

Universal Salvation in the Theology of George MacDonald (1824–1905)

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Born and raised in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, the Victorian visionary and prolific writer, George MacDonald, achieved enormous popularity in his own day both as an imaginative storyteller and as an authentic prophetic voice. “Between 1851 and 1897,” notes Frederick Buechner in the forward to Rolland Hein’s biography, “he wrote over fifty books—novels, plays, essays, sermons, poems, fairy tales, not to mention two fantasies for adults (*Phantastes*, 1858, and *Lilith*, 1895) that elude the usual categories.”¹ His friendship with Lewis Carroll (the penname for Charles Dodgson) was very close, and he also made friends with such luminaries as Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Mark Twain, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. At the height of his popularity in 1872, Macdonald traveled to the United States for a remarkably successful lecture tour in which he addressed huge audiences and “people flocked to him as prophet, seer, saint, all in one.”² But in no way did MacDonald seek popular acclaim or tailor a message in an effort to achieve popularity; to the contrary, he always remained true to a stunning religious vision that, one way or another, expressed itself in virtually all of his writings, lectures, and delivered sermons. It was a stunning and utterly consistent vision of God’s all-inclusive, all-pervasive, and inexorable love.

As it happened, MacDonald’s popularity faded rapidly after his death in 1905. But even so, his influence upon important nineteenth and twentieth century writers ensured an enduring legacy. As Nick Page notes in his introduction to an annotated edition of MacDonald’s influential

¹ See Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*, xvii.

² Ibid. His most popular lectures were on Robert Burns and *Hamlet*, but his repertory also included lectures on the British poet and humorist “*Tom Hood*, the *Lyrics of Tennyson*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Milton*.” (See Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 292).

Phantastes,³ “The roll call of writers who have been influenced by his unique perspective includes Robert Louis Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, E. Nesbit, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Maurice Sendak, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden.”⁴ According to W. H. Auden, for one, MacDonald was “one of the most remarkable writers of the nineteenth century.”⁵ But probably no one did more than C. S. Lewis to rekindle popular interest in MacDonald, which has grown steadily over the past few decades. In his preface to *George MacDonald: an Anthology*, Lewis thus wrote: “I have never concealed the fact that I regard him as my master; indeed I fancy that I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation.”⁶ Over the passing years, however, at least some of those who take “kindly” to Lewis’ own books have indeed come to appreciate why he regarded MacDonald as his own tutor and “master.”

Without question MacDonald’s relationship with his father—an unbreakable bond of loyalty, trust, and unconditional love that developed between them—profoundly influenced his own understanding of God’s relationship to created persons. On the one hand, George, Sr., was a simple farmer and a constant source of spiritual comfort to a young boy with a sickly constitution, who in his childhood lost his mother to the ravages of tuberculosis.⁷ As MacDonald explicitly stated in one sermon, “In my own childhood and boyhood, my father was the refuge from all the ills of life, even sharp pain itself.”⁸ But, on the other hand, George, Sr., was also devoutly reli-

³ *Phantastes* had a dramatic effect on C.S. Lewis and also influenced such fantasy writers as J.R.R. Tolkien and Madeline L’Engle.

⁴ See Page’s introduction to the special annotated edition of *Phantastes*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted on the second inside page.

⁶ Lewis (ed.), *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, xxxii.

⁷ “MacDonald was often ill as a boy. On one occasion he was kept in bed for four months and bled from the arm . . . [His] entire life . . . can be characterized as what he had time to do between bouts of illness” (Jeff McInnis, *Shadows and Chivalry*, 11). And yet, though he too was afflicted with tuberculosis, MacDonald nonetheless lived a relatively long life.

⁸ “Abba, Father!” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 284. MacDonald recognized, of course, that some people have a less than ideal relationship with their own father. So to them he went on to say: “You must interpret the word [“father”] by all

gious, a deacon in a local Presbyterian church, and committed to an especially stern form of Calvinism. So, because MacDonald was never able to reconcile in his own mind his father's Calvinist theology with his father's own sensitive, caring, and loving nature, he began to reject his father's theology at a remarkably early age. As Rolland Hein observes in his biography, "The young George took churchgoing very seriously";⁹ but his reaction to what he heard in church was often to question or even to reject it. When he first heard "the doctrine of [limited] election," for example, "he said he did not want God to love him if he did not love everybody."¹⁰ The boy was even known to experience physical pain while sitting in church. From the beginning, however, he loved the Christian Scriptures and spent years as a young man studying them in their original languages. But the more he studied, the more persuaded he became that he needed to unlearn almost everything he had learned in church. He thus wrote the following to his father, with whom he remained in loving contact throughout all of his early struggles: "I love my Bible more—I am always finding out something new in it—I seem to have had everything to learn over again from the beginning—All my teaching in youth seems useless to me—I must get it all from the Bible again."¹¹

MacDonald received his formal education at Aberdeen College and subsequently at Highbury Theological College in London, where he studied for the Christian ministry. But he resigned under a cloud of heresy from his first (and only) pastorate after only three years, and I doubt that anyone who reads his voluminous *Unspoken Sermons* or the lengthy religious reflections embedded in his Victorian novels would likely find this development surprising. For MacDonald was a persistent critic of Western theology, particularly as we encounter it in the likes of

that you have missed in life. Every time a man might have been to you a refuge . . . that is a time when a father might have been a father indeed" (Ibid).

⁹ Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

Augustine and Calvin, and his own religious convictions tended to accord far better with the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Even as many Christians believe that, despite a detailed knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' opponents among the scribes and the Pharisees had simply misunderstood the revelation that Moses and the Hebrew prophets had delivered to them, so MacDonald came to believe that, despite a detailed knowledge of the Christian Scriptures, far too many Western theologians have simply misunderstood the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. So perhaps it is not from religious leaders and scholars, he concluded, that we should even expect the greatest insight and clarity of vision. Here is but one example of his attitude towards the Western theological tradition:

How terribly, then, have the theologians misrepresented God . . . ! Nearly all of them represent 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.¹²

As this passage already illustrates, MacDonald passionately believed that God's glory consists not in his power or his kingship, but in his humility, in his loving nature, and in his eagerness to give of himself to *all* of those whom he loves into existence in the first place.

The Nature of Christian Faith

Although MacDonald was never shy about challenging the prevailing theological doctrines of his day, sometimes with a surprising degree of harshness, he also denied that the proper purpose of teaching was to persuade others to conform their thinking to the teacher's own thinking.

