

The Role of Nature in the Eschatology of George MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons*

Joshua Wise

George MacDonald's theology has, in the few academic presentations of his thought, been presented as a theology of the imagination.¹ While it would be foolish to challenge this interpretation of MacDonald, the complexity and systematic unity of MacDonald's thought has not been given much treatment beyond Kerry Dearborn's book. This paper, which will consider the role of MacDonald's understanding of Nature, both divine and human, in his Eschatology from his three part work, *The Unspoken Sermons*, is submitted as a step in that direction. While it is true that the interpretive lens of the imagination is everywhere present in the Scottish author's work, this does not remove the systematic and complexly consistent nature of his theological thought. This article will attempt to show how the eschatological thought of MacDonald works by means of a systematic consideration of his understanding of divine and human nature.

We will first briefly consider MacDonald's methodology in the *Unspoken Sermons*, and then move on to consider his thought with regard to his understanding of God, humanity, and eschatology, by examining his teaching on divine and human nature, first in general, and then with relation to the eschata. Finally, a brief consideration of the relevance of MacDonald's theology will be laid out.

1. MacDonald's Methodology

I believe that God is just like Jesus, only greater yet, for Jesus said so.² In the whole of the *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald refers to tradition scarcely except to criticize it. For his purposes, the teachings of the church in the past are not particularly useful except to appear as targets for his criticism. He does not approach thought about God with a theological manual in one hand and a reformation era confession in the other. Instead, he draws his conclusions about the nature of God from the man Jesus who is the revelation of God.³ His theology is an ascending Christology that roots nearly all of its conclusions in the life of Jesus as revealed by the Bible. He does not, as Pannenberg would do a century later, try to justify every teaching about the divine Logos in this or that particular event or element in Jesus' life.⁴ Instead,

he takes the general themes of the life and teachings of Jesus and comes to an understanding of the Father and the Son grounded in these.

However, he is not bound to the simple literal meaning of the text.⁵ His imagination, as Hein, Dearborn and others have pointed out, is the matrix through which he interprets the life of Jesus. Therefore, he knows as well that the revelation of Jesus, while full, draws us beyond the simple categories of language. Father is the best word for the Father, as far as MacDonald is concerned, but it is insufficient to capture the full reality of God.⁶ Parables teach more than they say.⁷ The larger world must be sought from its appearances in our smaller world. The divine nature, where enemies become friends is a dark abyss, beyond sight.⁸

Therefore his picture of God is drawn from the life and teachings of Jesus, and expanded by his continual contemplation of these. We may see here a twofold reaction to the Federal Calvinism of his youth. The first is his attempt to strip away traditions, religious and theological, that have, from MacDonald's perspective, covered over the true meaning of the text. He wants to get at the Bible as that which reliably tells us about Jesus, who reliably tells us about the Father. Second, as has been often noted, his conclusions about God are themselves the polar opposites of the religion of his boyhood.

Thus the categories which we are using to examine MacDonald's thought here are not original to him. He may well have resisted the idea that he had a doctrine of the divine nature. However, as long as the categorization of his thought is not placed above obedience to the Master, which was MacDonald's central understanding of Christian faith, it can only help us to understand his thought to consider it in these somewhat artificial categories.

2. Nature and the Will

Divine Nature

George MacDonald does not have a sermon dedicated purely to his doctrine of God in the *Unspoken Sermons*. Instead, his understanding of God is spread throughout the work, brought up here and there when some statement about the character and nature of God is necessary. However, it is possible to reconstruct an image of God from these statements that is coherent and consistent.

MacDonald's understanding of the nature of God does not begin with traditional theological categories of being, essence, or even with a general concept of divinity. Being is not the most basic category that we

can use to talk about God, nor is any philosophical category. Whereas the general philosophical definition of nature is understood as the principle which defines the activities and properties of a thing, MacDonald defines nature as the attributes or character of a thing.⁹ Nature is the innermost truth of a person or thing which shows how they will act. Thus, while he does not begin with philosophical categories, his definition is close to the traditional understanding of nature.

The divine nature is defined by the persons of God, their character, and their relationship. God as Father and Son is at the root of all being and creation, and to be divine is to be as the Father and the Son.¹⁰ Nature includes in it what we would generally divide out into attributes and character. Divinity is as much about being a freely willed person as much as it is about being the Father or Son in particular. Thus MacDonald does not have a concept of an abstract category of divinity which comes before the Father and Son. Instead, the very persons and their relationship, is the divine nature.¹¹ Here his faithfulness to Biblical language is evident.

In this eternal relationship of Father and Son, the Son's will is one with the Father, doing all that He sees the Father do.¹² MacDonald does not attempt to imagine what the divine life is within itself beyond this kind of generalization. However, it is not clear whether MacDonald perceives there to be two wills in God in perfect union, or a single will as has been traditionally thought. Because the divine nature is in fact a description of the character of the Father and Son, and there is no abstract nature which both Father and Son participate in, it seems unlikely that MacDonald considers there to be only one will in God in the traditional sense. Instead, real oneness, he points out, comes from the union of more than one thing.¹³ The one will of God is more likely to be the total union of the Son's will to the Father's will.

Therefore it is in this existing eternal relationship, will obeying will, that the divine nature exists. It is not limited to this, as we will see in the consideration of self-giving. However, MacDonald holds that the will is the locus of obedience, and obedience is the central relationship in the divine life. He comes to this, as with all things, through his understanding of the life of Jesus lived in obedience to the Father's will.

