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

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this gathering tonight. Dr. Neuhausser’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. Neuhausser 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. Euangelion 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. (1 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


