

George MacDonald on Universalism: The Extent of God's Love

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Is it true that George MacDonald believed that all would eventually be saved? What form did his belief in universalism take? The term “universalism” covers many shades of belief. What influences contributed to this belief? And finally, what justification, including Biblical, did he have for this belief? These are the questions to be addressed here. This is not an attempt to determine whether or not universalism is true.¹ It is only an exposition of MacDonald's views on the subject. Because he had so much to say about universalism, it seems only fair to give him a thoughtful hearing. MacDonald did not want to argue people into believing as he did. But he did want to state his beliefs and allow God to convince his hearers if he was right and convince himself to change his own beliefs if he was wrong.

A major theme in all of MacDonald's writing was his belief that a loving Father is our best image of God. He believed that a corollary to that belief was that God would not send any of his children to an eternal punishment. No earthly loving father would send a son or daughter to such a punishment and therefore neither would God. Now, words like “loving” and “father” when used about humans may not have quite the same meaning when used of God. However, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, if the meanings of the words we use about God have no relation to their ordinary meaning, then we are really not saying anything at all about God. Or, as Whittier put it in these lines from “The Eternal Goodness,”

But nothing can be good in Him
Which evil is in me.

A sermon on “Justice,” published in *Unspoken Sermons, Series 3*, is MacDonald's most clearly developed statement on this subject. In it he claims that the prevalent view that God would condemn or even allow a person to suffer eternal torment is one that, if attributed to any human would bring almost universal condemnation. In reality, God's punishment is always remedial and destroys sin by saving people from their sin. MacDonald believed that God's love is a tough love. He did not believe that God would just say to all, “I forgive, it doesn't matter what you are or have done; be happy!” He did believe that God would keep working and do whatever was necessary to get us to repent no matter how long it would take. I will elaborate on this belief later. We will look now at the origins of and influences on this belief.

In his novel *Robert Falconer* (all quotations from books by George MacDonald are from the Johannesen editions), the hero as a young boy experiences the same difficulty that I believe MacDonald himself experienced as a boy.

And he must believe, too, that God was just, awfully just, punishing with fearful pains those who did not go through a certain process of mind which it was utterly impossible they should go through without a help which he would give to some and withhold from others, the reason of the difference not being such, to say the least of it, as to come within the reach of the persons concerned. And this God they said was love. It was logically absurd, of course, yet, thank God, they did say that God was love; and many of them

succeeded in believing it, too, and in ordering their ways..." accordingly. (p. 77).

In another novel, a character says "I well remember feeling as a child that I did not care for God to love me if he did not love everybody: the kind of love I needed was ... the love ... that all men needed, the love that belonged to their nature as the children of the Father, a love he could not give me except he gave it to all men." (*Weighed and Wanting*, p. 37). I believe that MacDonald even as a boy was troubled by the then prevalent view of hell. This early sense of justice and his own father as an earthly example of the loving heavenly Father were the early beginnings of his later beliefs. That MacDonald's idea of God as a loving father is the basis for his belief in universalism is shown by the following conversation from the novel *Adela Cathcart*.

And the man was telling them, sir, that God had picked out so many men, women, and children, to go right away to glory, and left the rest to be damned for ever and ever in hell. And I up and spoke to him; and 'sir,' says I, 'if I was tould as how I was to pick out so many o' my childeren, and take 'em with me to a fine house, and leave the rest to be burnt up... which o' them would I choose?' 'How can I tell?' says he. 'No doubt,' says I; 'they aint your sons and darters. But I can. I wouldn't move afoot, sir but I'd take my chance wi' the poor things. And, sir,' says I, 'we're all God's children; and which o' us is he to choose, and which is he to leave out? I don't believe he'd know a bit better how to choose one and leave another than I should, sir – that is, his heart wouldn't let him lose e'er a one o' us, or he'd be miserable for ever, as I should be, if I left one o' mine i' the fire.' (p. 220).