Human Nature

In the article "George MacDonald and the Anthropology of Love"¹⁴ Robin Phillips makes the argument that while MacDonald's straightforward theological works argue for an anthropology of the will, his fantasy really

supersedes this with an anthropology of love. Phillips argues for this as superior since it seems to circumvent a problem of knowledge observed in MacDonald's demand that we both believe rightly about God in order to obey God, and come to think rightly about God by obeying God.

Phillips proposes that MacDonald imports an element of the Federal Calvinism of his grandmother, which demands a works-proof of salvation, and further proposes that the construction of MacDonald's formal theology is impossible for one who wants to know that they are doing the will of God, for true knowledge only comes from obedience. Yet, Phillips points out, MacDonald insists that to truly obey, we must think rightly of God.¹⁵ This is a seemingly insurmountable problem for the Scottish thinker.

However, two points may be brought to bear against this position. First, MacDonald is clear that the intention to obey the Lord is enough to give "the Lord a hold of him, which he will use."¹⁶ Obedience "is not perfection, but trying"¹⁷ and thus does not itself imply a perfection at the beginning. Simply trying to do what we think is the will of God is sufficient at the beginning of our endeavor to turn toward God.

Secondly, MacDonald makes it very clear how we are to discern what is the will of God, even if we do not fully know God aright. Our trying is revelatory. In the answer to how we are to know whether a thing is true, he answers "[b]y *doing* what you know to be true." Whatever we know to be true (we may be wrong) we must do. Upon doing what we know to be true, because all truth is God's truth, we will soon find the truth or falsehood of it. God will reveal to us the truth or falsehood by means of "the hold" that the Lord gets when we try to obey God.

MacDonald has not entered into the difficulty proposed by Gabriel Biel's "*facere quod in se est*."¹⁸ Biel's medieval concept, which contributed to the anxiety of the late Middle Ages, left open the question as to whether a human being was actually doing what was in them. At the end of the day a tortured conscience might yet say "I could have done more." MacDonald instead argues that we should do what we know to be good, and if we are wrong, God will correct us. We may have confidence in God's correction, indeed, we may demand it.

Therefore there is no difficulty in the anthropology of the will. The model therefore stands as his most explicit understanding of what the human being is. The will is, for MacDonald "the deepest, the strongest, the divinest thing in man."¹⁹ This is so because the will is central to the divine nature. Will is the place where a human being completes the circle of creator/creature,

“Obedience is but the other side of the creative will. Will is God’s will, obedience is man’s will; the two make one.”²⁰ This link is vital not only to us as we are, but to humanity as it should be. God’s will must be our will, so that it is how we understand our very being.²¹

However, Phillips is correct in attempting to speak about anthropology in the terms of love, because the human being is, for MacDonald, of the same kind or nature as God, and the will and love are not separable in God.²² The Son wills the Father’s will and obeys him. Jesus commands us to obey him if we love him.²³ Thus an anthropology of the will is an anthropology of love. We obey God because we love God, and in obeying we love. The will is the origin of human action, and that action is to be love. Love is the one proper act of the will, for love is obedience to the Father. Therefore we need not place the anthropology of the will in opposition to the anthropology of love, for they are one.

What MacDonald would mean by a human nature is therefore the same thing as he means by the divine nature. It is a willed existence ordered toward obedience to the Good will. The Father’s divine will is willed freely in light of the Father’s goodness, the Son’s will obeys. The creature, made in the image of God, and thus sharing this nature of will and obedience, participates in the divine nature by doing the same things that God does. Therefore it is something of a false dichotomy to speak of human nature as distinct from divine nature. Instead, human nature, when pure and unbroken, is the divine nature worked out in creaturely form. But to get at the real distinction, we must consider fallen human nature.

Fallen Human Nature

As we have seen, MacDonald’s understanding of nature is not consistent with the major theological formulations that came before him. He does not think of nature in philosophical terms, and certainly not in the terms debated over in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era when the term took on its now authoritative meaning. Instead, to share a nature is to be of the same “kind” with regard some important element of understanding, habit, composition, or perfection. When MacDonald speaks of human beings and God as the same “kind” or “nature” he means essentially that human beings naturally love the same things that God loves, and perceive the same things that God perceives. They are creatures of will and obedience because the character of God is to be Will and Obedience, and this makes humanity of the same nature as God.

However, in our current state, these natural inclinations are broken, fallen, and disordered. We do not will what God wills, or love what God loves. But, he argues, contrary to his own understanding of his upbringing, these inclinations are not so disordered that at our very base we see light as darkness or good as evil. We may do evil, we may love pleasures that come from evil, and we may even believe evil things of God and think they are good. But at our most basic level of being, which has its root in God,²⁴ we are not of another kind than God. “To say that what our deepest conscience calls darkness may be light to God, is blasphemy; to say light in God and light in man are of different kinds, is to speak against the spirit of the light.”²⁵ When St. John speaks of God as light, it is light that human beings can recognize and understand as light.

Free Will

MacDonald’s anthropology of will is only understood correctly if it is seen as an anthropology of free will, not a bound will. God is free, and not in any way bound, and thus the human will must also be free. Only through freely aligning the human will with the will of the Father is salvation from sin, and human perfection, possible. Here, MacDonald’s attack on imputed righteousness is most relevant. That we should be declared righteous without our wills being freely turned to righteousness is for MacDonald a mere trick of law that is unworthy of the living God. Any doctrine which teaches deception or anything less than the full real transformation of a human into one who is freely willing the good that is God, is to be cast off as a lie of theology that seeks to understand before it seeks to obey.