¹² "The Child in the Midst." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 15. *Unspoken Sermons* was originally published in three series in 1867, 1885, and 1889 in London by Longmans, Green & Co.

Instead, the sole purpose should be to acquaint people with the living Christ of the New Testament. As MacDonald himself put it: “I believe that no teacher should strive to make men think as he thinks, but [should instead strive] to lead them to the living Truth, to the Master himself, of whom alone they can learn anything, who will make them in themselves know what is true by the very seeing of it. I believe that the inspiration of the Almighty alone gives understanding. I believe that to be the disciple of Christ is the end of being; that to persuade men to be his disciples is the end of teaching.”¹³

These words also illustrate the extent to which MacDonald adopted a Christocentric approach to revelation. Like Karl Barth whom he anticipated in this regard, he seems to have distinguished sharply between the incarnate Word of God, which is the light (or the true revelation) that comes into the world and enlightens every person, and the words of any human witness, such as John the Baptist, who might testify to the light.¹⁴ As the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ is the ultimate and final revelation from God, and everything else, including everything else in the Bible, must be interpreted in light of this ultimate and final revelation that, sooner or later, will enlighten every person. Faith is simply the obedient response to this revelation, and, as such, it can also be a reliable source of knowledge under the right conditions. In that one respect, at least, MacDonald’s understanding of faith was similar to that of John Calvin, whose overall theology he passionately rejected. For even as Calvin held that “the only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals in our hearts,”¹⁵ so MacDonald held that “the inspiration of the Almighty alone gives understanding”; and even as Calvin held that certain convictions sealed in our hearts by the Spirit of God are “self-authenticating,” so MacDonald held that “the Master” enables us to

¹³ MacDonald, “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 536.

¹⁴ See John 1:1–9. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible will be from the New Revised Standard Version copyrighted in 1989 by the National Council of Churches in the United States of America.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, Ch. viii, Sec. 5.

“know what is true by the very seeing of it.” By faith, for example, “we understand that the world was created by the word of God”¹⁶ and we can know this, furthermore, without having to infer it from other propositions or from some body of evidence. Or, to express the point in a way familiar to contemporary philosophers, at least some of the truths known by faith are *properly basic* in Alvin Plantinga’s sense.¹⁷

In no way, however, did MacDonald identify *saving faith* with the possession of correct doctrine. Faith may be a *source* of knowledge, but it just *is* an obedient heart or a disposition to obey; and it “is the one terrible heresy of the church,” MacDonald lamented, “that it has always been presenting something else than obedience as faith in Christ.”¹⁸ In particular, Christians too often confuse faith in Christ with an acceptance of certain theories or abstract doctrines *about* his nature and work, and they just as often confuse an absence of “correct” doctrine with an absence of faith. But like Kierkegaard, MacDonald held that an acceptance of correct doctrine is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of saving faith. It is not a sufficient condition, because accepting a particular theory carries no guarantee of obedience; and besides, “to hold a thing with the intellect,” he insisted, “is not [even] to believe it [in the relevant sense]. A man’s real belief is that which he lives by.”¹⁹ And neither is an acceptance of correct doctrine a necessary condition of saving faith, because one can have an obedient heart, a willingness to submit to the “true light, which enlightens everyone,”²⁰ without giving assent to any particular theory about the nature of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. MacDonald even went so far as to suggest that an atheist might be closer to the Kingdom of God than a professing Christian: “It is better to be an atheist

¹⁶ Heb 11:3.

¹⁷ See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, ch. 8. According to Plantinga, “gospel truths resemble self-evident propositions” in the same respect that “perceptual and memory beliefs” resemble them. That is, “They are evident, but don’t get their evidence from other propositions; they have their evidence in themselves (and not by way of inference from other propositions)” (Ibid., 262).

¹⁸ “The Truth in Jesus.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 393.

¹⁹ Ibid., 390.

²⁰ John 1:9.

who does the will of God, than a so-called Christian who does not. . . . The doing of things from duty is but a stage on the road to the kingdom of truth and love.”²¹ Indeed, our theological opinions and theories, however correct they may be, might be the very thing that prevents us “from being Christians. For when you say that, to be saved, a man must hold this or that [theory], then are you leaving the living God and his will, and putting trust in some notion [such as a theory of atonement] about him or his will.”²² But our task, MacDonald contended, is simply to follow in obedience the one who died on our behalf and rose again in triumph; it is not to haggle over humanly devised theories about the way in which the death and resurrection of Christ successfully reconciles us to God.

Accordingly, a set of incorrect theological opinions, honestly and humbly held, could no more condemn someone than a set of correct opinions, held apart from a transformed heart, could successfully save someone. But if that is true, then in what sense, exactly, is faith also a source of knowledge? MacDonald’s rather nuanced answer includes an appeal to Philippians 3:15–16, wherein Paul wrote: “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about *anything* [my emphasis] this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.” Commenting on this text, MacDonald wrote: “Observe what widest conceivable scope is given by the apostle to honest opinion, even in things of grandest import!—the one only essential point with him is, that whereto we have attained, what we have seen to be true, *we walk by that*.”²³ So faith (or an obedient heart) is indeed, MacDonald contended, the principle instrument through which God imparts spiritual understanding and a knowledge of himself. But whatever light now dawns in our understanding, whatever ultimate truths we now discern (however faintly), and whatever obligations we now acknowledge, we

²¹ MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 25.

²² “The Truth in Jesus.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 390–91.

²³ *Ibid.*, 410.

must allow that to penetrate our hearts and to transform us. We must, in other words, *own up to* whatever light we have. When we follow that light in obedience and thereby submit to it, the Spirit will inevitably enable us to see farther and wider.

We thus approach what I (and many others) have found to be the single most refreshing aspect of MacDonald's approach to religion. He recognized that we must all proceed from where we now are in our respective spiritual journeys, and he saw no virtue in trying to suppress honest doubt or in ignoring moral qualms concerning, say, a widely accepted interpretation of the Bible. Such bad faith, as he saw it, is the very antithesis of a genuine faith in Christ. "Do not try to believe anything," he thus exhorted, "that affects you as darkness. Even if you mistake and refuse something true thereby, you will do less wrong to Christ by such a refusal than you would by accepting as his what you can see only as darkness."²⁴ Granted, what a given person sees as darkness at a particular time may depend on a host of cultural and individual factors, perhaps even on a confusion of one kind or another. Even MacDonald's own teachings, he would have acknowledged, may affect some as darkness. But with respect to any *genuine* revelation from God, it "is impossible," he believed, that "you are seeing a true, a real thing—seeing it as it is, I mean—if it looks to you darkness."²⁵

Imagine yourself, by way of illustration, a simple peasant with no knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, little knowledge of the Bible's historical background, and no access to scholarly works on the Bible. Imagine further that, even though you believe in your heart that racism and slavery are terrible evils, you should find yourself utterly unable to refute, exegetically, your pastor's racist interpretation of the curse of Ham or his appeal to Paul in support of institutional slavery.

