I am deeply grateful to God for my esteemed mentor and professor, Dr. David Neuhouser, through whom, beginning many years ago, I was given a fresh and fuller hearing of C.S. Lewis and an introduction to George MacDonald. I am particularly grateful for his interest in Christian universalism and conveying to us the thoughts of MacDonald that caused MacDonald to conclude that God will eventually conqueror our rebellion, win us all over, and—with our giving-in to his love—effect the transformation necessary for us to experience a perfect communion of imperishable love.

In my brief comments, I would like—in conversation with Neuhouser’s MacDonald—to argue that the case for Christian universalism is theologically and philosophically very strong. I also agree that this view has significant and often under-appreciated biblical motivation. In the end, however, I will acknowledge my own hesitancy to go “all in” . . . heaven. . . .

**A Strong Theological Case**

MacDonald’s view yields great theological coherence and respects the witness of Scripture which elevates and prioritizes the revelation of God in Christ and the revelation of God as triune.

*Christ, the revelation of God*

There is a critical starting point for MacDonald’s theological perspective and therefore the direction of the pressure of interpretation in his approach to Scripture. Simply stated it is this: “Jesus alone knows the Father and can reveal Him” (*Sir Gibbie*, 153); from another source, “Jesus is the express image of God’s substance, and in Him we know the heart of God” (*The Miracles of Our Lord*, 197).

And he reveals that he is a revealing God, “God is not a God that hides, but a God that reveals” (*Unspoken Sermons*, “The Final Unmasking”).  [Gender inclusive Man language]

> For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known.— Matthew 10:26; Luke 12:2.

God is not a God that hides, but a God that reveals. His whole work in relation to the creatures he has made—and where else can lie his work?—is revelation—the giving them truth, the showing of himself to them, that they may know him, and come nearer and nearer to him, and so he have his children more and more of companions to him. That we are in the dark about anything is never because he hides it, but because we are not yet such that he is able to reveal that thing to us.

That God could not do the thing at once which he takes time to do, we may surely say without irreverence. His will cannot finally be thwarted; where it is thwarted for a time, the very thwarting subserves the working out of a higher part of his will. He gave man the power to thwart his will, that, by means of that same power, he might come at last to do his will in a higher kind and way than would otherwise have been possible to him. God sacrifices his will to man that man may become such as himself, and give all to the truth; he makes man able to do wrong, that he [man] may choose and love righteousness.

There is a critical difference here with Calvin. Calvin left open the possibility that there may be—outside of the gospel—an unrevealed side of God with important purposes, very important to God’s dealings with many people. And so the Reformed tradition which is so wonderfully focused on the preeminence of God in all things also tended to accept that God’s will of command may be very different from his will of decree; and worse, the good news is only about God’s *revealed* will, not about his *secret* will.
In his commentary on 2 Peter 3:9 where we are told that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,” Calvin writes:

So wonderful is his love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost. . . . But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world.

MacDonald’s view yields the greater theological coherence and respects the witness of Scripture which elevates and prioritizes the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ.

*The Triune God is Eternally Loving*

And, of course it is in the revelation of God in Christ that we discover that God is triune. The church has stubbornly insisted on the doctrine of the trinity as essential to the biblical understanding of God who thereby shows himself, in his eternal and unchanging being, to be a communion of self-giving, life-giving, love. We understand our own relationship to the triune God through our identification with our brother the incarnate Christ and his own human receptivity to God addressed as *Abba* Father.

MacDonald’s view yields the greater theological coherence and respects the witness of Scripture which elevates and prioritizes the revelation of God as triune love. This was massively significant for MacDonald in the way that it repudiated the Greek, single person views of God like a self-obsessed monarch who is inwardly consumed with his own glory.

How terribly, then, have the theologians misrepresented God . . . [Nearly all of them] represent[ing] 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 it comes much to this. Brothers, have you found our king? There he is, kissing little children and saying they are like God. There he is at table with the head of a fisherman lying on his bosom, and somewhat heavy at heart that even he, the beloved disciple, cannot yet understand him well. The simplest peasant who loves his children and his sheep were—no, not a truer, for the other is false, but—a true type of our God beside that monstrosity of a monarch. *(Unspoken Sermons, “The Child in the Mist”)*