Contrary to the teaching of his youth, MacDonald did not see the human person as corrupt all the way down. Humanity does not have its being in itself. Instead, that being lies in God, who is pure from all sin.²⁶ Thus the foundation for our free will, our being, is not able to be corrupted by our sin. Thus, no matter how bad a human being might become, his freedom is preserved because it lies outside of his power to corrupt. The will remains free so that salvation is always and everywhere present to a person.

3. Self-Gift, Self-Revelation

Another way to view the nature is to consider it, alongside the will, through the lens of self-gift and self-revelation. The divine nature is as much that which gives itself away and reveals itself as it is that which wills and obeys. The ability to speak of self-gift and self-revelation as descriptors of the

divine nature demonstrates the way in which MacDonald formulates his understanding of God as based on action and not the mysterious internal principle.

In an imaginary speech by the Son in his Sermon “Kingship,” MacDonald lays out his understanding of the revelation of Jesus.²⁷ The Son is the one who knows the Father from all eternity and has come to tell us about the Father. This revelation is given without any kind of respect for kingdoms or power, or fear of what people will do to Jesus. They may kill him; he will rise. The life in him is too great to be held down.²⁸ To deny that God is as Jesus says He is would have been for Jesus to blaspheme, and not to be truly revelatory of the Father.

By observing the revealing nature of the Son, MacDonald concludes that the very nature and glory of God is self-revelation.²⁹ The relationship of the Son to the father reveals God in many different ways: life giving, providing of all needs because they are needs, forgiving of all sins except those we persist in, healing, and casting out of all evil.

But beyond simple revelation, the Son also gives himself to Humanity and to God the Father. He spends his life teaching about God, casting out demons, and living the life of God among people so that human beings might be reconciled to God. This costs Jesus his life, and reveals that God is self-denying in his self giving, thinking nothing of Himself but only of the needs of those whom he loves.³⁰ The deifying Jesus, who makes humans like himself, reveals the deity of the Father. Therefore, even his gift of self is a revelation about the divine nature, and the self revelation is seen as self-gift.

Thus the two ideas, self-giving and self-revealing are linked very closely in the divine life shown in Jesus. Based on this, MacDonald holds that it is the nature of God to reveal, not to hide truth.³¹ The Son is the revelation of the Father to humanity, and thus draws humanity into the great revelatory life of God.

MacDonald holds that the self-giving and self-revealing life of Jesus gives us a look into the immanent trinity.³² The Father gives himself to the Son, and the Son gives himself in return to the Father. MacDonald here is drawing heavily on the Johannine understanding of the Son, and makes the observation that John, writing his Gospel last, knew best what the character of the Son was.³³ The union of the Father and son is the pattern for all creation, with the Son going out from the Father and having all creation made by him and in him.

God for MacDonald is an eternal live giving circle in which the

Father gives Himself away to the Son, and the Son, observing this self giving, gives himself back to the Father.³⁴ In this, the Father and Son are potentially always creating creatures like themselves, always bringing into being those who they can share themselves with, and suffering as they need to be drawn into the right relationship with themselves and God.³⁵

The needs of these creatures must be met by God, for it is in God's nature to do everything for them by giving Godself to the creatures, as the Father and Son give themselves to each other.

I protest, therefore, against all such teaching as, originating in and fostered by the faithlessness of the human heart, gives the impression that the exceeding goodness of God towards man is not the natural and necessary outcome of his being.³⁶

The debt is not owed to the creature because of anything intrinsic to the creature, but because of God's own nature.³⁷ "God could not be satisfied with himself without doing all that a God and Father could do for the creatures he has made."³⁸ This is not a weakness in the power or glory of God, but the very essence of it.³⁹ The reciprocal self-giving of the Father and Son shows the nature of God such that every relationship that God has must be patterned on it. A God who did anything else would cease to be the God revealed by Jesus, and thus a God not worth worshiping or loving.⁴⁰ The God of MacDonald is a God who can only deny us the rights we have, which are rooted in God's own character and nature, by unmaking us.⁴¹ Only then will the debt of self that God must pay to each creature be cast aside. But if this will not happen, and MacDonald gives no indication that he thinks it would, God must then spend himself to make the creature perfect. The self giving of the Divine is done in order that the recipient should be as much like the divine as possible, as the Son is like the Father, and for the same reason. The Son is the very image of the Father because the Father makes a gift of Himself to the Son. This self-gift, or revelation, may require suffering and even death, but it will not matter to a God who will no less let something come between Creator and created than will allow something to come between Father and Son.

Human Self-Gift and Revelation

The concept of self-gift and self-revelation therefore also helps us to understand what MacDonald means by humanity. His understanding of the human body is that it, by being visible, tangible, and able to use the natural world to communicate, is a revelation of the innermost person to others.⁴²

The human body shows forth the inner person, and each human body is a revelation of God. The outworking of the inner secret of each person is communicated to the other people by means of the body through willed obedience to God in act and word.⁴³

The human being is meant to share the whole of the inner reality with all other humans and with God. The lived human life is to be both revelation and gift, patterned on the divine revelation. Yet we do not live this way. The observed reality is different than MacDonald's theory of humanity. Thus we find, a seeming contradiction. If MacDonald bases his understanding of nature on the actual act and attributes of a being, it seems that he could not in fact hold such lofty attributes for the human nature. However, for the basis of his theory, we must look somewhere other than merely at the lived lives of humans as they currently exist.

