The greatest fact of all is that we are bound to obey the truth, and that to the full extent of our knowledge thereof, however little that may be. This obligation acknowledged and obeyed, the road is open to all truth - and the only road. The way to know is to do the known. [*St. George and St. Michael*, p. 421]

There is a Biblical basis for believing that obedience leads to knowledge. “If any man’s will is to do his will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.” [*John 7:17 RSV*] “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” [*John 8:31-2, RSV*]

One weakness in many evangelistic endeavors is the use of too much emotionalism. The following two quotations tell why MacDonald has reservations about the use of emotion as a means of Christian witness.

The revival] was at first free from the results of one influence of men with faith in a certain evil system of theology, to rouse a galvanic life by working on the higher feelings through the electric sympathies of large assemblages, and the excitement of late hours, prolonged prayers and exhortations, and sometimes even direct appeal to individuals in public
presence. The end of these things is death, for the reaction is towards
spiritual hardness and a more confirmed unbelief: when the excitement has
died away, those at least in whom the spiritual faculty is for the time
exhausted, presume that they have tasted and seen, and found that nothing
is there. [Malcolm, p. 181]

“You try to work upon people’s feelings without reference to their
judgment. Anyone who can preach what you call rousing sermons is
considered a grand preacher amongst you and there is a great danger of his
being led thereby to talk more nonsense than sense. And then when the
excitement goes off, there is no seed left in the soil to grow in peace, and
they are always craving after more excitement.”

“Well, there is the preacher to rouse them up again.”

“And the consequence is, that they continue like children - the good ones,
I mean – and have hardly a chance of making a calm, deliberate choice of
that which is good; while those who have been only excited and nothing
more, are hardened and seared by the recurrence of such feeling as is
neither aroused by truth nor followed by action.” [The Seaboard Parish, p.
307]

I have one final point; MacDonald believed that patience, waiting on the Holy Spirit to
work, was essential in any evangelistic effort. The Vicar in The Vicar’s Daughter
received the following criticism.

Certain people considered him not eager enough to convert the wicked:
whatever apparent indifference he showed in that direction arose from his
utter belief in the guiding of God, and his dread of outrunning his designs.
He would follow the operations of the Spirit . . . Until an opportunity, then,
was thrown in his way, he would hold back; but when it was clear to him
that he had to minister, then was he thoughtful, watchful, instant,
unswerving. [p. 215-6]

Also relevant here is a comment about a character in Weighed and Wanting, “… she did
not seem, however, to have gained any influence even with those who lived in the same
house; only who can trace the slow working of leaven?” [p. 378] In Robert Falconer,
Robert’s patient evangelization was described thus: “And ‘he that believeth shall not
make haste.’ Labour without perturbation, readiness without hurry, no haste, and no
hesitation was the divine law of his activity.” [p. 337-8]
The curate, Thomas Wingfold also shows patient waiting on the Holy Spirit. Wingfold tells his wife about a young man he is interested in and she asks if he has made an appointment with the young man. He answers:

No, I haven't. But there's an undertow bringing us on to each other. It would spoil all if he thought I threw a net for him. I do mean to catch him if I can, but I will not move till the tide brings him into my arms. At least, that is how the thing looks to me at present. I believe enough not to make haste. [There and Back, p. 149]

To summarize, MacDonald believed that reason could be helpful in convincing an unbeliever of the truth of Christianity, but it must be used with care. Furthermore, there are more effective tools for evangelism. First, a Christian must be a witness through a Christ-like life and through personal testimony. This should make the person witnessed to want to find out if Christianity is true. Then if a person seeking to know the truth reads the Gospels, the reading will attract that person to Jesus Christ and then will be convicted that certain actions should be taken. If the unbeliever will obey whatever truth is revealed, it will lead to more truth and eventually a saving faith. I believe that the following poem from Poetical Works, Vol. I is a fitting conclusion for this paper.

“After Thomas Kempis”

Who follows Jesus shall not walk
In darksome road with danger rife;
But in his heart the Truth will talk,
And on his way will shine the Life.

