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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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George MacDonald on the Logic of Faith

Barbara Amell

George MacDonald on the Logic of Faith

by Barbara Amell

For the past seven years it has been my great pleasure to serve as editor of *Wingfold*, a literary quarterly devoted to restoring material by and about George MacDonald. One of my best sources of period articles and reviews related to MacDonald has been *Scribner's Monthly*, a 19th-century American magazine; the editor, Richard Watson Gilder, was a friend and admirer of MacDonald. Because of the many positive comments recorded in this publication I was delighted when I came across a review in an 1876 *Scribner's* issue of one of my favorite MacDonald novels, *Thomas Wingfold*. But the unsigned review was, to my surprise, largely negative. While initially acknowledging that "George MacDonald cannot write anything that is not valuable," the critic labeled the novel "argumentative," claiming this aspect had not only undermined the quality of the novel, but had done so to no added purpose. "You cannot prove the truth of Christianity, the immortality of the soul, the mission of Jesus Christ, and the fallacy of positivism in a novel," the critic stated, adding that the author had made an "ineffectual attempt to render objective a class of arguments in favor of Christianity which must ever remain subjective."

George MacDonald obviously did not agree with his critic regarding the possibilities of substantiating belief. And whatever criticisms one might make of MacDonald, no one could accuse him of presenting a rosy

picture of the universe supposedly created by a loving God when he wrote *Thomas Wingfold*. The title character's spiritual mentor is a deformed dwarf who suffers, as MacDonald did, from painful bouts with asthma; the mere sight of such a man would cause many to question the existence of a caring Creator. One of the novel's subplots involves the redemption of murderer, and throughout the book *Wingfold* endures the pain of unrequited love. "I have known people," MacDonald once wrote, "whose power of believing chiefly consisted in their incapacity for seeing difficulties." When George MacDonald aimed to prove the unprovable, he did not select easy targets.

The fact that MacDonald repeatedly attempted to apply logic to faith throughout much of his vast literary output may not be obvious to the average reader. MacDonald believed that Christ did not present an intellectual system of belief, and the author appears to have followed this example when composing his published sermons. His sons Greville and Ronald recorded that their father's beliefs were illustrated in his numerous didactic novels; yet many of the religious characters in these books were simple country people, not sophisticated theologians. MacDonald remains best known for his fantasy works and fairy tales; he was often referred to by his contemporaries in the press as a poet, a mystic, a preacher, a novelist, but seldom as a philosopher—yet it is my opinion that he was

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one of history's finest. Scattered throughout nearly forty of his books one finds more concepts on substantiating belief than possibly any other writer in the English language. George MacDonald brought a phenomenal degree of logic to the subject of faith by an expanded definition of both logic and faith, by an analysis less of physical facts than of spiritual ones. The result is a presentation of proof designed first for the soul, then consequently for the intellect. A composite picture of his logic's outcome must be compiled from numerous sources. By sharing a variety of quotations from both his well-known and obscure works I hope to demonstrate that he was largely successful in his efforts to provide the public with reasons to believe.

There can be no doubt that George MacDonald was a man of faith. In 1868 *The British Quarterly Review* declared, "MacDonald himself, as he is revealed in his books, is in all things the opposite of a skeptic. He can sympathize, delicately and deeply sympathize, with doubt, but, for his own part, he seems literally to be destitute of the faculty of dubitation. The universe for him beams and blazes with the light of God." Yet this same man of faith acknowledged that it is only understanding God, not simply believing in Him, that "will at length result in the unraveling for us of what must now, more or less, appear to every man the knotted and twisted coil of the universe."

First things first: Can we know beyond doubt that there is a God?

According to George MacDonald, yes, we can. The following excerpt from his novel *Paul Faber* is but one among many of his passages devoted to humanity's ultimate dilemma: "Do you long for the assurance of some sensible sign? Do you ask why no

intellectual proof is to be had? I tell you that such would but delay, perhaps altogether impair for you, that better, that best, that only vision . . . contact with the heart of God Himself, such a perception of His being . . . as, by its own radiance, will sweep doubt away forever. Being then in the light and knowing it, the lack of intellectual proof concerning that which is too high for it, will trouble you no more . . . It is for the sake of such vision as God would give that you are denied such vision as you would have . . . There is a better, closer, nearer than any human way of knowing, and to that He is guiding us across the desert of our ignorance."

We find in this passage a recurring theme from many of MacDonald's concepts on the discovery of truth: an enhanced definition of the factors necessary for knowing—divine rather than human contact, divine rather than intellectual logic, divine rather than physical facts. It follows of course that if we are to make this divine contact with God we must become more divine, in other words, more virtuous. MacDonald believed the path to virtue lay in the doing of what we know to be right, and that the resulting contact with God, far from being an emotional vagary, would be an experience that increased our understanding of the divine. "Obedience is the soul of knowledge," he wrote, quickly adding, "God forbid I should seem to despise understanding. The New Testament is full of urgings to understand. Our whole life, to be life at all, must be a growth in understanding. What I cry out upon is the misunderstanding that comes of one's endeavour to understand while not obeying . . . Not anxious to know our duty, or knowing it and not doing it, how shall we understand that which only a true heart and a clean soul can ever understand?"