²⁴ From Rolland Hein's edited version of "Light" in *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 42. I choose this edited version because MacDonald's use of "thee," "thou," "thy," and some older linguistic forms in the paragraph from which the quotation is lifted could be distracting to some readers.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

And imagine, finally, that your pastor should then play his trump card: an appeal to original sin in an effort to knock you off your moral convictions, as if sin would more likely corrupt your deeply rooted moral convictions than it would his interpretation of Scripture. How should you then respond in the face of your pastor's seemingly superior knowledge of the Scriptures and his injunction to bow humbly before them (as he interprets them, of course)? MacDonald's counsel on such matters was clear: Hold on to your moral convictions, treat them as part of the light that the Word of God has brought into the world, and do not "let your cowardly conscience receive any word as light because another calls it light, while it looks to you dark. Say either the thing is not what it seems, or God never said or did it. But, of all evils, to misinterpret what God does, and then say the thing as interpreted must be right because God does it, is of the devil."²⁶

The God Revealed in Jesus Christ

Now if, according to MacDonald, Jesus Christ is the very revelation of God to us, just what is the nature of the God he reveals? In a sermon entitled "The Creation in Christ," MacDonald asked: "Now what is the deepest in God?"²⁷ That is, what is the most basic attribute of divinity, the one that explains God's most basic reasons for acting? It could not be his power because having the power to do something could never, by itself, provide a reason to do it. Neither does having the power to do something exclude the possibility of doing it for a selfish or even for a demonic reason. So, because Jesus himself described God as our "Father in heaven," because his entire message, as MacDonald understood it, was one of love and forgiveness, and because I John 4:8 & 16 declares twice that God not only loves but *is* love, MacDonald likewise wrote: "In

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "The Creation in Christ." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 420.

one word, God is Love. Love is the deepest depth, the essence of his nature, at the root of all his being. . . . His perfection is his love. All his divine rights rest upon his love.”²⁸

But if it is indeed God’s nature to love, how then should we understand his holiness and justice? Are not these also attributes of God? People sometimes say, as if it were an illuminating remark, that God is not only loving and merciful, but also just; they then exhort us to take into account God’s justice, as well as his love, and to avoid an overly sentimental understanding of his love. According to MacDonald, however, God’s justice is itself an expression of his love and, beyond that, his justice and mercy are exactly the same attribute. Nor was MacDonald’s understanding of God’s perfecting love, which a sinner might sometimes experience as wrath, harsh judgment, or even a temporary hardening of a heart, even remotely sentimental.

I believe that justice and mercy are simply one and the same thing; without justice to the full there can be no mercy, and without mercy to the full there can be no justice; that such is the mercy of God that he will hold his children in the consuming fire of his distance until they pay the uttermost farthing, until they drop the purse of selfishness with all the dross that is in it, and rush home to the Father and the Son, and the many brethren—rush inside the centre of the life-giving fire whose outer circles burn. I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children.²⁹

So God is not, in other words, a split personality whose justice pushes him in one direction and whose mercy pushes him in another. In order to illustrate the point, MacDonald chose, as a text for his sermon entitled “Justice,” the King James translation of Psalm 62:12: “Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy; for thou renderest to every man according to his work.” He then pointed out that, given the prevailing Calvinist theology of his day, one would have expected this text to read very differently, something like: “Also unto thee, O Lord, belongs *justice*; for thou renders to everyone according to his or her work.” But if MacDonald was right about justice and mercy (and the Calvinists of his day were mistaken), then it matters not which term one might

²⁸ Ibid., 421.

²⁹ “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 535.

choose. For the two resulting statements are, if not synonymous, at least logically equivalent, and so both are true if either one is true.³⁰ MacDonald might also have pointed to a text such as Isaiah 30:18, according to which God's mercy expresses his justice: "Therefore the Lord wants to be gracious to you; . . . he will rise up and show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice." Or he might have pointed to the eleventh chapter of Romans, which explicitly teaches that God's severity towards the disobedient, his judgment of sin, and even his temporary hardening of a heart all express his boundless mercy. The point is that, according to explicit teachings in the Bible, God's justice and mercy both require exactly the same thing, namely, an absolute destruction of sin and the separation of every sinner from it.

This single move, that of affirming an identity between divine justice and divine mercy, strikes at the very heart of Calvinism as a system of theology. Many Christians who might reject MacDonald's universalism—Arminians, Roman Catholics, and other freewill theists—can nonetheless accept such an identity, but a Calvinist cannot. You cannot consistently affirm a doctrine of limited election (much less that of limited atonement) unless you suppose that God deals "justly" with some people—namely, the non-elect—without being merciful to them. In defense of limited atonement, therefore, the Calvinist philosopher Paul Helm has argued that mercy differs from justice in just this respect: By its very nature mercy must be supererogatory, an expression of *undeserved love*, and hence cannot rest upon a moral necessity of any kind. "What is essential to such [undeserved] love is it could, consistently with all else that God is, be withheld by him. If God cannot but exercise mercy as he cannot but exercise justice then its character *as mercy vanishes*. If God has to exercise mercy as he has to exercise justice then such 'mercy' would not be mercy [i.e. would not be undeserved love]. . . . A justice that could be unilaterally waved

³⁰ Two statements need not be synonymous in order to be logically equivalent. For example, "The triangle on the board is equilateral" and "The triangle on the board is equiangular" are not synonymous statements. But they are logically equivalent. It is necessarily true that both are true if either one is true.

would not *be* justice, and a mercy which could not be unilaterally waved would not be mercy.”³¹

Now the first thing to observe about such an argument is that it is not a biblical argument at all; that is, it does not rest upon the interpretation of some biblical text or combination of texts. It is instead a quasi-philosophical argument of a kind that MacDonald encountered repeatedly and always rejected on the ground that it rests upon an utterly pagan understanding of justice and mercy.³² The easiest response would be to make Helm a present of the word “mercy” and then simply to replace it with any one of the following: “beneficence,” “kindness,” “compassion,” or even “pity.” One could then note the absurdity of the following claim: “If, given his essential attributes, God cannot but exercise beneficence [kindness, compassion, or pity] as he cannot but exercise justice, then its character *as beneficence vanishes.*” And, finally, one could point out that Romans 11 culminates in the statement: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful [or beneficent] to all.”³³ As I have suggested elsewhere, the basic Pauline concept here, typically “translated in our English Bibles with the word ‘mercy,’ is not that of *undeserved love* at all. It is instead that of beneficence, kindness, compassion, or pity. It has in view not the setting aside of a just punishment, as Helm supposes, but the relief of misery or distress.”³⁴ In fact, MacDonald himself rejected as absurd the whole idea of God withholding a deserved punishment from someone. For if divine justice and mercy are the very same attribute, then God withholds a deserved punishment only if he withholds his mercy as well.