However, there were outside influences on his belief in universal salvation as well as his own sense of divine justice. There was a split in the Church of Scotland in 1843 with nearly a third of the members and clergy leaving to start the Free Church of Scotland. Although there were a number of issues involved, one was "the doctrine of universal redemption, with ministers being expelled and churches disendowed because of it." (Hein, *George MacDonald*. p.18). Universal reconciliation was used not to mean universalism but to a wider application of the atonement than the traditional Calvinism doctrine. MacDonald was a college student at this time and this conflict in the church would have reinforced his doubts about the orthodox theology of his day. "In Glasgow, students were expelled from the Congregational Theological Seminary for adhering to the doctrine of Universal Redemption." (Greville MacDonald, p. 79). In just a few years after this MacDonald would be a student at the Congregational seminary in London. Even earlier, in 1831, John MacCleod Campbell, who later became a friend of MacDonald, was driven out of the Established Church for his views on atonement.

Then there were some friends of MacDonald who influenced him. One of them was Thomas Erskine who "had a reputation for genuine godliness of spirit and attitude, together with a sense of justice and compassion that served to exclude him from the institutionalized church. He believed in the universality of the Atonement and the eventual restoration of all people to the unsullied divine image." (Hein, *George MacDonald*. P. 174). Erskine's work was "read at the Broadlands conferences" (Parry and Partridge, p. 229). These conferences were held from 1874 until 1888 at the estate of Lord and Lady Mount Temple, two of MacDonald's most intimate friends. One of the major organizers of the conferences was another friend, Russell Gurney. MacDonald was a major speaker at many of these meetings.

A more important influence was the preacher Alexander John Scott who was disfranchised from the Presbyterian ministry for preaching universalism. As a young seminary student in London, MacDonald attended many of Scott's lectures. At various difficult times Scott was a friend and counselor to MacDonald. MacDonald's first daughter, Lilia Scott was named after him and MacDonald's novel *Robert Falconer* was dedicated to Scott. In a letter to Scott's daughter, MacDonald wrote "I looked up to your father more than to any man except my own father." (Sadler, p. 335). MacDonald wrote a poem in tribute to this friend. In it he described the darkness and confusion he experienced until

Thy [Scott's] voice, Truth's herald,
Calm and distinct, powerful and sweet and fine:
I loved and listened, listened and loved more. (*Poetical Works*, Vol. I, p. 272).

According to Rolland Hein, a retired Wheaton professor and who knows more about MacDonald than any other living person,

[T]he most prominent Victorian theologian to influence MacDonald's thought was [Frederick Denison] Maurice... A man whose deep practical spirituality lent a moral beauty to his life... MacDonald became a disciple of his in the late 1850's. Among the ideas that MacDonald clearly shared with him were his stress upon the Fatherhood of God and the conviction that Christ is absolutely at one with the Father ... Both rejected the idea that sin would be eternally punished, emphasized the "Inner Light" with the possibility of revelation to the individual apart from Scripture (but not inharmonious with it.) (Hein, *The Harmony Within*, p. 32-33).

However, Maurice stated, "I have said distinctly that I am *not* a Universalist, that I have deliberately rejected the theory of Universalism, knowing what it is; and that I should as much refuse an Article which dogmatized in favour of that theory as one that dogmatized in favour of the opposite." (Vidler, p. 59). Although not a Universalist, his sympathy to universalism is shown by the following quotations:

Within the last ten years the Scotch Church has ejected from its bosom some of the most devout, laborious, and able of its preachers. These men may have had offensive opinions, but that which was put forward as the reason for their expulsion, was their belief in the universal redemption of mankind by Christ, and their repeated declarations in their sermons that all whom they addressed were the objects of God's love. (Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ* Vol. 1, p. 152).

and

I ask no one to pronounce, for I dare not pronounce myself, what are the possibilities of resistance in a human will to the loving will of God. There are times when they seem to me – thinking of myself more than of others – almost infinite... I am obliged to believe in an abyss of love which is deeper than the abyss of death: I dare not lose faith in that love. I sink into death, eternal death, if I do. I must feel that this love is compassing the universe. More about it I cannot know. But God knows. I leave myself and all to Him." (Maurice. *Theological Essays*. p. 323).