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For MacDonald the proof that human beings have eternal souls lay with the nature and results of this contact with eternal Love, what he called “the unprovable mystery out of which come the things provable.” “It is only in God that the soul has room,” he said. “Truly the relation of the world to its maker cannot primarily be an intellectual one; it must be a relation tremendously deeper! We do not . . . come of God’s intellect, but of his imagination. He did not make us with his hands, but loved us out of his heart.”

MacDonald thus did not regard the human mind alone as capable of laying hold of God. He described himself as “not valuing the bare assent of the intellect,” adding that in spiritual matters, “adduction of proof is scarce possible in respect of inward experience,” and “The sole assurance worth a man’s having, even if the most incontestable evidence were open to him from a thousand other quarters, is that to be gained only from personal experience—that assurance which he can least readily receive from another, and which is least capable of being transmuted into evidence for another.” He also believed that “The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended.”

Yet that such proof as the human soul required was to be had, MacDonald not only heartily maintained, but declared the path to intellectual understanding lay through that personal spiritual experience. In his criticized novel *Thomas Wingfold* he declared that spiritual matters must be “apprehended ere they can be comprehended.” MacDonald believed intellectual comprehension must follow spiritual apprehension because love is greater than logic. “No human reason can be given for the highest necessity of divinely created existence,” he wrote. “For reasons are always from above downwards . . . Love cannot be argued about in its absence, for

there is no reflex, no symbol of it near enough to the fact of it, to admit of just treatment by the algebra of the reason or imagination.”

Why then does MacDonald often speak so sympathetically, so encouragingly of our need to understand, of our capacity to grasp truth? The answer lies in part in MacDonald’s expanded definition of truth. “The simple, absolute truth is hard to understand,” he wrote. “But when once (a man) does see it, it is so plain that he wonders how he could have lived without seeing it. That he did not understand it sooner was simply and only that he did not see it. To see a truth, to know what it is, to understand it, and to love it, are all one . . . Once beheld it is for ever. To see one divine fact is to stand face to face with essential eternal life.” MacDonald believed this divine contact developed and nurtured not only the soul but the intellect. “Where religion itself is not the most important thing with the individual, all reasoning upon it must indeed degenerate into strifes,” he wrote, “. . . yet on no questions may the light of the candle of the Lord, that is, the human understanding, be cast with greater hope of discovery than on those of religion, those, namely, that bear upon man’s relation to God and to his fellow. The most partial illumination of this region, the very cause of whose mystery is the height and depth of its *truth*, is of more awful value to the human being than perfect knowledge, if such were possible, concerning everything else in the universe; while, in fact, in this very region, discovering may bring with it a higher kind of conviction than can accompany the results of investigation in any other direction.” The difficulty of seeing the divine MacDonald, but not in a negative way. “If we could thoroughly understand anything,” he wrote in his novel *Robert Falconer*, “that would be enough to prove it undivine.” The infinite depth of God’s

divine nature was no apparent cause of frustration for MacDonald. "There are consciousnesses of lack," he wrote, "that hold more bliss than any possession." "Do not say (God's truth) is too high for you. God made you in his own image, therefore capable of understanding him."

MacDonald believed the key to finding God lay with apprehending the nature of Jesus. In 'The Voice of Job' he describes God as having made not only our bodies and souls but our needs—particularly our need for verification of God's existence and goodness. Throughout this sermon he stresses that we not only need such confirmation, but are entitled to it. "God is the origin of both need and supply, the father of our necessities The story of Jesus is the heart of His answer . . . to the divine necessities of the children he has sent out into the universe."

And how are we to prove the existence and nature of Jesus? "The reality of Christ's nature is not to be proved by argument," he wrote in his essay on Browning's *Christmas Eve*. "He must be beheld. There are thoughts and feelings that cannot be called up in the mind by any power of will or force of imagination, which, being spiritual, must arise in the soul when in its highest spiritual condition. . . . A steadfast regarding of Him will produce this calm, and His will be the heavenly form reflected from the mental depth."

The nature of Christ's story recorded in the Gospels, as MacDonald perceived it, was I believe, the primary foundation of his faith. He described the birth of Christ as "the miracle visible and credible by the depths of its heart of glory." In his novel *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* the character of the minister offers insights into MacDonald's approach to helping others find faith: "I felt that to open

the inner eyes even of the brain, enabling people to *see* in some measure the reality of the old lovely story, to help them to have what the Scotch philosophers called a true *conception* of the external conditions and circumstances of the events, might help to open the yet deeper spiritual eyes which alone can see the meaning and truth dwelling in and giving shape to the outward facts."