Behind the widespread idea that God’s mercy is supererogatory lies the more general ab-

³¹ Helm, “The Logic of Limited Atonement,” 50.

³² There are in fact powerful exegetical arguments in support of MacDonald’s contention here. For an exceptionally careful study of how the translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Septuagint and the subsequent translation of the Septuagint into the Latin Vulgate distorted the Hebrew understanding of justice and drove an unwarranted wedge between justice and mercy, see McGrath, “Justice and Justification”; for a discussion that non-specialists might find somewhat more accessible, see Brinsmead, “The Scandal of God’s Justice: Part 1”; and for an exhaustive review of the biblical evidence, see Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, chapter 2: “The Justice of God in Paul and Jesus.”

³³ Rom 11:32.

³⁴ See Talbott, “Grace, Character Formation, and Predestination unto Glory,” 22.

surdity that, even as our Creator, God owes us nothing in our so-called fallen state; in particular, he has no obligation (no responsibility grounded in necessity) to save sinners. But MacDonald rejected that view as patently absurd. For just as the decision to have children entails an obligation to care and to provide for them, however disobedient they may become, so God's decision to create us entailed a freely accepted obligation to meet our true spiritual needs. MacDonald thus exclaimed:

Away with the thought that God could have been a perfect, an adorable creator, doing anything less than he has done for his children! . . . The idea that God would be God all the same, as glorious as he needed to be, had he not taken upon himself the divine toil of bringing home his wandered children, had he done nothing to seek and save the lost, is false as hell. Lying for God could go no farther. As if the idea of God admitted of his being less than he is, less than perfect, less than all-in-all, less than Jesus Christ! less than Love absolute, less than entire unselfishness! . . . It will be answered that we have fallen, and God is thereby freed from any obligation, if any ever were. It is but another lie. No amount of wrongdoing in a child can ever free a parent from the divine necessity of doing all he can to deliver his child.³⁵

So here, once again, we see how MacDonald's vision of God's all-pervasive love so inflamed his imagination that he found much of the Western theological tradition, insofar as it departs from a consistent expression of it, deeply offensive.

The Mission of Jesus

I said at the outset that MacDonald's own religious convictions were far more in accord with Eastern Orthodox theology than they were with mainline Western theology, and nowhere does his departure from the latter emerge more clearly than in his understanding of the atonement. He never wavered—was never even tempted to waver—in his belief in the death and literal resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he rejected as fundamentally wrong-headed the idea that the purpose of the Cross was to pacify God's wrath, so that God might be able to forgive us in a way that would otherwise have been impossible.

³⁵ "The Voice of Job." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 340, 342–43.

Why, after all, would God have sent his Son in the first place if he did not *already* love us and had not *already* forgiven us? As St. Paul put it: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”³⁶ Accordingly, it is not God’s attitude towards us—a loving attitude that remains the same yesterday, today, and forever—that needed changing; it is instead our attitude towards God that needed changing. Paul, at least, consistently put it this way: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself”;³⁷ and as MacDonald never tired of pointing out, “There is not one word in the New Testament about reconciling God to us; it is we that have to be reconciled to God.”³⁸ The purpose of the Cross, then, was not to pacify an angry God, but to reconcile estranged sinners to God and to do so by bringing God’s love and forgiveness, which nothing a sinner does could ever threaten, to those who would otherwise be unable to receive it. “*We* sacrifice to God!” MacDonald once exclaimed, “it is God who has sacrificed his own son to us; there was no way else of getting the gift of himself into our hearts.”³⁹

Still, we are here approaching perhaps the most sensitive aspect of MacDonald’s theology, one that some Christians may find even more controversial than his universalism. For MacDonald rejected altogether the *penal satisfaction* theory of the atonement, which he regarded as utterly demeaning to the person and work of Christ. The following passage, which illustrates just how deeply legalistic theories of atonement offended him, is a fair sample of similar passages sprinkled throughout his sermons:

This is the best device, according to the prevailing theology, that the God of truth, the God of mercy, whose glory is that he is just to men by forgiving their sins, could fall upon for saving his creatures! . . . They say first, God must punish the sinner, for justice requires it; then they say he does not punish the sinner, but punishes a perfectly righteous man instead, attributes his righteousness to the sinner, and so continues just. Was there ever such a confusion, such an inversion of right

³⁶ Rom 5:8 (NIV).

³⁷ 2 Cor 5:19.

³⁸ “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 536.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 537.

and wrong! Justice *could not* treat a righteous man as an unrighteous; neither, if justice required the punishment of sin, *could* justice let the sinner go unpunished. To lay the pain upon the righteous in the name of justice is simply monstrous. No wonder unbelief is rampant. Believe in Moloch if you will, but call him Moloch, not Justice.⁴⁰

Insofar as some may find such a harsh-sounding rejection of what they first learned in Sunday school disturbing, perhaps even blasphemous, they may also wonder how C. S. Lewis could have written concerning MacDonald: “I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continuously close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself.”⁴¹ For how could Lewis say that, one may wonder, about someone who appears to deny the atonement?⁴² And certainly many critics in his own day leveled a similar charge at MacDonald, as the following comment illustrates: “If I explain the atonement otherwise than they explain it, they assert that I deny the atonement; nor count it of any consequence that I say I believe in the atoner with my whole heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.”⁴³ For in rejecting a particular theory of the atonement, it hardly follows that MacDonald denied the atoning work of Christ itself,⁴⁴ and MacDonald in fact explained the atonement in exactly the way that the Eastern Orthodox have always explained it. The prolific New Testament scholar, Nicholas Arseniev, who taught in Russia, Germany, Poland, and finally the United States before he died in 1977, thus articulated the typical Eastern Orthodox view this

⁴⁰ “Righteousness.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 578–79.

⁴¹ Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, xxx–xxxii.