The anthropology of revelation must be found in the incarnation. The reality of humanity, its meaning and its goal, is drawn just as much from the man Jesus and his relationship with the Father as is his idea of divinity. Just as his anthropology of will is patterned on the divine life revealed in Jesus obedient to the Father, so the life of self-gift and self-revelation is demonstrated in the life of Jesus.

Jesus is, for MacDonald, the one true man, or the only man, or simply 'the man.' The meaning of these terms is revealed in his sermon, *The Truth*. MacDonald considers what science has done to the beautiful flower and to refreshing and lovely water. He observes that the truth of a flower is the full bloom of it as a revelation of the Father to his children, not simply its parts. The truth of water is that it is cool, refreshing, and babbles in the brook with the voice of God's creature, not that it is made of hydrogen and oxygen. The truth of the flower is the ideal of flower in the mind of God. The truth of the human being is Jesus Christ who is transparent to the love of God. The true creature is the creature that reveals God most fully. As the flower is a revelation, not in its parts, but in its whole, so too is the human being in its highest form a revelation of God. This revelation gives MacDonald the ground for his understanding of human nature as different than that observed in the fallen world around him. In essence, Jesus reveals not only God, but humanity to itself.⁴⁴

4. Time and Eternity

MacDonald does not have a clear definition in his *Unspoken Sermons* of his use of "eternal" or "eternity." It seems to be akin to that of the Boethian⁴⁵

understanding of being that is full possession of its whole life. He makes reference to the idea that with God “there is no past.”⁴⁶

However, it does not seem that MacDonald intends for this use of the word “Eternal” to apply to humans. Eternal life is not a change in our temporal experience, but a union with God that gives our lives the same kind of quality that the unchangeable God has. Eternal life is that life which is as far from nothingness or non-entity as possible.⁴⁷ It has nothing to do with the slightest idea of going out of being or having never been. It is life so rooted in God that God’s eternity gives its mighty qualities to temporal lives.

But when considering time itself, MacDonald is much more clear. Much like the second century thinker Irenaeus of Lyons, George MacDonald understands time as the environment in which the human creature grows into greater and greater likeness to God.⁴⁸ The will is trained over long periods of time to come to will the same things as the Father. The proper loves are built up over time, as is understanding and knowledge. Human nature is a temporal nature because it is a created nature.

MacDonald, also like Irenaeus, does not consider it possible that, upon our first creation, we should have been able to fully grasp the deepest mysteries of God.⁴⁹ It is not merely that we are fallen creatures that need correction, but that finite creatures necessarily need time to learn the deepest mysteries of God and community. Irenaeus’ argument, that humanity fell because it could not keep hold of the divinity that was offered to it, is not explicitly repeated by MacDonald.⁵⁰ However, his formulation is in line with this thinking. The human being could not accept all of the divine life that was offered to it upon its first creation, but needed to grow into the stature of one who could receive this life.

As we are fallen, time then serves the function of giving us space to grow out of our fallen state into the divine life. Whereas an unfallen people would merely have worked to grasp one good truth after another, the fallen person must struggle against the lie of self that binds her. Only when the lie of self is overcome, can time then begin to serve its original purpose once more of ushering the young king or queen into deeper and deeper mysteries in God.

Here then the finitude of the created being is given the best possible existence that can imitate the divine life. Since God is infinite, creation in a perfected state is not possible, since that state would have to infinitely understand the infinite God, which is not possible. Thus what appears to be a disjunction in natures, the eternal divine and the temporal human, is in fact

the only possible situation in which the created could be of the same kind as the divine in willing, loving, self-giving, and self-revealing.

5. Eschatology

The ignorant soul understands by this life eternal only an endless elongation of consciousness; what God means by it is a being like his own, a being beyond the attack of decay or death, a being so essential that it has no relation whatever to nothingness; a something which is, and can never go to that which is not, for with that it never had to do, but came out of the heart of Life, the heart of God, the fountain of being; an existence partaking of the divine nature, and having nothing in common, any more than the Eternal himself, with what can pass or cease: God owes his being to no one, and his child has no lord but his Father.⁵¹

Considering then our examination of divine and human natures in MacDonald's theology, we can now turn to the flower of each in his Eschatology. We will consider the elements of divine and human nature that have been laid out above, and how they lead into his understanding of the last things.

First, however, it is important to point out that MacDonald only mentions the second coming of Christ once in the entire *Unspoken Sermons*.⁵² The instance deals with the teaching by considering that Christ said that its time and manner would be a surprise, which indicates that MacDonald did not consider it a proper subject in the sermons. The central point for MacDonald here is that Jesus said that we must be ready for it and be at work when it comes.

Therefore, the resurrection and the new heavens and the new earth exist in an eschatological reality of which the temporal and physical relation to our current time and space is not clear. It appears that it is this earth and these heavens that are considered in his thought about the eschata, but how they transition from their current state to that future state is not spelled out. The missing second coming certainly fills in this connection, but MacDonald appears to feel it his duty to not speak on this matter beyond admonishing his readers to be ready at all times. Thus, we may assume that MacDonald sees the second coming of Christ as the transitional event between the old and new creation, but the evidence in the text of the sermons is sparse.