So, on the story we must pore
Of him who lives for us, and died,
That we may see him walk before,
And know the Father in the guide.

In words of truth Christ all excels,
Leaves all his holy ones behind;
And he in whom his spirit dwells
Their hidden manna sure shall find.

Gather wouldst thou the perfect grains,
And Jesus fully understand?
Thou must obey him with huge pains,
And to God’s will be as Christ’s hand.

What profits it to reason high
And in hard questions court dispute,
When thou dost lack humility,
Displeasing God at very root!

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Response to Dr. David Neuhouser’s Presentation about George MacDonald on Evangelism

Dr. Faye E. Chechowich

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this gathering tonight. Dr. Neuhouser’s thoughtful, synthetic presentation of George MacDonald’s Method of Evangelism took me back to an era in my life when I was first exposed to George MacDonald through the Michael Phillips series of MacDonald’s novels. I have since learned that these popularized versions of MacDonald’s novels deleted hundreds of pages of text. One of the essays I read made me think I had missed the essence of Macdonald’s writing.) I was living and working in South Africa at the time and MacDonald’s characters kept me company during long cold winter evenings as I huddled under my down comforter in my garden flat that had no central heating. At the time I was in my 10th year as a staff person with a para-church organization whose mission was to share the gospel with young people who were not in the sphere of influence of a church. Evangelism was at the heart of my life mission. I can remember in the midst of that season of life resonating with characters like Malcolm, David Elginbrod, Donal, Robert Falconer. I can remember at the time being mindful of the perspectives about evangelism that MacDonald seemed to be promoting in his characters. How wonderful to have this piece of work that synthesizes the MacDonald’s thinking as he speaks through this variety of characters. Dr. Neuhouser has summarized MacDonald’s thinking from so many sources.

● Followers of Christ living obediently create a curiosity about a life well lived in those who don’t yet believe.

● As the yet unbelieving person inquires about the source of joy, the Christian can direct the person to Christ as he is depicted in the Gospels

● The attractional power of Jesus in the gospels creates in the reader a conviction that there is truth that requires a response. As the person responds to the truth revealed, more truth becomes apparent.

● The power of the Holy Spirit draws people to Christ and to see the truth revealed in Christ.

What underlies the whole process is the love of God that draws people to himself.

As I begin, let me remind us of a technical definition of evangelism. "To evangelize" is to proclaim the good news of the victory of God’s salvation. "Evangelism" is the noun denoting that activity. Evangelion] is normally translated "gospel," denoting the content of the good news. But it can also be a noun of action, describing the activity of telling that news (Larkin)
In my response this evening I would like to do 3 things as we focus on evangelism this evening. First, I would like to think with you about the historical context in which George MacDonald lived and wrote. I have a question that I would like to pose to you all. Second, I would like to describe the contemporary evangelical setting in which we find ourselves in the early 21st century. Lastly, I would like to frame MacDonald’s thinking about evangelism by describing two approaches to evangelism that have been contrasted but which I think are complementary. I think there is a place for both the proclamational and the incarnational ways of evangelism.

George MacDonald was born in 1824 and lived until just past the turn of the 20th century, 1905. He was a contemporary of Charles Spurgeon, the well-known British Baptist preacher and founder of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London who was born in 1834 and died in 1892 at the age of 58. An American contemporary, Dwight L Moody was born in 1937 and lived until 1899. I mention this in the context of my response tonight because both Spurgeon and Moody were well known evangelists during the years when MacDonald was writing. Moody was one of the trans-Atlantic evangelists who preached evangelistically to some large crowds around Great Britain during 1872-75. 1880-1935 is called by one historian the era of the evangelists. These evangelists represent what is often called a proclamational approach to evangelism. Both Spurgeon and Moody are prime examples of this approach to evangelism whereby a preacher presents the gospel message to a large group of people and calls for a public response. It is said the Spurgeon would ask the congregation to come to the church on Monday morning if they wanted to respond to the gospel. Moody had more immediate altar calls when he invited congregants to come to the inquirer’s room. Moody and Spurgeon collaborated during the seasons when Moody was in Great Britain and Spurgeon defended Moody’s ministry when there was criticism. The following is a report Spurgeon solicited about the effects of Moody’s ministry when Moody was criticized.

