

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 2 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 15

11-1999

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis

Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oestreicher Kotapish, Sharon (1999) "Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol2/iss1/15

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

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

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis

Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis

by Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

C.S. Lewis stated that he knew of no other writer who seemed closer to the Spirit of Christ than George MacDonald.¹ Lewis made it clear that he regarded MacDonald as his master and stated that he fancied he had never written a book in which he did not quote from him.² It is, in fact, because of Lewis's acclamation of MacDonald that many readers of Lewis have been drawn to read MacDonald's works. One such reader, Madeleine L'Engle, went so far as to say that "the biggest influence Lewis had on her writing was to introduce her to the writings of George MacDonald."³

People who have enjoyed reading Lewis and have benefited from his writing are curious to know: "Who is this man who influenced Lewis so much?" and "What did he have to say?" As an admirer of Lewis, it was this curiosity that inspired me to read the works of MacDonald and to try to see what it was about him that had made such an impression on Lewis. It was while reading MacDonald's sermons and other writings that there seemed to be a familiar ring to much of what he had written. Then I realized that what I was reading in MacDonald reminded me of things I had read in Lewis. Sometimes it was a particular word used in an unusual way that seemed to jump out at me. Sometimes it was a certain phrase that caught my attention. But most often, it was an expression of thought that, while expressing a fresh new way of

looking at something, still seemed to be familiar.

In this paper I present several examples from MacDonald that are reflected in the writings of Lewis. The examples are by no means exhaustive but rather consist of some of my favorite passages.

In a letter written in 1953, Lewis wrote, "How little people know who think that holiness is dull."⁴ The use of the word "dull" here always stuck in my mind. It seemed an unusual way to describe how some people feel about holiness. Most people would probably have used the word "boring." But Lewis used the word "dull." Later, while reading a sermon by MacDonald, I noticed that he used the word "dull" to express a similar thought when he wrote: "Dull are those—little at least can they have of Christian imagination—who think that where all are good, things must be dull."⁵

I also noticed the repetitious use of the word "daily," italicized in passages by both MacDonald and Lewis. MacDonald wrote that "although the idea of the denial of self is an entire and absolute one, yet the thing has to be done *daily* . . ."⁶ Lewis wrote that "life has to be taken day by day and hour by hour."⁷ He emphasized this point with the repeated use of the word "daily" when he wrote that the prayer, "'Give us our daily bread' (not an annuity for life), applied to spiritual gifts too; the little *daily* support for the *daily* trial."⁸

This focus on living life daily, day by day, parallels the importance that both Lewis and

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

MacDonald put on living in the present and not being overconsumed with the future. Lewis expressed this idea in a metaphor when he compared our lives to a play and wrote that we “are not the playwright, we are not the producer, we are not even the audience. We are on the stage. To play well the scenes in which we are ‘on’ concerns us much more than to guess about the scenes that follow it.”⁹ These thoughts reflect MacDonald’s similar notions about the value of living in the present when he wrote that it is not our business “to speculate what we would do in other circumstances, but to perform the duty of the moment, the one true preparation for the duty to come.”¹⁰

There are many other instances where the ideas found in the writings of Lewis closely parallel things that MacDonald had written. Regarding the problem of sin, both in ourselves as well as in others, MacDonald writes that “the cause of every man’s discomfort is evil, moral evil—first of all, evil in himself, his own sin, his own wrongness, his own unrighteousness; and then, evil in those he loves”¹¹ Lewis elaborates on this idea when he writes that “the very activities for which we were created are, while we live on earth, vicariously impeded: by evil in ourselves or in others.”¹²

Both Lewis and MacDonald express a distrust of feelings and admonish their readers not to pay too much attention to them. MacDonald notes that our feelings, which come and go, are notably illogical.¹³ He advises his readers: “Heed not thy feelings: Do thy work.”¹⁴ Lewis agrees that “*feelings* come (or don’t come) and go”¹⁵ He expresses the idea that feelings are something that “happen” to a person¹⁶ and that our feelings are often determined by the weather, our health, or the last book we read.¹⁷ Like