6. Nature and Eschatology

Free Will and Hell

Despite the fact that MacDonald's well known position was that all

human beings would eventually be saved from their sin and come out of Hell, MacDonald insisted that they must come out willingly. The will is, as we saw above, the central element of the human person for MacDonald. It is the place where the man or woman is most like God, and is actually akin to God. Thus, for MacDonald, a person could not come out of hell and have their will overwhelmed or countermanded by brute force. This would be illogical, a contradiction in terms. The will must come to God on its own, must choose God freely.

But God can compel the soul with terrible instruments of suffering and solitude.⁵³ The process, which MacDonald imagines, involves the loss of all external stimuli, all faint shadows of the revelation of God.⁵⁴ All that was meant to be media of the life and love of God failed at its task while a person was alive. But after her death, a soul may be stripped of all of these so that she might be utterly and inconsolably alone. It is this terrible solitude, cut off from the physical world, from the society of all people, and even from one's own body, that forms the hell of MacDonald's imagination. Gone are all glimmers of light, so that a person might begin to long for them.

This hell, which brings about the yearning for any contact whatsoever, brings clearly to light in the damned soul his eternal need. Alone, there is nothing, and nothing can be done about it. Some contact, some society, any society, even one's greatest enemy, is terribly longed for by the damned soul. And here, in this longing, God can snatch up the person to show them their relationship to Him.

This hell, instead of one simply designed to punish, is the result of two important ideas for MacDonald. The first is that no amount of punishment is ever able to bring about justice for a wrong.⁵⁵ Only a person who is able to come to the wronged party and offer himself in true and humble sorrowful repentance is able to make atonement for sin. MacDonald uses the illustration of a person who has stolen his watch. If the man is thrown into prison, or beaten for his crime, is justice served? No, the watch is still missing, the victim is by no means restored.

But if the man should come to him and fall down at his feet, offering himself in place of the watch, offering his deepest sorrow for the wrong he has done, then atonement, or reconciliation, might be made. Something better than the watch has been given to the victim, the brotherhood of the person who has done them wrong. Of course, it would be best if the watch also was restored, and MacDonald insists that that which was taken must be restored. The things we have lost in this life due to being wronged, if they be real and

eternal things, must be restored to us.

And thus the hell of self which locks a person away until they scream for their deadliest foe to come and console them, is a hell that is designed to bring about a transformation into righteousness, so that real atonement can be made between people. Real restoration is only possible when person meets person face to face as whole humans who can make atonement with each other and God.

The second idea is, which we have seen above, that God owes the creature the very best that God can give. MacDonald, seeing the debt inherent in the creator side of the creator creature relationship, saw this debt only possibly met in the full restoration of life, justice, and righteousness to each individual soul. God's debt to each person could only be fully paid if they each received the very best for them, which is God's own self.

This debt gives the human being rights, though they are not what would be popularly called "rights" in common language. In no uncertain terms, MacDonald insists that the human creature has the right to be hunted by God to the very extremities of his or her own being. The claim on God is the claim to being made perfect.

He has a claim to be compelled to repent; to be hedged in on every side; to have one after another of the strong, sharp-toothed sheep-dogs of the great shepherd sent after him, to thwart him in any desire, foil him in any plan, frustrate him of any hope, until he come to see at length that nothing will ease his pain, nothing make life a thing worth having, but the presence of the living God within him; that nothing is good but the will of God; nothing noble enough for the desire of the heart of man but oneness with the eternal.⁵⁶

Hell in its terrible maddening darkness, is a right that each human being has, that God will see delivered until the soul has paid the last farthing of self back to God. This right, far from "standing on the promises of God", is ours whether we want it or not. We do not claim it, God claims it for us as that which we cannot forsake.

This inability to forsake is found in MacDonald's understanding that humanity has its being in God, and finds its most foundational ontological stratum inaccessible to its own sin. We can damage ourselves down to a certain level, but because our being is rooted in God, and not in ourselves, we cannot damage that level of our being. We cannot unmake ourselves, or remove our ties of kindred to the Father. Instead, God holds us in being, maintains our ties of kindred, and demands that each human receive the full measure of her rights from God.⁵⁷

7. Self-Revelation, Self-Gift and Eschatology

The Resurrection of the Body

MacDonald, considering a question as old as Origen, emphatically denies that the bodies we will have in the resurrection will be identical to the ones we have now.⁵⁸ He considers the changeable nature of our current bodies, and rejects the idea that they should be set for eternity in the state in which we die. What he calls a “worthless identity” of having the same body, does not serve any purpose to God. In perhaps a shot at another tradition dating back to St. Augustine, but preserved by many others since him, he compares the desire for the exact same body that we had in life to a Christian who might “desire that the hair which has been shorn from him through all his past life should be restored to his risen and glorified head.”⁵⁹

Instead, MacDonald asks the question regarding our bodies with an eye toward what we have said about the self-giving and self-revealing nature of the human body. The resurrected body will most certainly be our own body, though we will give no care to whether it is made up of the same molecules. Instead, what makes it ours is that it is recognizably our own. Here MacDonald is drawing on his understanding of the body as the revelation of the inner person. We will know our friends (a concern he addresses numerous times) because we will see in them that person that we loved. The body will remain an outward revelation of identity, only now it will do so without the hindrance of defect, deformity, or error.⁶⁰

MacDonald seems here to come close to the teaching of the soul as the form of the body. The form guarantees the identity of the person who rises in the body. This should be distinguished from, for example, the Thomistic idea that the soul and matter would be both numerically identical.⁶¹ MacDonald does not use the terminology of the soul as form, but the principle of self that knows itself and is expressed through the body seems to be a workable match for the soul in scholastic theology.⁶²

The resurrection of the body for the individual person other than Christ, for MacDonald, is tied to the death of sin. He links it with an internal life giving principle that will raise people from the dead as it did Jesus, and argues that it is only when the life within us is like the life of Jesus, that the body will live again.⁶³ Further, he identifies the lack of a body with damnation, at least insofar as the body is the medium of revelation and that revelation is fully removed in hell.⁶⁴ The internal life giving principle is the life of the Father, participated in fully by the Son. When it is fully

participated in by the believer, they experience the resurrection of the body like Christ.