This has enormous implications for how we think of God’s response to sin and the atonement. Here I am moving quickly by things about which much more could be said. With respect to justice, however, the triune God, revealed in Christ does not need to meet out a punishment for sin because his honor has been affronted. He is not beholden to an abstract system of justice with particular fixed eternal penalties that must be extracted from guilty parties in order to balance divine scales. And most importantly, he is not therefore divided between love and wrath. His wrath toward sin is his love burning against all that would separate the beloved from communion with him. MacDonald’s view removes the inconsistencies in our doctrine of God that stem from faulty preconceptions of the divine which have led us into less than faithful readings of Scripture. God is not divided between love and wrath, God is fearfully loving—and so his justice is always restorative even when it is retributive. But that means there is no such thing as mere punishment. And this is precisely what MacDonald affirms:
I do not believe that mere punishment exists anywhere in the economy of the highest; I think mere punishment a human idea, not a divine one. But the consuming fire is more terrible than any punishment invented by riotous and cruel imagination. Punishment indeed it is—mere punishment; a power of God for his creature. Love is God's being; love is his creative energy; they are one: God's punishments are for the casting out of the sin that uncreates, for the recreating of the things his love made and sin has unmade. (Donal Grant)

Because God is eternally and immutably self-consistent, we know that his acts towards his creatures are always loving. But this is exactly what the Calvinistic tradition finally could not affirm. As one present day expositor following in the footsteps of the great Jonathan Edwards puts it, “it is biblically unwarranted to speak of God’s loving those condemned to hell because nowhere is the final judgment viewed as remedial or temporary.” (Piper, “How Does a Sovereign God Love?”)

It is one of the most powerfully helpful scales to be lifted from Christian eyes to see that God does not damn people to hell, he permits them to resist his sovereign love, hell is his allowing them an enormous degree of separation—but even in hell nothing can separate us from the love of God, minimally in the sustaining of our existence. And, in MacDonald’s view, his love will eventually subdue our restless and rebellious hearts.

In this, then, is God like the child: that he is simply and altogether our friend, our father—our more than friend, father, and mother—our infinite love-perfect God. Grand and strong beyond all that human imagination can conceive of poet-thinking and kingly action, he is delicate beyond all that human tenderness can conceive of husband or wife, homely beyond all that human heart can conceive of father or mother. He has not two thoughts about us. With him all is simplicity of purpose and meaning and effort and end—namely, that we should be as he is, think the same thoughts, mean the same things, possess the same blessedness. It is so plain that any one may see it, every one ought to see it, every one shall see it. It must be so. He is utterly true and good to us, nor shall anything withstand his will. (Unspoken Sermons, “The Child in the Mist”)

MacDonald’s view addresses extremely significant theological inconsistencies by committing to the fullness of revelation in Christ who discloses for us the eternally, consistently and uncompromisingly outward, other-centered, self-giving love of God for his creatures.

**Biblical tensions**

The only hesitancy I have with MacDonald’s universalism stems from biblical tensions and a good proportion of the church’s reception of the biblical witness. But, let me first point out that this impacts only part of MacDonald’s conclusion. For instance, it should be uncontested in the Christian church that Jesus is the paradigmatic and definitive revelation of God and that all of Scripture should be read through the lens of Christ as the fullest revelation of the heart of God. Moreover, I take any perception that a certain passage of Scripture is in tension with the revelation of the triune God as a being of uncompromising, self-giving love, as a misperception that requires a more careful, informed or enlightened understanding.

The part of MacDonald’s conclusion about which I worry there may be real tension, is the claim that all will eventually be won over. Other options are available, though it was perhaps the Calvinist in MacDonald that would not go for them. As Dr. Neuhouser mentioned, for MacDonald, God’s higher will/sovereign love will not be thwarted.
When John Stott, in 1988, wrote in favor of annihilationism, he questioned a lot of conventional exegesis be he also claimed he could not be a universalist because, in his view, the New Testament witness is clear that there is a real banishment from God which is eternal. The language and imagery at several points seems to affirm this and so this presents itself to me as in tension with the universalist passages. That some may be annihilated or that some may forever persist in drastic separation from God does not, in my view, threaten the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ as a being of uncompromising love. In other words, this is a different kind of tension, not one where the clearer and more foundational passages seem to require a resolution in one direction or the other; and so, I hesitate to accept a resolution one way or the other.

Nevertheless, where I think we should all agree with MacDonald, and indeed John Stott, is expressed in this affirmation taken from the conclusion of Stott’s 1988 essay:

We need to remember that God is the Creator of all humankind, and remains infinitely loving, patient and compassionate towards all whom he has made. Yes, and he is also everybody’s ‘Father’, both in the sense that they ‘live and move and have their being’ in him, deriving the richness of their human life from his generosity (Ac 17:25-28), and in the sense that he continues to yearn for his lost children, as in the parable of the prodigal son. (It is the intimacy of a father-child relationship which according to the New Testament is given only to those whom God has reconciled to himself through Jesus Christ.) We have to remember too that God does not want anybody to perish but wants everybody to be saved (2Pe 3:9; 1Ti 2:4);