MacDonald attended Maurice's London church and named one of his sons Maurice in his honor. In a poem, "A Thanksgiving For F. D. Maurice," MacDonald praised him for his "prophet's calm commanding voice," "obedient, wise, clear listening care," "learning," and "humility." According to Greville MacDonald the following verse of that poem was omitted from the printed version.

He [Maurice] taught that hell itself is yet within
The confines of thy kingdom; and its fires
The endless conflict of thy love with sin,
That even by horror works its pure desires. (Greville MacDonald, p. 398).

Another of MacDonald's friends, Charles Dodgson, (Lewis Carroll) wrote an interesting essay, "Eternal Punishment." In it he identified what he believed were three contradictory statements.

- I God is perfectly good.
- II To inflict Eternal Punishment on certain human beings, and in certain circumstances would be wrong.
- III God is capable of acting thus. (Collingwood, p. 345).

These are somewhat similar to the three inconsistent propositions that Thomas Talbot uses to defend universalism in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*. In his essay, Dodgson stated that

My object has been throughout, *not* to indicate one course rather than another, but to help the Reader to see clearly *what* the possible courses are, and *what* he is virtually accepting, or denying, in choosing any *one* of them. (Collingwood, p, 355).

Although Dodgson uses his training as a mathematical logician to attempt to identify the logical possibilities without advocating any one, it seems to me that the position that rejects the Eternal Punishment proposition is shown in a favorable light. He does not indicate whether dropping the second one leads to universalism or annihilationism. As close as MacDonald and Dodgson were it seems likely that they would have discussed this issue with each other.

MacDonald was influenced by authors as well as personal friends. He admired Tennyson's poetry. According to MacDonald, "In Memoriam," "was the poem of the hoping doubters, the poem of our age." (*England's Antiphon*, p. 329). The following lines must have been especially loved,

Behold we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last – far off –at last, to all.
And every winter change to spring.

It is true that Tennyson follows this verse with one expressing doubt about this trust in universal salvation with the following one.

So runs my dreams; but what am I?
An infant crying in the night;
An infant crying for the light;

And with no language but a cry.

However, this is in turn followed by the claim that the wish for universal salvation comes from that within us that is most like God; a belief that MacDonald held as well. In fact, MacDonald quotes this stanza in *England's Antiphon*.

The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul. (Hill, p. 237),

Even Martin Luther must have been of some help to MacDonald as the following hymn by Luther suggests that even in hell we can turn to Christ. Here is MacDonald's translation.

When amidst the pains of hell
Us our sins are baiting;
Whither shall we flee away
Where relief is waiting?
To thee, Lord Christ, thee only
Who didst outpour thy precious blood
For our sins sufficing good:
Luther's Song-Book (*Rampoli*, p. 172).

MacDonald admired and was influenced in many ways by the German poet, Georg Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg who wrote under the pen name, Novalis. He translated and published privately many of Novalis' poems into English. Support for universalism is found in the following lines. (The bold print is added for emphasis.)

Thou stand'st with love unshaken
Ever by every man;
And if by all forsaken,
Art still the faithful one.
Such love must win the wrestle;
At last thy love they'll see,
Weep bitterly, and nestle
Like children to thy knee.
Spiritual Songs From Novalis (*Rampoli*, p. 25)

On MacDonald's lecture tour of the United States in 1872, he met the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier as well as most of the other major literary figures of the day. Mrs. MacDonald wrote to her children about their visit with Whittier and commented, "He is a most lovable, holy man, but full of fire and enjoyment of all things good. He is very wide in his beliefs." (Greville MacDonald, p.426) George probably read "The Eternal Goodness" by Whittier, and if he did, I am sure he would have found welcome support for his views, especially in the lines,

I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

Also, MacDonald must have been aware that some of the earlier Christian leaders believed in universalism. MacDonald does refer to Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254) in *The Seaboard*

Parish (p. 314) and in his lectures. Origen was one whose beliefs were remarkably similar to MacDonald's. According to the church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette,