“I have no hesitation as to my answer to your question about Moody and Sankey. We here are all of us the better, and our churches in many ways, for their visit; permanently the better. More living, more aggressive; quicker to desire and bolder to execute plans of usefulness: and the converts, so far as I can judge or hear, stand wonderfully. I do not mean that there are no disappointments, it were madness to expect that; but they are, to say the least, in every respect of stability and character, equal to the converts received at other times. I do not, of course, commit myself to every method our brethren use; but the men are worthy of all confidence and love; and their work leaves a real blessing behind, especially to those who go in for hearty cooperation with them. You are quite free to give this opinion as mine, for whatever it is worth, to Mr. Spurgeon, or any other friend who is anxious on the subject.”
I raise the question of historical context as a question primarily. I am wondering if George MacDonald’s perspectives were shaped in any way as a reaction or in response to these very public evangelists. MacDonald seems to be promoting a more personal approach to making the good news of God’s love known. As a matter of interest, I think Moody and MacDonald would agree about the fact that the love of God is compelling and that the love of God must be the primary message communicated. Moody had a compelling experience that was transformative in his life and preaching that moved him to stress the love of God. However, I do think George MacDonald presents a contrasting approach to evangelism that in more recent years has been called incarnational, lifestyle, friendship, or relational evangelism.

For a window into our contemporary setting and the state of evangelism among U. S. evangelicals, the Barna organization reports the following:

In a 2013 study 73% of those who claim to be born again Christians said Christians have a responsibility to share the gospel and 52% said they did share the gospel at least once in the last year. Interestingly, evangelistic practices of most generations of Christians have declined or remained static in the past few years, while among Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2004) faith-sharing practices have increased from 56 to 65% between 2010 and 2013. (Barna) While some think of Millennials being more focused on social action this study shows that Millennials who claim to be evangelicals seem to have a fervor for sharing their faith.

I have the conviction that both the incarnational, lifestyle approach and the proclamational approach are necessary. Joe Aldrich wrote a book titled *Life Style Evangelism* in the early 80’s that has been a foundation for many books and programs that have followed.

“Evangelism is expressing what I possess in Christ and explaining how I came to possess it. In the truest sense, evangelism is displaying the universals of God’s character, his love, his righteousness his justice and his faithfulness the particulars of my everyday life. Therefore evangelism is not a special activity to be undertaken at a prescribed time. It is the constant and spontaneous outflow of our individual and corporate experience of Christ. Even more specifically, evangelism is what Christ does through the activity of his children as they are involved in proclamation, fellowship and service.” Joe Aldrich writes that evangelism is spreading the beauty of God first in the way the life of a Christian looks (to use Paul’s metaphor the way we smell -- we are the aroma of Christ) then in the way we relate and serve then finally in the words we use to direct people to the love of Christ as we invite people to follow Christ with us. I can’t help but think that MacDonald would agree?
I would like to raise one more matter in response to Dr. Neuhouser’s presentation of George MacDonald’s method of evangelism. In the section about Macdonald’s awareness of the limitations of resorting to arguments from reason to convince someone of their need to be in relationship with God. It is clear that George MacDonald believes that conversation about spiritual matters are vital in the processes of seeing people come to faith. He offers wisdom to our contemporary apologists who win arguments but lose influence and connections with people. The apostle Peter writes that we are to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within us. (I Peter 3:15) I think MacDonald would like the approach of John Stackhouse who named his book *Humble Apologetics* and makes the case that engaging people about the content of their beliefs or unbeliefs can be done in ways that are respectful and in ways that build bridges. Timothy Keller, author of *The Reason for God in an Age of Skepticism* makes the same point. We need winsome apologists who know the connection points in our current culture where relativism permeates contemporary ways of viewing the world. I think George MacDonald with agree with a statement attributed to Teddy Roosevelt, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”

Bibliography