⁴² In point of fact, though his own rejection of the classic substitution theory was perhaps more subtle, more nuanced, and less combative than MacDonald’s rejection was, Lewis had this to say about the theory that we were “let off because Christ had volunteered to bear a punishment instead of us”: “Now on the face of it, this is a pretty silly theory. If God was prepared to let us off, why on earth did he not do so? And what possible point could there be in punishing an innocent person instead? None at all that I can see, if you are thinking of punishment in the police-court sense”—which would be, I presume, in the sense of divine retribution for sin (see Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 59.). My thanks to Peter Schmurr for calling this text to my attention.

⁴³ “The Truth in Jesus.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 392.

⁴⁴ Lewis provided the following helpful analogy: “All sensible people know that if you are tired and hungry a meal will do you good. But the modern theory of nourishment—all about vitamins and proteins—is a different thing. People ate their dinners and felt better long before the theory of vitamins was ever heard of: and if the theory of vitamins is someday abandoned they will go on eating their dinners just the same. Theories about Christ’s death are not Christianity: they are explanations about how it works” even as the theory of vitamins is an explanation of how food nourishes the body” (see *Mere Christianity*, 57).

way: “The meaning and basis of the atonement is the love of God. Only this is the inspiring and conquering force thereof, not any idea of juridical justification, of forensic litigation.”⁴⁵ From the perspective of the East, in other words, it is precisely God’s humility, love, and forgiveness, his self-surrender and loving condescension to us in Jesus Christ, that makes true atonement possible, and to reduce this to a quasi-legal transaction—or to a “vulgar Roman legality,”⁴⁶ as MacDonald called it—is simply to trivialize the whole thing.

The penal satisfaction theory also has its source, MacDonald insisted, in “unbelief—[an] incapacity to accept the freedom of God’s forgiveness; [an] incapacity to believe that it is God’s chosen nature to forgive, that he is bound in his own divinely willed nature to forgive.”⁴⁷ The basic misconception here is that something had to be done—if not by us, then by someone else—to *earn* God’s forgiveness. But that is not only a misconception; it is ultimately incoherent. For as MacDonald pointed out: if “sin demands punishment and the righteous punishment is given, then the man is free. Why should he be forgiven?”⁴⁸ Why, in other words, should any forgiveness be required, once God’s justice is fully satisfied? Either our sins are paid for in full, in which case no debt is left to forgive, or they are already forgiven and no further payment or penal satisfaction is required. Does this mean that God never punishes sin, according to MacDonald? Not at all. It means only that we need to understand *why* he punishes sin. In and of itself, MacDonald contended, punishment does nothing to make up for the slightest of sins; it “is *no-wise* an *offset* to sin.”⁴⁹ It neither atones for our sin, nor “balances the scales of justice,” nor justifies God’s decision to permit sin in the first place, nor somehow restores God’s stolen glory, as

⁴⁵ Arseniev, *Revelation of Life Essential*, 126.

⁴⁶ “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 528–29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

St. Anselm put it in his classic formulation of the penal satisfaction theory.⁵⁰ So why is God prepared to punish sin? For the same reason, MacDonald declared, that he sent his Son in the flesh: to deliver us from evil. “The mission of Jesus was from the same source and with the same object as the punishment of our sins. He came to work along with our punishment. He came to side with it, and set us free from our sins.”⁵¹ Because sin is the ultimate source of human misery and God loves us, he will do everything within his power to deliver us from this source of our misery. And so Jesus came not to endure some sort of vindictive punishment for sins he never committed, but to save sinners from their sin, as Matthew 1:21 explicitly states. For “Primarily, God is not bound to *punish* sin; He is bound to *destroy* sin”⁵² and to destroy it altogether.

So herein lies, as MacDonald saw it, the fatal flaw in any penal satisfaction theory of the atonement: The mere punishment of sin carries no guarantee of its final destruction. “Punishment, or deserved suffering, is [therefore] no equipoise to sin. It is no use laying it on the other scale. It will not move it a hair’s breadth. Suffering weighs nothing at all against sin.”⁵³ Why not? Because suffering does nothing in and of itself to cancel out a sin, to compensate or to make up for it, to repair the harm that it brings into our lives, or to heal the estrangement that makes it possible in the first place. And as for *undeserved* suffering, such as Jesus endured, it is impossible that this should ever qualify as punishment in any case. So yes, Jesus suffered and died on our behalf, according to MacDonald, but his death on the Cross no more qualifies as a just punishment for sin than the death of a soldier who flings himself on a hand grenade in an effort to save comrades in arms qualifies as a just punishment for this heroic act.

As MacDonald interpreted the New Testament, then, its central message is one “of for-

⁵⁰ See Anselm’s book *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man).

⁵¹ From Rolland Hein’s edited version of “Salvation from Sin” in *Life Essential*, 15.

⁵² “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 510.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 509.

giveness, not of vengeance; of deliverance, not of evil to come.”⁵⁴ Indeed, long before Jesus walked the earth, the Psalmist had declared: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. . . . He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.”⁵⁵ Why not? Because, as Paul explained, love “keeps no record of wrongs.”⁵⁶ But if not, then why the New Testament warnings about the possibility of future punishment? MacDonald’s answer to this all-important question is as startling as it is profound. God cares nothing, he says, about our past offenses, which are already forgiven, but he cares everything about our *present condition*.

Not for anything he has committed do they [the New Testament writers] threaten a man with the outer darkness. Not for any or all of his sins that are past shall a man be condemned; not for the worst of them needs he dread remaining unforgiven. . . . His present, his live sins—those pervading his thoughts and ruling his conduct; the sins he keeps doing, and will not give up; the sins he is called to abandon, and clings to; the same sins which are the cause of his misery, though he may not know it—these are they for which he is even now condemned.

Of course, one’s present condition may include the memory of past sins or, worse yet, a present refusal to repent of past sins. So if, for example, a man has committed murder in the past and refuses in the present to repent of that past sin, then the man’s present condition includes the heart of a murderer; and no one with the heart of a murderer can enter into the Kingdom of God. MacDonald therefore took very seriously the New Testament warnings concerning the possibility of future punishment. For God could hardly be *for us* unless he were unalterably *against our sin*, or, as MacDonald liked to say, “eternal love will not be moved to yield you to the selfishness that is killing you.”⁵⁷ Indifference might so yield, but “Forgiveness can never be indifference.”⁵⁸ Would forgiving parents take no corrective action when their teenage son is caught swindling old

⁵⁴ From Rolland Hein’s edited version of “Salvation from Sin.” In Hein, *Life Essential*, 15.