MacDonald, Lewis advises his readers not to bother much about their feelings but to focus on obedience¹⁸ and on their intentions and behavior.¹⁹

I remember reading *Mere Christianity* for the first time and coming across Lewis’s idea that the words “God is love” would have no meaning unless God contained at least two persons. Lewis went on to say that “if God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.”²⁰ This was the first time I had ever heard this idea and I always remembered it. Later, when reading one of MacDonald’s sermons, I found that MacDonald expressed a similar idea when he wrote that “God could not love, could not be love, without making things to love. Jesus has God to love, the love of the Son is responsive to the love of the Father.”²¹

Both Lewis and MacDonald contrast love and duty. MacDonald writes that duty is a stage toward something better, an impulse toward a vital contact with the truth. He goes on to say that someday we will forget all about duty and do everything from love.²² These same thoughts are reflected in Lewis when he writes that duty is a substitute for love, for love of both God and of other people. Lewis compares duty to a crutch that is a substitute for a leg²³ and notes that “a *perfect* man would never act from a sense of duty,” but that he would “always *want* to do the right thing”²⁴

Both Lewis and MacDonald understand the abhorrence that people feel toward others who act not out of a sense of love but of duty. MacDonald gives an example of a man who ministers to the wants of his wife and family out of duty and not love. He expresses the idea that everyone would want a man who neglects his family to take care of them for any reason, even for fear of the whip, but that the

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

strongest and most operative sense of duty does not satisfy anyone in such a relation.²⁵ Lewis expresses the same sentiment when he says that “we do not wish either to be, or to live among, people who are clean or honest or kind as a matter of duty: we want to be, and to associate with, people who like being clean and honest and kind. The mere suspicion that what seemed an act of spontaneous friendliness or generosity was really done as a duty subtly poisons it.”²⁶

Both Lewis and MacDonald address the problem of seemingly unanswered prayer and attribute this phenomenon to their belief that God knows what each person needs and that He wants the best for each person. Lewis writes: “God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want.”²⁷ These thoughts reflect the similar ideas MacDonald has on the subject when he writes that “man finds it hard to get what he wants, because he does not want the best,” and that God finds it hard to give, because He wants to give the best, but man will not take it.²⁸ Lewis explains why we sometimes think that God has not answered our prayers by saying that it seems self-evident that God in his “wisdom must sometimes refuse what ignorance may quite innocently ask.”²⁹ MacDonald writes that for God to give a man something not in harmony with His laws of truth and right, just because the man has asked for it, “would be to damn him—to cast him into outer darkness.”³⁰

Both Lewis and MacDonald express the idea that God not only wants to give us what is best for us, but that He also wants to make each person into a beautiful, radiant creation. MacDonald writes of a person growing as beautiful as God meant him to be when God first thought of him.³¹ Lewis carries this theme further when he writes that if we let Him, God “will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into

a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine”³²

Both authors write of God’s desire for man to be not only beautiful, but also to be perfect. MacDonald writes that we are required to be perfect because God is perfect,³³ and Lewis writes that when Christ said, “‘Be perfect.’ He meant it.”³⁴ Lewis goes on to say that when God told us to be perfect, “He meant that we must go in for the full treatment.”³⁵ What is this “full treatment” that Lewis writes of? Lewis indicates that one aspect of the treatment is for us to be cured of our sins when he writes that God’s love is not wearied by our sins, and that God is quite relentless in his determination that “we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.”³⁶ These thoughts reflect what MacDonald wrote when he said that “God is bound by His love to punish sin in order to deliver His creature: He is bound by justice to destroy sin in His creation.”³⁷

When writing of God’s love, MacDonald made the rather unusual statement that “there is no refuge from the love of God.”³⁸ But why would anyone want refuge from God’s love? MacDonald believes that we may well want to flee from God’s love because, for the sake of destroying evil in us, there is no extreme of suffering to which God will not subject us. He goes on to say that “a man might flatter or bribe, or coax a tyrant; but . . . the love of God will . . . , for very love, insist upon the ‘last penny.’”³⁹ These words are reflected in Lewis when he writes that we may wish “that we were of so little account to God that He left us alone to follow our natural impulses—that He would give over trying to train us into something so unlike our natural selves.” But