Origen taught that ultimately all the spirits who have fallen away from God will be restored to full harmony with Him. This can come about only with their cooperation, for they have freedom to accept or to reject the redemption wrought in Christ. Before their full restoration they will suffer punishment, but the punishment is intended to be educative, to purge them from the imperfections brought by their sin. After the end of the present age and its world another age and world will come, so Origen believed, in which those who have been born again will continue to grow and the unrepentant will be given further opportunity for repentance. Eventually all, even the devils, through repentance, learning, and growth, will be fully saved. Origen's conception of the drama of creation and redemption was breath-taking in its vast sweep and in its confident hope. (Latourette, p. 151).

In *Lilith*, MacDonald suggests that even Satan may be saved eventually. Hans Denck (c. 1495-1527) an Anabaptist leader had similar views. Denck believed that "A God of love could not punish the sinner vindictively and eternally. His love would find a way to overcome evil by correctives that would not coerce the individual's free will." (Goertz, p. 69). This is an important point, one that MacDonald also believed, that evil would be overcome without coercing the individual's free will.

Although MacDonald was aware of earlier and contemporary advocates of universal salvation and he certainly was influenced by his friends and mentors, he seems to have had confidence in his own understanding of the implications of God's love and power. According to Barbara Amell who has researched numerous contemporary accounts of his lectures, "It is a peculiar feature of MacDonald's lectures that he does not refer to others who share his belief in the triumph of God's mercy or even quote Scriptures in behalf of his case; he simply states it as an absolute, a certainty of moral fact. (an email from Barbara Amell dated June 25, 2005).

In his book, *Universal Reconciliation*, Michael Phillips quotes ten early church fathers who suggest a belief in universal salvation or at least the possibility of salvation after a time of punishment in hell. (p. 41-3). They are, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose Bishop of Milan, Jerome, and Theodoret of Antioch. Morvenna Ludlow, a Cambridge and Oxford scholar whose specialty is a study of the historical development of universalist ideas in Christianity, stated that the intention in her chapter in *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* was "neither to provide an exhaustive account of all those people who have advocated universal salvation nor to defend any particular belief... [but] rather... to show ... that there has been a more or less continuous tradition of universalism within (and on the penumbra of) Christianity." She adds, "[W]hat is ... striking is that most of the writers I have examined, despite their many speculations have ultimately based their convictions on the biblical promises that God wills all to be saved and that in the end, God will be all in all." (p. 215). [Examples of Biblical references for universalism are given below.] In Barbara Amell's book, *Triumph*, may be found references to many books published in the nineteenth century supporting universalism.

The remainder of this paper will illustrate and further develop MacDonald's views on this subject. In many of his novels, he expressed his belief in universalism and clarified his views and his reasons for that belief. In *There and Back* there is a description of a dream that MacDonald

said was almost word for word the account that one of his friends gave of an actual dream of his own.

“But this part of my dream, the most lovely of all, I can find no words to describe; nor can I even recall to my own mind the half of what I felt. I only know that something was given me then, some spiritual apprehension, to be again withdrawn, but to be given to us all, I believe, some day, out of his infinite love, and withdrawn no more. Every heart that had ever ached, or longed, or wandered, I knew was there, folded warm and soft, safe and glad. And it seemed in my dream that to know this was the crown of all my bliss - yes, even more than to be myself in my Father’s arms.” (p. 392).

Another evidence of his belief in universalism is given by the following conversation in *Donal Grant*.

“But some are lost after all!” she said.

“Doubtless; there are sheep that will keep running away. But he goes after them again.”

“He will not do that for ever!”

“He will.”

“I do not believe it.”

“Then you do not believe that God is infinite!”

“I do.” ...

“But if his mercy and his graciousness are not infinite, then he is not infinite!”

“There are other attributes in which he is infinite.”

“But he is not infinite in all his attributes? He is partly infinite, and partly finite! – infinite in knowledge and power, but in love, in forgiveness, in all those things which are the most beautiful, the most divine, the most Christ-like, he is finite, measurable, bounded, small!” (p. 221)

Although the following are the thoughts of a character in *The Elect Lady* following her father’s death, they certainly agree with MacDonald’s own ideas.