⁵⁵ Ps 103:8, 10.

⁵⁶ 1Cor 13:5 (NIV).

⁵⁷ “Justice.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 517.

⁵⁸ “It Shall Not Be Forgiven.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 52.

ladies? The question virtually answers itself.

All of which leads to the most basic question of all: If Jesus Christ was not literally *punished* on our behalf, what then *was* the purpose of the Cross? And how did his crucifixion differ from any other martyr's death? Because nothing is required to earn God's forgiveness or to reconcile him to us, MacDonald believed that "No atonement is necessary to him but that men should leave their sins and come back to his heart."⁵⁹ Or, as the Psalmist declared: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."⁶⁰ So the only issue is how such an atonement might best be accomplished. According to Hebrews 12:2, Jesus is both its author—that is, its initiating cause—and the one who brings it to completion. "Who is the mover," MacDonald asked, "the causer, the persuader, the creator of the repentance, of the passion that restores fourfold?—Jesus, our propitiation, our atonement. He is the head and leader, the prince of the atonement."⁶¹ In Pauline theology, moreover, it is precisely the resurrection that distinguishes the crucifixion from an ordinary martyr's death. For as the first fruits of a more general resurrection,⁶² the resurrection of Christ unleashed the power that guarantees a complete victory over sin and death, defeats all of the cosmic powers inimical to our human interests,⁶³ and repairs all of the harm we have done to others as well as to ourselves. Why else would Paul declare that, if Christ was not raised from the dead, then we are still in our

⁵⁹ "Justice." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 539.

⁶⁰ Ps 51:17.

⁶¹ "Justice." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 538. A perceptive reader might detect in this quotation the language of Hebrews 2:10 and 12:2, where the author describes Jesus as the pioneer of our salvation (translated "captain" in the KJV). The Greek word is "arche[set macron over e]gos," which often refers to a leader, ruler, or prince, as well as to an originator or founder of some process or movement. But even though MacDonald's sentence could almost qualify as a lexical entry on "arche[set macron over e]gos," he made no effort to call attention to this and, in fact, disliked the practice of incessantly citing chapter and verse in an effort to document some biblical doctrine. He preferred simply to allow the spirit (as opposed to the letter) of the biblical language to saturate his own forms of expression.

⁶² See 1 Cor 15:20.

⁶³ For the classic statement of this understanding, see Aulen, *Christus Victor*.

sins?⁶⁴ Such a declaration clearly implies that the resurrection, which plays no role whatsoever in a penal satisfaction theory, was the very thing required to bring about atonement, that is, to destroy our sin and to save us from it.

Systematic Theology

In a letter to his father, dated April 15, 1851, MacDonald made explicit a deeply rooted suspicion of systematic theology, as we might call it: “I firmly believe that people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice. The word doctrine, as used in the Bible, means teaching of duty, not theory. . . . I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist. To no system could I subscribe.”⁶⁵

For my own part, however, I wonder whether a clear and sharp distinction between theory and practice is truly possible. I certainly agree with MacDonald concerning the nature of Christian faith, and we can all agree, I presume, that the failure to practice what one preaches is the very definition of hypocrisy. But if, as MacDonald also insisted, actions are often a better indication of one’s real beliefs than a mere *profession* of belief might be, then a consistent failure to practice what one preaches may simply indicate a failure to believe what one preaches. As his own published writings illustrate, moreover, MacDonald was well aware (and deeply concerned) that faulty theological ideas can have destructive consequences in the lives of people—not only in the lives of those who accept them, but in the lives of those troubled by them as well. That is why he could exclaim, “No wonder unbelief is rampant,” when reflecting upon a faulty doctrine, and could also write: “I desire to wake no dispute, will myself dispute with no man, but for the sake of those whom certain *believers* trouble I have spoken my mind. I love the one God seen in the face of Jesus Christ. From all copies of Jonathan Edwards’ portrait of God, however faded by

⁶⁴ 1 Cor 15:17.

⁶⁵ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 155.

time, however softened by the use of less glaring pigments, I turn with loathing. Not such a God is he concerning whom was the message John heard from Jesus, *that he is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*⁶⁶ As far as I know, this is the only place, besides various references to Dante's portrait of hell, where MacDonald actually named an individual for the purpose of identifying this individual with a view he detested. But whether or not one agrees (as I do) with the sentiments expressed here, it is clear that MacDonald attributed great importance to the various doctrinal issues surrounding the Calvinist doctrine of limited election.

He was equally impatient with the classic Arminian view that, contrary to Jesus' teaching in the parable of the prodigal son, God's mercy has a built in time limit, typically understood to be the moment of one's physical death. For according to standard Arminian teaching, God will reject the unrepentant sinner forever once the relevant deadline has passed and will even subject such a sinner to an eternity of torment. In response MacDonald repeatedly asked, "shall a man be more merciful than God? Shall, of all his glories, his mercy alone not be infinite? Shall a brother love a brother more than The Father loves a son?—more than The Brother Christ loves his brother?"⁶⁷ In fact, if almighty God should reject someone *forever* or, worse yet, subject someone to an eternity of torment that serves no further redemptive purpose, then he could hardly will the best (or even an overall good life) for that person; and if he does not will the best (or at least an overall good life) for a given person, then neither does he truly love that person, whatever temporary good he might permit the person to experience. A Calvinist such as Hermann Hoeksema, who forthrightly denied that God truly loves the non-elect, was at least consistent on this particu-

⁶⁶ "Justice." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 540.

⁶⁷ "The Consuming Fire." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 32–33.

lar score.⁶⁸ But the claim that God rejects forever someone whom he supposedly loves is implicitly self-contradictory and hence altogether untenable. Or, at least, so MacDonald believed.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that MacDonald would describe himself as neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian. For in opposing the Calvinist idea that God restricts his love and mercy to a limited elect, MacDonald in effect embraced:

- (1) God's redemptive love extends to all human sinners equally in the sense that he sincerely wills or desires the salvation of (and therefore an overall good life for) each one of them.

And in opposing the Arminian idea that God's will or desire, as described in (1), will be eternally frustrated, MacDonald likewise embraced:

- (2) God will eventually achieve a complete victory over sin and death and will therefore successfully accomplish the salvation of everyone whose salvation he sincerely wills or desires.

But it is hard to see how a Christian could explicitly reject, as MacDonald did, both the Calvinist and the Arminian systems of theology without implicitly embracing a third. For the conjunction of (1) and (2) clearly entails

- (3) God will eventually accomplish the salvation of each and every sinful human being.