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

Lewis goes on to say that then we would be asking “not for more love, but for less.”⁴⁰

On the subject of work, MacDonald writes that “the same principle runs through the highest duty and the lowest—that the lowest work which God gives a man to do must be in its nature noble, as certainly noble as the highest.”⁴¹ Lewis seconds this when he writes that “most men must glorify God by doing to His glory something which is not *per se* an act of glorifying but which becomes so by being offered”⁴² Both authors give concrete illustrations of this principle. MacDonald writes that “the simplest peasant loving his cow, is more divine than any monarch whose monarchy is his glory.”⁴³ Lewis illustrates the same principle when he writes that “the work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly ‘as to the Lord.’”⁴⁴ However, Lewis goes on to say that “this does not, of course, mean that it is for anyone a mere toss-up whether he should sweep rooms or compose symphonies. A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow.”⁴⁵ These thoughts mirror MacDonald who writes, “I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of.”⁴⁶

The writings of both Lewis and MacDonald indicate that neither of them regarded this world as our real home. Both authors used metaphors to express the temporal nature of our life here on earth. MacDonald compares our life on earth to living and working on a scaffold and notes that, while we work on that scaffold, it is not God’s purpose to make us comfortable but to make us good.⁴⁷ In a letter written in 1963, Lewis compares our life on earth to a seed living in a land of dreams.⁴⁸ He thinks of this

world as a place not intended simply for our happiness but as a place of training and correction.⁴⁹ Following are quotations by both MacDonald and Lewis expressing how they see our life on earth in terms of these metaphors.

MacDonald writes:

Suppose God were building a palace for you, and had set up a scaffold, upon which He wanted you to help Him. Would it be reasonable for you to complain that you didn’t find the scaffold at all a comfortable place to live in? Or that it was draughty and cold? This world is that scaffold

. . . . God wants to build you a house whereof the walls shall be *goodness*. You want a house with walls of *comfort*. But God knows that such walls cannot be built He would make you comfortable, but neither is that His first object, nor can it be gained without the first, which is to make you good. . . .

It comes to this, that when God would build a palace for Himself to dwell in with His children, He does not want His scaffold so constructed that they shall be able to make a house of it for themselves, and live like apes instead of angels.⁵⁰

Lewis writes: “If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it’s not so bad.”⁵¹ He further admonishes:

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

Think of yourself just as a seed patiently wintering in the earth; waiting to come up a flower in the Gardener's good time, up into the *real* world, the real waking. I suppose that our whole present life, looked back on from there, will seem only a drowsy half-waking. We are here in the land of dreams. But cock-crow is coming. It is nearer now than when I began this letter.⁵²

It would be possible to carry this study a step further and to show how Scripture is reflected in the writings of both MacDonald and Lewis. The Scriptural truths expressed by both writers have served as a reinforcement to the beliefs of many readers. We are all influenced by our encounters with Scripture as well as with other people—both their writings and spoken words as well as their actions—and we in turn influence the lives of others. The interrelationship between the writings of Lewis and MacDonald could be said to demonstrate this influence of one person on another. Lewis learned from MacDonald and in turn expressed ideas that he gleaned from him in a new way. Through the popularization of many of Lewis's books, people who are not likely to read MacDonald's writings can gain access to his insights and ideas. MacDonald's writings have also been made more accessible to today's readers through edited versions of his sermons⁵³ and anthologies of his writings.⁵⁴ I would imagine that both Lewis and MacDonald would be pleased to know just how deeply their writings have influenced millions of readers who have feasted on their work in the short years since their publication. We are then left with the challenge to allow what we have learned from their writings to