This brings us to what constitutes a major obstacle for many intellectuals: why should we trust the accounts of events in the Bible, a book which MacDonald himself acknowledged as having flaws and contradictions? There are many profound passages among MacDonald's works on this complex issue; today I have time to share but one. Thomas Wingfold asks the dwarf Polwarth how he has come to find such revelations in Bible passages which Wingfold only found vague and insupportable by logic. Polwarth replies that, never having been a religious man before he turned to the Bible, "No system of theology had come between me and a common-sense reading of the book." "Religion is nothing," MacDonald once said, "if it be not the deepest common sense."

What did MacDonald discover when plumbing these depths of common sense? "Our Lord had no design of constructing a system of truth in intellectual forms," he wrote in one of his *Unspoken Sermons*. "The truth of the moment in its relation to him, the Truth, was what he spoke. He spoke out of a region of realities which he knew could only be suggested—not represented—in the forms of intellect and speech." Yet in the next paragraph MacDonald adds, "We are bound to search after what our Lord means—and he speaks that we may understand." Elsewhere he points out that Christ "addresses us as reasonable creatures."

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When seeking to understand why we should follow the ways of Christianity, MacDonald states, "We must not answer, 'Because the Lord says so.' . . . Although the Lord would be pleased with any man for doing a thing because he said it, he would show his pleasure by making the man more and more dissatisfied until he knew why the Lord said it. He would make him see that he could not in the deepest sense—in the way the Lord loves—obey any command until he saw the reasonableness of it." I believe this need for reasoning in religion helped account not only for MacDonald's extraordinary faith but for his definition of faith. "True faith is a power," he wrote, "not a mere yielding."

For MacDonald one of the keys to finding faith was understanding the nature of the miracles attributed to Christ. He called the miracles "one of the modes in which His unseen life found expression," adding that Christ's actions, like His words, were an embodiment of truth. A being who only does and speaks what is true must essentially be an endless source of revelation, one whose words are, like His works, miraculous; it is in discovering the miraculous nature of these words that the miracles of Christ become more credible. MacDonald called Christ's words "a power, not of argument, but of life. The words of the Lord are not for the logic that deals with words as if they were things; but for the spiritual logic that reasons from divine thought to divine thought, dealing with spiritual facts."

Many people would surely object that we are dealing here with the mystical, thus the unprovable. MacDonald not only defines mysticism as "a mode of embodying truth," he describes Christ's mysticism as logical. "The highest expression of which the truth admits lies in the symbolism of nature and the human customs that result from human necessities. (A

mystic) prosecutes thought about truth so embodied by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms. This is the highest mode of conveying the deepest truth; and the Lord himself often employed it. . . . No dweller in this planet can imagine a method of embodying truth that shall be purer, loftier, truer to the truth embodied." "We can speak of nothing that belongs to the mind of God or the mind of man, but by the picture of some outside thing."

One of MacDonald's favorite mystical quotations of Jesus was, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "I am well aware" he said, "that this gospel has passed through phases and that there are difficulties, but here is this utterance which no human heart could have invented, so it seems to me—seems to me so, that I will lay my faith in it." "By no argument, the best that logic itself can afford, can a man be set right with the truth," MacDonald said in a recorded sermon. He spoke instead of "the spiritual perception which comes of hungering contact with the living truth . . . this can alone be the mediator between a man and the truth."

A surprising source of MacDonald's concepts on faith is his children's literature. In an unsigned 1883 review of his fairy tale *The Princess and Curdie*, the critic stated, "It seems almost needful for (Dr. MacDonald) to have a medium of imagination through which to look, as if what became exaggerated, and so misled other men, only enabled him to gain due proportion." In this magical book MacDonald says, "There is a kind of capillary attraction in the facing of two souls, that lifts faith quite beyond the level to which either could raise it alone." We may not be able to prove the personal spiritual certainty we have been given to others, but it is surely a comfort

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to know our faith may communicate itself indirectly to another.

Of all the works restored in *Wingfold* my favorite is a rough draft manuscript from the Harvard collection of what is to my knowledge MacDonald's only Bible story. In 'The Little Man,' the familiar tale of Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax collector, MacDonald combined the imaginative genius displayed in his fairy tales with his theological insights into the nature of Christ. The result is a stunning and valuable story, the fruit of a man who believed "the imagination is one of the most powerful of all the faculties for aiding the growth of the truth in the mind." MacDonald describes Zacchaeus perched in a tree, searching the crowd below for a glimpse of the great man he had heard about. "At first he thought it was that bold-looking, big, broad, dark-eyed man; then he thought it was that beautiful, eager, yet thoughtful face next the man; but when at last his eyes did fall on the great man himself, he did not look any further. He knew and was sure that it was his very self"

"The little man had never seen such a grand, beautiful face before. And he was so delighted at the sight, that I think he must have drawn a great, deep breath, and felt as if he himself were twice the man he was before."

It is scarcely possible to do justice in a brief presentation to the wealth of concepts George MacDonald recorded on the logic of faith. Anyone interested in reading more material on this topic will find particularly fine sources in MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons* series, *England's Antiphon*, the essay collection *A Dish of Orts* and, of course, *Thomas Wingfold*.

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