Nor was MacDonald reluctant to embrace this logical consequence as well: "But at length, O God, will you not cast Death and Hell into the lake of Fire—even into your own consuming self? . . . Then indeed will you be all in all. For then our poor brothers and sisters, every one—O God, we trust in you, the Consuming Fire—shall have been burnt clean and brought home."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ According to G. C. Berkouwer, Hoeksema—a Dutch Reformed theologian—described God's attitude towards the non-elect as the "sovereign hatred of his good pleasure." For the quotation from *Het Evangelie*, see Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 224.

⁶⁹ From Rolland Hein's edited version of "The Consuming Fire." See Hein, *Creation in Christ*, 165–66.

It thus seems altogether fair to say that MacDonald implicitly embraced a system of theology, even though, as his own theological ideas continued to mature, he found himself rejecting both systems that presented themselves in his youth. For as he eventually came to see clearly, the Calvinist and the Arminian systems hardly exhaust the possibilities for a Christian. He also came to believe that Christian universalism accounts for *all* of the biblical data in a much more coherent way than any competing theology does. And that, of course, is just what any traditional system of Christian theology tries to do.

Love Triumphant

Another of MacDonald's complaints against the traditional theologians was that they failed to appreciate, in his opinion, both the seriousness of sin and the nature of God's uncompromising opposition to it. This may come as a surprise to those who regard vengeance and vindictiveness as a proper response to sin rather than as a manifestation of it. But from MacDonald's perspective, an eternity of vengeance and vindictiveness against the sinner, such as Dante imagined, would merely concede the ultimate victory to evil itself: "Such justice as Dante's keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform, or at least give a home to victorious evil. . . . Although against evil, it is but the vain and wasted cruelty of a tyrant."⁷⁰ Why so? Because even though God opposes evil enough to confine it to a particular region of his creation, a region known as hell, he does not oppose it enough to destroy it altogether. "There is no destruction of evil thereby, but an enhancing of its horrible power in the midst of the most agonizing and disgusting tortures a *divine* imagination can invent."⁷¹

Few thoughtful Christians today, it is true, accept the idea of an eternal torture chamber; and according to some, particularly those who follow the lead of C. S. Lewis, hell is a freely em-

⁷⁰ "Justice." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 512–13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 513.

braced condition rather than an externally imposed punishment. In Lewis' own words, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."⁷² It is not God who rejects the sinner forever, in other words; it is the sinner who finally rejects God forever. Nor is it God who ultimately defeats the sinner; it is the sinner who ultimately defeats God. So, as Lewis also conceded: "it is objected that the ultimate loss of a single soul means the defeat of omnipotence. And so it does."⁷³ But MacDonald found the very idea of such a defeat almost inconceivable: "those who believe that God will thus be defeated by many souls, must surely be of those who do not believe he cares enough to do his very best for them. He *is* their Father; he had power to make them out of himself, separate from himself, and capable of being one with him: surely he will somehow save and keep them! Not the power of sin itself can close *all* the channels between creating and created."⁷⁴

Suppose, however, that some sinners should somehow manage to defeat God's love altogether and, as a consequence, to make themselves irredeemably evil. In that event, God would have no choice, MacDonald believed, but to opt for annihilation as the lesser evil: "If God be defeated, he must destroy—that is, he must withdraw life. How can he go on sending forth his life into irreclaimable souls, to keep sin alive in them throughout the ages of eternity?"⁷⁵ Merely to quarantine irredeemably evil persons, after all, would do nothing to eliminate this permanent stain from his creation. But make no mistake: Not even their annihilation would successfully atone "for the wrongs they have done."⁷⁶ When the mother of Ted Bundy declared, so agonizingly and yet so appropriately, her continuing love for a son who had become a monster (as a serial killer of young women), she illustrated how in harming himself and in making himself intolerable

⁷² Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 115.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Actually, the relevant defeat would not be a defeat of God's *omnipotence*, but instead a defeat of his *love*.

⁷⁴ "Justice." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 516.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

bly evil, her son had also harmed his own mother. She also illustrated why the annihilation of her son would accomplish no healing whatsoever for this suffering mother, who continued to yearn for his redemption, and why an ultimate defeat of God's love would likewise entail an ultimate defeat of his justice and righteousness as well.

So herein lies, I believe, the one point in MacDonald that C.S. Lewis seems not to have appreciated sufficiently: There can be no ultimate triumph of God's justice or righteousness, according to MacDonald, apart from a triumph of his love, because both require the absolute destruction of sin. The failure to appreciate this point fully rendered Lewis' own defense of hell, as we encounter it in *The Problem of Pain*, fundamentally incoherent. For here Lewis imagined an utterly wicked man "who has risen to wealth or power by a continued course of treachery and cruelty";⁷⁷ then, after describing the man's wickedness in great detail, Lewis asked his readers to suppose that the man is never "tormented by remorse or even misgivings," that he eats like a schoolboy and sleeps like a healthy infant, that he is "without a care in the world," and that he is "unshakably confident . . . that God and man are fools whom he has got the better of."⁷⁸ Would it not be an outrage of justice, Lewis in effect asked, for such a man to remain content with his own actions and never to be forced—even against his own will, if necessary—to see them for what they are? "In a sense," wrote Lewis, "it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good, that it should know itself a failure, a mistake. Even mercy can hardly wish to such a man his eternal, contented continuance in such ghastly illusion."⁷⁹

Note the words "Even mercy." Here Lewis saw, however dimly, why divine mercy and divine justice require exactly the same thing. But the thing that justice requires is the very thing that Lewis' account of hell excludes; hence, there can be no ultimate triumph of justice on Lew-

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 108.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

is' account. For the damned never do discover, on Lewis' account, that they are "a failure, a mistake"; neither does God successfully shatter the "ghastly illusion" underlying their wickedness. To the contrary, from their own point of view the damned are "successful, rebels to the end," utterly defeating God's love for them and thus utterly defeating his justice as well. As I have suggested elsewhere:

If an unrepentant Hitler, for example, is never required to learn a hard lesson, if he is permitted to cling forever to his rationalizations and to his comforting illusions, then there is no justice, so far as I can tell, for the millions of victims who endured unspeakable horrors at his hand. Where is the justice in rewarding an unrepentant Hitler with exactly what he thinks he wants and continues to think he wants forever after? And where is the justice for Hitler himself? If he were free to cling forever to his "ghastly illusion" even as he acts upon it, assuming that this were even possible, then for that very reason he would also be free to sin with impunity and to defeat God's justice forever.⁸⁰

MacDonald also understood the *nature* of hell very differently than Lewis did. For whereas Lewis depicted hell as a place where Satan rules (see *The Great Divorce*) and from which God is utterly absent, MacDonald regarded both hell and the lake of fire as special manifestations of God's holy *presence*. This difference also manifests itself in their respective understandings of the image of fire. According to Lewis, "The prevalent image of fire is significant because it combines the ideas of torment and destruction";⁸¹ but according to MacDonald, the importance of this image is that it combines the ideas of destruction and *purification*. As MacDonald never tired of reminding us, "our God is a consuming fire"⁸² and the consuming fire of his love will in the end consume (or destroy) all that is false within us: "The consuming fire is just the original, the active form of Purity, that which makes pure, that which is indeed Love, the creative energy of God."⁸³ So even the fires of hell exist for the purpose of the ultimate redemption of those in it.