Eternal Mirrors

Thus will love spread and spread in wider and stronger pulses till the whole human race will be to the man sacredly lovely.⁶⁵

The divine and human natures are expressed for MacDonald most fully in his teaching on the eschatological community. He likens the abiding light and presence of God in the redeemed person to the way a light broods in a mirror, deep within it, casting the light back out again.⁶⁶ He draws the imagery from St. Paul, as well as from Moses whose face shone when he came from God's presence, and the transfiguration of Jesus. The light, which is the life of God, is so much the individual person's that it dwells deeply in the humanity of each man and woman.

That indwelling light is shown forth for the express purpose of revealing the hidden mystery of God that only that one person knows to the whole community of the people of God. Each person shines forth with the deep brooding indwelling light, not merely reflecting back an external light, for each person is a unique revelation of God in his or her innermost being. Each person knows something about God that no other person knows.⁶⁷

To express this hidden knowledge, MacDonald uses the image of the white stone from the Revelation of John on which is written a secret name known only to the Father and the person it is given to.⁶⁸ This stone symbolizes that hidden truth of God that can only be known through the individual person. Therefore the knowledge of God is intrinsically tied to a person's fellows, who stand as revelation to their creator. Each will be, as MacDonald says, a prophet to the rest, telling forth the hidden mysteries of God.

Here also we see one of the important elements of the universal nature of salvation for MacDonald. Without each and every person in the kingdom, the revelation is incomplete. To lack even a single voice is to lack an infinity of revelations, for as each other son or daughter of God receives a single person's revelation, so too do they reflect back their own mysteries in light of this new truth, and so on to infinity. Each person's revelation is itself incomplete without the eternally resonating and ever uplifting revelation of every other person in the heavenly kingdom.

8. Time and Eschatology

As we saw in the Anthropology section, time functions as the environment in which the fallen human can come to a proper alignment with the will of God. There does not seem to be any significant change in the way in which time functions in the eschata. Human beings are temporal creatures by nature, and those who are in hell experience time just as much as those who have been resurrected. MacDonald does not propose any kind of disjunction between these two times, but insists that those in the resurrection, who have God's life in them, will be able to see and reach down to those who are in need of being drawn out of the pit of self.⁶⁹

Due to his understanding of time as necessary for change, MacDonald does not propose that time will ever disappear for humanity. It will endure long enough for every damned soul to be made free. But it will also endure so that every resurrected person can go on being the contributor to and the recipient of the everlasting exchange of revelation about God in the eschatological community. Time will endure for each person will search the Father directly for deeper and deeper mystery. God cannot be fully comprehended, and thus can always be delved into more deeply for greater and greater truth. When each soul is freed from the hell of self, then time will once more serve its original purpose, the perfecting of the perfected. Here we see a striking similarity to a synthesis of the theology of Irenaeus which perceived the necessity of time for the development of the human into the fullness of divinity, and of Gregory of Nyssa, who saw the infinity of God as that which could never be fully comprehended.

Therefore, the minor theme of apophatic theology in MacDonald parallels the development of the same ideas in Nyssa, with the same conclusion of an everlasting ascent into the understanding of God, *Epektasis*.

9. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the structure of MacDonald's thought about eschatology built on his understanding of divine and human nature. Far from merely positing an unreflective universalism, MacDonald's thought displays a rich understanding of the relationship between the divine and human as revealed by Jesus. It would not be going too far to say that MacDonald concludes universal salvation from the incarnation. It would be wrong to say that his conclusion is foregone. However, the line drawn from the incarnation to a fully redeemed humanity is clearly drawn.

Therefore in light of the complexity of his thought and resonances

with early church fathers, a richer view of the theological thought of George MacDonald seems to be useful to contemporary theology for a number of reasons.

First, with the rise of the acceptance of the theology of C.S. Lewis in contemporary academic works,⁷⁰ it is important to understand the influences on Lewis' thought. While many authors were influential on the great Oxford apologist, he wrote a book on only one of them,⁷¹ and openly confessed only one his "master." Only one appeared as his guide though the heavenly realm.⁷² As C.S. Lewis ascends in academic respect, so too should George MacDonald enter more fully into serious theological consideration.

Secondly, MacDonald's confrontation with Federal Calvinist theology is not irrelevant today in a theological clash between Evangelical theology and main line Protestant and or Catholic theology. His ability to read scripture in a day when the Bible was no less under attack from science, textual criticism and popular opinion, is a continuing model for how we might do biblical theology in a similar context.

Thirdly, his understanding of the atonement, which is not addressed in this paper, is highly relevant in light of the discussions of violence and the cross in the last half century. While MacDonald might appear to fit within the school of Abelard, his larger theological framework may show his conclusions in new and useful light for the contemporary discussions.