She pondered much about her father, and would find herself praying for him, careless of what she had been taught. She could not blind herself to what she knew. He had not been a bad man, as men count badness, but could she in common sense think him a glorified saint, shining in white robes? The polite, kind old man! Her own father! – could she, on the other hand, believe him in flames forever: If so, what a religion was that which required her to believe it, and at the same time to rejoice in the Lord always! (p. 154).

In *Robert Falconer*, Robert’s grandmother believed that her son had just died and was unsaved. She was, of course, greatly distressed.

But in a few weeks she was more cheerful. It is one of the mysteries of humanity that mothers in her circumstances, and holding her creed, do regain not merely the faculty of going on with the business of life, but, in most cases, even cheerfulness. The infinite Truth, the Love of the universe, supports them beyond their consciousness, coming to them like sleep from the roots

of their being, and having nothing to do with their opinions or beliefs. And hence spring those comforting subterfuges of hope to which they all fly. Not being able to trust the Father entirely, they yet say: ‘Who can tell whether God did not please to grant them saving faith at the eleventh hour?’ – that so they might pass from the very gates of hell, the only place for which their life had fitted them, into the bosom of love and purity: This God could do for all: this for the son beloved of his mother perhaps he might do? (p. 91-2).

I believe that many people have thoughts like these, “How can this good person that I love suffer in hell forever?” Or, “Surely it is possible that at the last minute this beloved friend or relative may have accepted Christ.” Thoughts like these were the beginnings of MacDonald’s universalism.

In *David Elginbrod* the following was said about one of the characters and could be said of MacDonald himself:

He believes entirely that God loves, yea, *is* love; and therefore, that hell itself must be subservient to that love, and but an embodiment of it; that the grand work of Justice is to make way for a Love which will give to every man that which is right, and ten times more, even if it should be by means of awful suffering, - a suffering which the Love of the Father will not shun, either for himself or his children, but will eagerly meet for their sakes, that he may give them all that is in his heart. (p. 371-2).

MacDonald was concerned that people might believe that if universalism were true, nothing really matters. After all if we are all saved eventually, why not do as we please in this life. In 1885, he wrote “... thousands of half thinkers imagine that since it is declared with such authority that hell is not everlasting, there is then no hell at all.” (*Letters From Hell*, p.viii). According to MacDonald’s son, Lilith

was written, I do think, in view of the increasingly easy tendencies in universalists, who, because they had now discarded everlasting retribution as a popular superstition, were dismissing hell-fire altogether, and with it the need for repentance as the way back into the Kingdom. (Greville MacDonald, p. 552).

In *Lilith*, the salvation of Lilith was far from a simple or painless operation.

So his universalism was not an easy out for the sinner and certainly not a doctrine that would make Christians less likely to want to evangelize. Who would want a friend to have to suffer for any length of time and possibly for a long time? The following conversation is found in *The Elect Lady*.

“Time is plentiful for his misery, if he will not, repent; plentiful for the mercy of God that would lead him to repentance. There is plenty of time for labor and hope; none for indifference and delay. God *will* have his creatures good. They can not escape Him.”

“Then a man may put off repentance as long as he pleases!”

“Certainly he may – at least as long as he can – but it is a fearful thing to try issues with God.” (p. 55-6).

In *Robert Falconer* a character says, “I believe that you will be compelled to repent some day, and that now is the best time. Then, you will not only have to repent, but to repent that you did not repent now.” (p. 407).

The following statement from the sermon “Justice” shows his belief that suffering may be necessary.

Justice requires that sin should be put an end to; and not that only, but that it should be atoned for; and where punishment can do anything to this end, where it can help the sinner to know what he has been guilty of, where it can soften his heart to see his pride and wrong and cruelty, justice requires that punishment shall not be spared. And the more we believe in God, the surer we shall be that he will spare nothing that suffering can do to deliver his child from death. If suffering cannot serve this end, we need look for no more hell, but for the destruction of sin by the destruction of the sinner. That, however, would, it appears to me, be for God to suffer defeat, blameless indeed, but defeat. (*Unspoken Sermons, Series I, II, and III*, p. 515-6).