⁸⁰ Talbott, "Freedom, Damnation," 418.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 113.

⁸² Heb 12:29.

⁸³ "The Consuming Fire." In *Unspoken Sermons*, 30.

“For hell is God’s and not the devil’s. Hell is on the side of God and man, to free the child of God from the corruption of death.”⁸⁴ Or, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, “the Day” is coming when fire will test the works of Christian leaders and will consume some of their works as if they were wood, hay, or straw (v. 12). Although those whose “work is burned up . . . will suffer loss,” they will nonetheless “be saved, but only as through fire” (v. 15).⁸⁵ Alluding to the same idea, MacDonald wrote:

It is the law of Nature—that is, the law of God—that all that is destructible shall be destroyed. . . . Many a man's work must be burned, that by that very burning he may be saved—"so as by fire." Away in smoke go the lordships, the Rabbi-hoods of the world, and the man who acquiesces in the burning is saved by the fire; for it has destroyed the destructible. . . . If still he cling to that which can be burned, the burning goes on deeper and deeper into his bosom, till it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him—possibly by looking like the truth.⁸⁶

As the final sentence of this quotation illustrates, MacDonald did agree that even in hell sinners can continue to resist the consuming fire of God’s love; that is, they can continue to cling to their false beliefs, deceptions, and illusions. But such resistance also carries, he insisted, a terrible cost: “If the man resists the burning of God, the consuming fire of Love, a terrible doom awaits him, and its day will come. He shall be cast into the outer darkness who hates the fire of God.”⁸⁷ So just what is this outer darkness? We might think of it as the absolute limit, short of

⁸⁴ From Rolland Hein’s edited version of “Salvation from Sin.” In Hein, *Life Essential*, 15.

⁸⁵ Nor should one take seriously, in my opinion, the ways in which some Protestant theologians and commentators try to explain away the obvious purgatorial implications of Paul’s image here. Perhaps the silliest suggestion would make verse 15 out to be a metaphor for being “saved by the skin of one’s teeth”—as if this were an intelligible idea in Pauline theology and as if the relevant salvation were little more than fire insurance rather than, as Paul himself pictured it, a complete destruction of the old person or the false self. And not much better is the association of 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, where fire has a real work of testing to do and actually consumes that which is false in us, with Amos 4:11 and Zechariah 3:2, where the image is that of a brand being plucked from a fire. A far more relevant context would be Malachi 3:2–3, where we read: “But who can endure *the day* of his coming [my emphasis], and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.”

⁸⁶ “The Consuming Fire.” In *Unspoken Sermons*, 29–30. Here again MacDonald incorporated an important biblical text into his sermon without adopting the technique, which he found distasteful, perhaps even pretentious, of citing chapter and verse.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

annihilation, beyond which no additional separation from God is even possible. Short of annihilation, there can be, of course, no metaphysical separation from the omnipresent ground of all being. But a near absence of any *experience* of God is perhaps theoretically possible. If a soul suspended alone in the outer darkness, without even a physical order to experience, is the only possible condition in which sinners can *both* retain their identity as persons *and* escape entirely from every implicit experience of God, perhaps we can also think of it as God simply allowing a sinner to experience the very condition of separation that the sinner has chosen, however confusedly.

What sick dismay shall then seize upon him! For let a man think and care ever so little about God, he does not therefore exist without God. God is here with him, upholding, warming, delighting, teaching him—making life a good thing to him. God gives him himself, though he knows it not. But when God withdraws from a man as far as that can be without the man's ceasing to be; when the man feels himself abandoned, hanging in a ceaseless vertigo of existence upon the verge of the gulf of his being, without support, without refuge, without aim, without end, . . . then will he listen in agony for the faintest sound of life from the closed door.⁸⁸

Accordingly, no matter how tenaciously some sinners might pursue a life apart from God and resist his loving purpose for their lives, God has, as a sort of last resort, a sure-fire way of shattering the illusions that make their rebellion possible in the first place. To do so, he need only honor their own free choices and permit them to experience the very separation they have confusedly chosen.⁸⁹ For according to the Christian faith, separation from God includes, among other things, separation from all human relationships, including such improper ones as master and slave. When John Milton's Satan imagines himself reigning in hell, his delirious fancy is utterly inconsistent with the New Testament picture. For who but God can reign in the lake of fire? And over whom might a soul, suspended alone in the outer darkness, appear even to itself to exercise

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹ For why Lewis' account of hell, as well as that of other freewill theists, ultimately requires that God *interfere* with human freedom and refuse to let sinners experience the consequences of their own free choices, see Talbott, "Misery and Freedom."

power and domination? When, as a last resort, God allows a sinner to experience the logical end of separation and self-worship, namely the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness, then the resulting horror will at last shatter any illusion that some good is achievable apart from God; it will finally elicit, therefore, a cry for help of the kind that, however faint, is just what God needs in order to begin and eventually to complete the process of reconciliation.

So yes, love is inexorable, according to MacDonald, and God's love will indeed triumph in the end. It will undermine over time every possible motive for disobedience, even if this requires in some cases that a sinner experience the full horror of separation from God, and it will repair all of the harm that we have done to ourselves as well as to others.⁹⁰ Because the ultimate truth about the universe is therefore glorious rather than tragic, God will eventually wipe away all tears, including those of Ted Bundy's mother, without having to conceal from anyone the depth of some terrible tragedy. For however horrendous some *temporary* tragedies may be, the simple truth is that all shall be well in the end.

⁹⁰ MacDonald "enjoyed countering the objection that his expectations for the eternity of mankind were too good to be true by saying they were so good they had to be true" (Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*, 403).

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