Finally, contemporary debates in Roman Catholicism regarding nature and grace reveal tendencies in certain threads of that tradition that may have deep resonance with MacDonald's view on what the Creator owes the creature. Furthermore, current questions in Protestantism regarding the doctrine of Purgatory may be benefitted by considering the same questions.

George MacDonald's theology must be treated as a whole for it to be treated fairly. This paper has attempted to give a microcosm of that theology by presenting from a single three volume set, *Unspoken Sermons*. Clearly, further work must be done to treat MacDonald's corpus more systematically to understand how his thought hangs together across multiple works. For the once great voice of Christian hope in an age when much hope was lost, should itself not be lost in a similarly beleaguered age.

Endnotes

1. Most notably by Kerry Dearborn, *The Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006 and Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*. Grand Rapids: Christian Univ Pr, 1982.

2. George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I,II,III in one Volume*. Whitehorn: Johannesen, 2011, 534.

3. In this he prefigures Barth, Pannenberg, and other twentieth century theologians.

4. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968 .

5. In fact, MacDonald freely reinterprets texts to be understood within the general structure of his understanding of Christ. His rejection of the word “adoption” in St. Paul’s writing is an example of how he does not feel bound to the text, or at least the translators’ reading of the text *Abba, Father!* in *US*, 275ff). Frequently MacDonald will approach the Greek of the text and give an alternate reading that better suits his understanding of God.

6. *US*, 39, 52

7. *Ibid.*, 488

8. *Ibid.*, 148.

9. What is traditionally understood as the nature of God, the inner reality of God which admits no real examination, is not considered God’s nature in MacDonald’s theology. Instead, the inner life of God is submitted to totally dark mystery.

10. MacDonald’s understanding of the role of the Spirit, especially in the life of the trinity, is ambiguous in the *Unspoken Sermons*. The Spirit does come up throughout the book, but it is often unclear whether MacDonald is thinking of the third hypostasis of the trinity, or simply God as present in the world or the believer. Further, it is not clear whether there is, for MacDonald, any distinction between these two concepts.

11. The myth of the divide between the east and west with regard to the priority of person over nature may be in full retreat these days. However, for MacDonald the priority of the person of the Father is clear. He does not use language of *Monarchia* as a designator for the rule of the Father, though it certainly fits with his model of the Father’s relationship to the Son and the rest of creation.

12. *US*, 246.

13. *Ibid.*, 298.

14. Robin Phillips, “George MacDonald and the Anthropology of Love”, *North Wind* 30(2011).

15. As to Phillips’ statement that “MacDonald never abandoned the idea that good works (particularly obedience to the commands of Christ) are essential to proving that one has true faith.” Phillips, “Anthropology of Love”, 30, it seems clear that MacDonald nowhere is concerned with the proving of one’s faith. The doing of faith is everything to MacDonald, the proving of it is nothing.

16. *US*, 409.

17. *Ibid.*, 399.

18. Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 128.

19. *Ibid.*, 310.

20. *Ibid.*, 311.

21. *Ibid.*, 363.
22. See, for example, Thomas Gerold, "Theology for the Sake of God's Children", *North Wind*, 23 (2004), 15.
23. John 14:15.
24. *US* 456-457.
25. *Ibid.*, 546.
26. *Ibid.*, 257
27. *Ibid.*, 496-497.
28. *Ibid.*, 375. Cf. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 31.
29. *US*, 236.
30. *Ibid.*, 367-368.
31. *Ibid.*, 164.
32. However, MacDonald will argue that what God's life is, in and of itself, no one knows (*US*, 419). Due to his connection of character and attribute as nature, this is in line with the Greek idea that the essence of God is beyond comprehension, which leads to the Cappadocian *Epektasis*. MacDonald follows along similar lines.
33. *US*, 68.
34. *Ibid.*, 423.
35. *Ibid.*, 299. The question as to whether creation is necessary is not specifically addressed here. MacDonald speaks of what *is* not what *must be*.
36. *Ibid.*, 342.
37. *Ibid.*, 346-347. MacDonald is also careful to distinguish between rights and merits. Human beings merit absolutely nothing of themselves. The concept of merit is completely foreign to MacDonald's conception of the relationship between humanity and God.
38. *Ibid.*, 343.
39. *Ibid.*, 236, 249.
40. MacDonald directly deals with the idea of a God who is not worth loving in his consideration of a God whose central attribute is power, (*US*, 420-421).
41. *US*, 347.
42. *Ibid.*, 292.
43. Here we have half of what we might call MacDonald's theology of space and time. For space is used to communicate the inner secrets of the person's being, which is God, to others. Time is used to shape and form that person into the living truth that they will one day be. In this life, space and time are here for the work of making us into these living truths, raising us up to the level at which we may go on to use both space and time aright. What we might simply call our context or environment, where we might interact with other images of God and learn from them, MacDonald puts under the category of revelation. He does not merely include the bodies of other people, revealing their inner thoughts, but the bodies of all of creation appearing before us in what theology has called "General Revelation".
44. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

45. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 5.

46. *US*, 566.

47. *Ibid.*, 308-309

48. Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.*, 4.38.

49. *US*, 581.

50. Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.*, 4.38.2.

51. *US*, 308-309.

52. *Ibid.*, 225.

53. MacDonald is fond of the verb “compel” when it comes to God’s ability to turn a human heart without countermanding the freedom of the will. See *US* 82, 151, 262, 265, 267, 342, 348, 473, 482, 488, 529. At least once MacDonald speaks of the rebellious soul compelling God to take the very measures that will compel the soul to come out of the self. See *US* 300.