This passage from MacDonald’s sermon is a rebuttal to C. S. Lewis’ beliefs about hell. Lewis believed that hell is not a place of conscious eternal suffering. Lewis’ view that what is in hell forever is the remains of a person. As he put it in *The Great Divorce*, a grumbler may at some point become only a grumble. To put it more plainly, although a person may be in hell forever, he is not continually conscious of pain. This would be one answer for anyone who has a problem with the idea that God would punish a finite creation of his (therefore one whose sin must be finite) with an infinite punishment. The preceding quotation from MacDonald’s sermon shows that MacDonald rejects this position. He believes that the destruction of the sinner would be a defeat of God’s love. The quotation also clearly shows that he believed that God must do whatever it takes to destroy the sin. One of his sermons is entitled “Our God is a Consuming Fire.”

There are some Biblical verses that MacDonald thought supported his belief in universalism. MacDonald found support for his views in Psalms 22:27-28, “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the Lord’s: and he is the governor among the nations.” (This and all subsequent Biblical quotations are from the King James Version) Also, Romans 14:11 says, “For it is written, ‘As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’” Every knee will bow is also claimed in Phil. 2:10, and Isaiah 45:23. John 12:32 says that Jesus will draw all men unto Him. I Cor. 15:22, says that all men will be made alive in Christ. Acts 3:21 in the New English Bible speaks of “universal restoration.” Titus 2:11 says that the grace of God brings salvation to all men. There are more but one that I think is especially interesting is I Tim. 4:10 which says that God “is the Savior of all men, specially of those that believe.”

Of course, there are many Biblical passages that seem to refute universalism. One such verse is Matthew 25:46, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” seems to be a strong statement refuting universalism. However, William Barclay said that the Greek word translated here as punishment is *kolasis* and he wrote,

I think it is true to say that in all of Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment. The word for eternal is *aionios*...
The simplest way to put it is that *ainios* cannot be used properly of anyone

but God... Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give. (Barclay, p. 66).

This agrees with MacDonald's views. In the sermon 'Creation in Christ,' MacDonald said, "If God would not punish sin, or if he did it for anything but love, he would not be the father of Jesus Christ." (*Unspoken Sermons, Series I, II, and III*, p. 421). He believed that God's love would punish, not for the sake of punishment, but for the destruction of sin and the restoration of the sinner.

In one way, MacDonald may be the ultimate Calvinist. He believes so much in the sovereignty of God that He will not be defeated but will accomplish what He desires, namely that all men will be saved (I Tim. 2:4). However, he may also be the ultimate Arminian. He believes in free will, namely that we can resist God as long as we want. In a conversation in *Robert Falconer* between Robert and his grandmother, Robert expresses what I believe is MacDonald's view that universalism does not contradict free will.

'Duv ye think 'at God cudna save a man gin he liket, than, grannie?'
'God can do a'thing. There's nae doobt but by the gift o' his speerit he cud save a'body.'
'An' ye think he's no mercifu' eneuch to do 't?'
'It winna do to meddle wi' fowk's free wull. To gar fowk he gude wad be nae gudeness.'
'But gin God could actually create the free wull, dinna ye think he cud help it to gang richt, without ony garrin'? We ken sae little about it, grannie! Hoo does his speerit help onybody? Does he gar them 'at accep's the offer o' salvation?'
'Na, I canna think that. But he shaws them the trowth in sic a way that they jist canna bide themsel's, but maun turn to him for verra peace an' rist.