impact our lives and to share what we have learned with others.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 18.
2. C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 20.
3. Neuhouser, ed., *George MacDonald: Selections from his Greatest Works*, 7.
4. Kilby, ed., *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated August 1, 1953), 136.
5. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 290.
6. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons (Series Two)*, 222.
7. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated July 17, 1953), 250.
8. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated July 17, 1953), 250.
9. C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night*, 104.
10. MacDonald, *England's Antiphon*, 227.
11. Hein, ed., *Life Essential the Hope of the Gospel: George MacDonald*, 14.
12. C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, 115.
13. MacDonald, *God's Word to His children*, 28; MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 136.
14. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons (Series One)*, 178.
15. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated December 7, 1950), 225.
16. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated June 13, 1951), 233.
17. C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, 117.
18. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated December 7, 1950), 225.

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

19. W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated June 13, 1951), 233.
20. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 152.
21. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 16-17.
22. MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 206.
23. W. H. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated July 18, 1957), 277.
24. W. H. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated July 18, 1957), 277.
25. MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 206.
26. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 187.
27. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 48.
28. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons (Series Two)*, 142.
29. C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections (Petitionary Prayer)*, 142.
30. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons (Series One)*, 25.
31. MacDonald, *The Marquis of Lossie*, 80.
32. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 176.
33. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 31.
34. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 170.
35. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 170-171.
36. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 118.
37. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 72.
38. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 75.
39. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 75.
40. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 38.
41. MacDonald, *The Seaboard Parish*, 78-79.
42. C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections (Christianity and culture)*, 24.
43. Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*, 17.
44. C.S. Lewis, *Transposition and Other Addresses*, 50.
45. C.S. Lewis, *Transposition and Other Addresses*, 50.
46. MacDonald, *David Elginbrod*, 238-239.
47. MacDonald, *The Vicar's Daughter*, 259-261.
48. Kilby, ed., *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis* (letter dated June 28, 1963), 187.
49. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (Answers to Questions on Christianity)*, 52.
50. MacDonald, *The Vicar's Daughter*, 259-261.
51. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics (Answers to Questions on Christianity)*, 52.
52. Kilby, ed., *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis*, 187.
53. Hein, ed., *Life Essential the Hope of the Gospel: George MacDonald*; Hein, ed., *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*.
54. Neuhouser, ed., *George MacDonald: Selections from His Greatest Works*; Verploegh, comp., *3000 Quotations from the Writings of George MacDonald*.

Bibliography

- Hein, R., ed.
 1974 *Life Essential the Hope of the Gospel: George MacDonald*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw.
 1976 *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw.
- Kilby, C.S., ed.
 1968 *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Reflections of MacDonald in Lewis • Sharon Oestreicher Kotapish

- Lewis, C.S.
 1943 *Mere Christianity*. Reprint. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
 1946 *George MacDonald: An anthology*. Reprint. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955.
 1949 *Transposition and Other Addresses*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
 1952 *The World's Last Night*. Reprint. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960.
 1954 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. Reprint. Oxford: Clarendon. F. P. Wilson & B. Dobree, eds., 1965.
 1962 *The Problem of Pain*. Reprint. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
 1967 *Christian Reflections*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. W. Hooper, ed.
 1970 *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. W. Hooper, ed.
 1977 *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*. Glasgow: Collins.
- Lewis, W. H., ed.
 1966 *Letters of C.S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- MacDonald, G.
 1867 *Unspoken Sermons (Series One)*. London: Alexander Strahan.
 1881 *The Vicar's Daughter*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington.
 1887 *God's Word to His Children*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls.
 1890 *England's Antiphon*. New York: MacMillan.
 1895 *Unspoken Sermons (Series Two)*. London: Longmans, Green.
 n.d. *Paul Faber, Surgeon*. Philadelphia: David McKay.
 n.d. *The Marquis of Lossie*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- n.d. *The Seaboard Parish*. Philadelphia: David McKay.
 n.d. *David Elginbrod*. Boston: Loring.
- Neuhouser, D. L., ed.
 1990 *George MacDonald: Selections from his Greatest Works*. Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen.
- Verploegh, H., comp.
 1996 *3000 Quotations from the Writings of George MacDonald*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revel.