54. *US* 268-270.

55. *US* 501ff.

56. *Ibid.*, 348. MacDonald also uses the language of God compelling us to “put in our claims” of perfection with God. God will torment the soul until it demands its rights from God to be made truly righteous. See *US* 342.

57. George MacDonald is generally remembered by those not especially concerned with his writing, as either an inspiration for C.S. Lewis, or a proponent of Universal Salvation. What is perhaps generally not considered is that MacDonald’s position is rooted in a larger theological world of perceptions. His universalism flows from his understanding of God as self-revealing and indebted to creatures to bring them the very best that is possible. It rests on the fact that human freedom is built on the divine life that underpins it, and thus cannot be utterly destroyed by anything unless God withdraw being from the person.

Therefore an attack on MacDonald’s universalism then must come as an attack, not on the conclusion, but on the constellation of premises that bring about the conclusion. Simple dismissal of Universal salvation on popularly accepted biblical grounds cannot get at the heart of his argument, since he is rooting himself in what he understands to be a deeply biblical theology that is impervious to simple proof-texting. Instead, to understand his argument for universal salvation, we must understand his image of God, Father and Son, and the role of the creature in that relationship. It may be useful to consider his theological motivations in light of two of the great proponents of universal salvation from the early church, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.

Origen’s belief that all things will come once more to perfection comes from his understanding that everything must be, in its end, like its beginning. MacDonald would clearly disagree with Origen, for MacDonald, like Irenaeus, would insist that the beginning is created for an end unlike itself. Development and growth are necessary for the human being to reach perfection. The human souls do not fall into bodies when they are sated with divine life, as in Origen, but have bodies explicitly

to participate in the divine communal life. Whereas Origen has no defense against a second fall, or even a continual cycle of falls and elevations, MacDonald once more appears to think more like Irenaeus in that the fall is due to our youth and need of growth which will be cured when perfection comes.

Nyssa understands God, however, as the one who will be all in all (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*). In his work *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory speaks of the punishments of the damned as those appropriate to and purifying of the sins of a person's life. The fire burns away that which is not lovely in the person. The finite nature of evil and the infinite nature of God guarantee that people will return to God (Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal salvation: eschatology in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 2000, 88.). Here MacDonald is far closer to Nyssa than Origen. However, whereas Gregory wants to link the need for the burning to "fleshly" desires and a link to our bodies, MacDonald roots the need for burning in the love of self. Once more, the difference exists in his teaching of the body as integral to the human's divine life.

This very brief comparison helps to point out where MacDonald is both like and unlike two of the most important figures who have proposed universal salvation. Such an understanding may help to show where MacDonald's views are relevant in contemporary debates regarding eschatology and universal salvation.

58. *US*, 160.

59. *Ibid.*, 161.

60. *Ibid.*, 292.

61. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 81.

62. This clarifies what is perhaps one of the more obscure interpretations by MacDonald of the resurrection. He proposes that the many different appearances of Jesus in which He is not recognized, are to be explained by the fact that Jesus is expressing the humanity that is in him, which could not be exhausted by every image of every child of God. An objection to this understanding would be that the resurrected body of Christ would not in fact be his own then, for it was not the body that was pierced on the cross. Yet, it follows from his understanding of what makes a body our own, that Christ in Himself, might claim any body at all as long as it truly showed forth his inner character. This inner character would then be recognizable to someone who encountered Christ in whatever body, if not immediately, then through some action of that body, like the Emmaus disciples, or the disciples who went fishing, or even Mary Magdalene at the grave of Christ.

63. *US*, 291.

64. *Ibid.*, 269.

65. *Ibid.*, 142.

66. *Ibid.*, 450-453.

67. *Ibid.*, 612.

68. *Ibid.*, 69-70.

69. *Ibid.*, 143-144.

70. See for example works by Peter Kreeft, as well as Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That all Men be Saved”?*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988 , and Jerry Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012 .

71. C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology - 365 Readings*.

72. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*.

Works Cited

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles, Volume IV*. Garden City: Image Books, 1957. Print.
- Athanasius of Alexandria. Schaff, Philip & Wallace, Henry, Editors. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series Volume IV Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007. Print.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs Von. *Dare We Hope “that all men be saved”?* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988. Print.
- Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans., Victor Watts. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Dearborn, Kerry. *The Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. Print.
- Gerold, Thomas. “Theology for the Sake of God’s Children.” *North Wind* 23 (2004): 13-20. Print.
- Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Trans. Catharine P. Roth. Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993. Print.
- Hein, Rolland. *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*. Grand Rapids: Christian Univ Pr, 1982. Print.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Print.
- . *George MacDonald: An Anthology - 365 Readings*. San Francisco: Harper, 2001. Print.
- Ludlow, Morwenna. *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2000. Print.
- MacDonald, George, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I,II,III in one Volume*. Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 2011. Print.
- Oberman, Heiko. *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000. Print.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Jesus: God and Man*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968. Print.
- Phillips, Robin. “George MacDonald and the Anthropology of Love.” *North Wind* 30 (2011): 25-37. Print.
- Pope Paul VI. *Pastoral Constitution On The Church In The Modern World — Gaudium et Spes*. Vatican City: 1965. Print.
- The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Volume I The Apostolic Fathers - Justin Martyr - Irenaeus*. Ed., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1993. Print.

The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Volume IV Terullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second. Ed. Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1994. Print.

Walls, Jerry L. *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation.* New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.