Weel, that's something as I think. An' until I'm sure that a man has had the trowth shawn till him in sic a way 's that, I canna alloo mysel' to think that hooever he may hae sinned, he has finally rejeckit the trowth... An' jist think, gin it be fair for ae human being to influence anither a' 'at they can, and that's nae interferin' wi' their free wull--it's impossible to measure what God cud do wi' his speerit winnin' at them frae a' sides, and able to put sic thoughts an' sic pictures into them as we canna think. It wad a' be true that he tellt them, and the trowth can never be a meddlin' wi' the free wull.' (p. 330-1)

His reconciliation between predestination (he believed that all were predestined to be saved) and free will was that eventually God's love would convince everyone even though it may take a prolonged effort to convince some. Suppose that I would have resisted the love of the woman who became my wife (this is a big supposition since I definitely did not resist!) Nevertheless, her love and her beauty of form and character would, without doubt, have conquered my resistance eventually. According to MacDonald, "People are not coerced into choosing God; they will all one day simply be allowed a clear-sighted choice." (Hein, *The Harmony Within*, p. 121).

To summarize: MacDonald believed that God's love would be a consuming fire that would eventually rid the world of sin by convincing everyone to accept their rightful place as obedient children and worship their heavenly Father. He came to these beliefs from his firm faith that God is love and that His love will never fail. He was influenced by his friends and contemporaries as well as from books. In particular, he believed that this is what the Bible taught. I think that he would like to leave us with this question. "When shall a man dare to say that God has done all He can?" (*Robert Falconer*, p. 410).

¹ For a more complete study of universalism, one excellent source is *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* edited by Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge.

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Biblical Passages Suggesting Universalism

(There are, of course, many Biblical passages suggest the opposite. This is one of many issues for which proof texts can be given on both sides.)

Isaiah 45:23 (Amplified Bible)

²³I have sworn by Myself, the word is gone out of My mouth in righteousness and shall not return, that unto Me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear [allegiance]. [\(A\)](#)

Isaiah 45:23 (King James Version)

²³I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

Jeremiah 31:34 (King James Version)

³⁴And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more

Joel 2:28 (King James Version)

²⁸And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions:

Matthew 16:18 (The Message)

¹⁸And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out. "Hold out against it" is in the Amplified Bible., "not overcome it" or "not overpower it" in other versions.

Matthew 25:46 (King James Version)

⁴⁶And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Matthew 25:46 (English Standard Version)

⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

“The Greek word translated as punishment is kolasis. According to Barclay, “I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature kolasis is never used of anything but remedial punishment. The word for eternal is aionois... The simplest way to put it is that aionios cannot be used properly of anyone but God ... Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.” (Barclay, A Spiritual Autobiography, p. 66).

Matthew 25:46 (Young's Literal Translation)

⁴⁶And these shall go away to punishment age-during, but the righteous to life age-during.'

Luke 2:10 (King James Version)

¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

John 12:32 (King James Version)

³²And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.

Acts 3:21 (King James Version)

²¹Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. NEB says “universal restoration.”

Romans 5:18-19 (King James Version)

¹⁸Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

¹⁹For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

Romans 14:11 (Amplified Bible)

For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God [acknowledge Him to His honor and to His praise].

1 Corinthians 15:22 (King James Version)

²²For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

2 Corinthians 5:19 (King James Version)

¹⁹To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

Ephesians 1:9-10 (King James Version)

⁹Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself:

¹⁰That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:

Ephesians 1:9-10 (New International Version)

⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Philippians 2:10-11 (New English Translation)

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father

Will bow worshipfully ... every tongue confess with joy and praise – according to W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

Colossians 1:20 (King James Version)

²⁰And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

1 Timothy 2:4-6 (King James Version)

⁴Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

⁵For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

⁶Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

1 Timothy 4:10 (King James Version)

¹⁰For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

Titus 2:11 (King James Version)

¹¹For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,

Titus 2:11 (New American Standard Bible)

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,

2 Peter 3:9 (King James Version)

⁹The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

1 John 2:2 (King James Version)

²And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

Revelation 5:13 (King James Version)

¹³And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

Revelation 15:4 (Young's Literal Translation)

⁴who may not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? because Thou alone [art] kind, because all the nations shall come and bow before Thee, because Thy righteous acts were manifested.'

Response to Dr. Neuhouser's presentation about George MacDonald on Universalism
Dr. Kevin Diller

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 conquer 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--not 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. Neuhaus 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 but 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 in 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);