

## George MacDonald's Spiritually Prophetic Imagination

*An imaginatively conceived transformational vision  
of God's nature and eternal purposes in his universe  
and in the lives of his created men and women*

### The paper as read

Wade Center, Wheaton, May 31, 2024

*[2284 words—20 minutes as given...an exercise in massive editing!]*

The paper I am going to read today is entitled *George MacDonald's Spiritually Prophetic Imagination*.

The first question that occurred to me was: What do these words mean?

We use the word prophetic to describe men and women who walk in more exalted regions. We call them renowned, gifted, innovative, historic, even genius.

We speak of George MacDonald in all these ways. In our minds he glows with the aura of greatness.

#### THE HIGHEST PROPHECY— ILLUMINATING GOD'S PURPOSES IN ETERNITY

What "prophetic" actually means, however, is predictive of the future...and secondarily interpretive of spiritual truth.

*Predictive and interpretive.*

The true prophetic gift points to *God's* future. Then it *interprets* that future.

Prophetic truth rises even higher—into the realm of God's *intended* future. Not merely what *will* happen...but what God *wants* to happen...what God *ordains* to happen.

*The highest prophecy, then, is that which illuminates what God ordains to accomplish in eternity.*

We peer into such realms through a glass darkly. But to those whose vision is keener than the rest we ascribe the word *prophetic*.

George MacDonald was such a one. He apprehended God's purposes...because he saw into the depths of God's Fathering heart.

And in a transformational stroke of either heresy or brilliance, MacDonald posits the astonishing idea that God has given mankind the imagination to *transcend* and *illuminate* theology, teaching, and church tradition. The imagination raises God's truth from *other* sources into loftier realms. Imagination enlightens and informs *many* signposts along the path toward truth.

Imagination possesses a singular power these other methodologies do not have. It is capable of turning hearts above the clouds of our earthbound humanity...even when the idea of "God" may yet be a million miles away.

#### WHEN GOD BREAKS THROUGH

Where raw *theology* or spiritual *ideas* may repel, the imagination lures and draws.

Light years before any Christian teaching is on the horizon, the imagination may be sending down roots into the wondering consciousness...beguiling and hinting toward the infinite.

The imagination prepares for the season when the clouds dissipate...and God himself breaks through—the creative Presence...which man's wonderings, longings, and numinous sense of "other-ness" have been seeking all along.

The imagination may thus be instrumental as a *starting* point of Everyman's spiritual quest...*and* as an illuminating guide, perhaps years later, helping the hungry truth-seeker look toward the high mountains of eternity.

It is this, not merely that he spun clever and imaginative tales, that gives George MacDonald's imagination power and prophetic import.

#### IMAGINATION COMPLETES THE CIRCLE BETWEEN THE TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL

The imagination is not the only illuminating light by which God can be known. God has placed hints, glimpses, and mysteries of revelation into every atom of his creation. Some of these clues are easy to see. Some are extremely confusing.

One of the most perplexing, which sadly turns many away from God rather than toward him, is that we use the word *father* for both earthly fatherhood and God's Fatherhood.

However, the connections between the two "fathers" are frustratingly vague. The mirrors of earthly fatherhood are cracked and broken. Their reflections of God are out of focus, and in some cases almost non-existent.

The created universe, likewise, reflects God's nature by the things he has made. But like human fatherhood, the God-reflections of the world are not immediately apparent. To our eyes they produce as much suffering as wonder and awe.

Even the best earthly fatherhood...and the most exquisite displays of nature...are deeply rooted in the temporal. We have difficulty translating their fragmentary clues and dim images into the realm of eternity.

Enter MacDonald's revolutionary conviction, that God has given the imagination to connect the dots...to fill in the gap between the temporal and the eternal. The imagination interprets the wonderful yet perplexing mysteries of the created world...and it helps us discern the high significance of earthly fatherhood.

In both instances we find MacDonald's keen wisdom training us to see what we are *supposed* to see. He uses the searchlight of the imagination to supply what neither nature nor earthly fatherhood—nor most of man's diverse religious teachings—can on their own.

MACDONALD POLISHES THE GLASS

We return to the role of the prophetic as *interpretive*. MacDonald *interprets* nature...and the eternal idea of fatherhood...through the imagination.

He writes:

*I believe that every fact in nature is a revelation of God... How should we **imagine** what we may of God, without the firmament over our heads... The truth of the sky is what it makes us feel of the God that sent it out to our eyes.*

*Nature...exists primarily for...her appeals to the heart and the **imagination**... One day, I trust, we shall be able to enter into their secrets from within them.*

MacDonald's prophetic imagination enables us to see deeper into the incomplete temporal reflections...and thus mend the cracks of the broken earthly mirrors. Then he polishes the glass so we can at last see face to face.

DARE TO IMAGINE THE BEST OF GOD!

MacDonald's most daring proposal reaches even higher. He says that we must dare to imagine God *more* imbued with goodness and love and forgiveness than the doctrines and theologies of man even hint at...*higher* than the best earthly fatherhood anyone can conceive of.

*Infinitely* higher than all temporal images, revelations, hopes, and dreams.

He challenges us to let our imaginations soar about how good the best God, the best Father, in the wildest imagination could possibly be.

He writes:

*Our **imagination** is made to mirror truth...I suspect it is the region whence issues prophecy.*

*The only possibility of believing in a God seems to me to lie in finding an idea of God large enough, grand...pure...lovely enough...to believe in.*

*I...believe God as good as the tenderest...human heart could **imagine** him, yea, an infinitude better.*

*God...is...altogether our friend, our father...our infinite love-perfect God...beyond all that human **imagination** can conceive.*

*Our longing desires can no more exhaust the fulness...of the Godhead, than our **imagination** can touch their measure.*

Imagining God *beyond* our imaginings, we at last touch the fringes of his garment.

MacDonald's far-reaching vision thus encloses the circle. He brings together all the fragmentary hints contained within the idea matrix of our beliefs, conjectures, wonderings, and hopes about what God might truly be.

#### THE BROKEN MIRROR OF EARTHLY FATHERHOOD

MacDonald encourages those who have suffered from the broken mirror of earthly fatherhood to look up, through the imagination, and seek the divine Fatherhood, of which all earthly fatherhoods are but a faint and broken echo.

This great healing represents the primary earthly doorway opening into the Father heart of God.

He writes:

*There may be among my readers...to whom the word Father brings no cheer...Therefore I say to son or daughter who has no pleasure in the name Father, 'You must interpret the word by all...that human tenderness can give or desire...all and infinitely more must be true of the perfect Father...the maker of fatherhood.*

*Truly our hearts shall be jubilant, because thou art...infinitely beyond all we could **imagine**...Beyond all...that the rich **imagination** can devise.*

#### THE INFINITELY RENEWING CIRCLE OF ETERNITY

Few of MacDonald's books better than *Castle Warlock* so clearly trace the sequence of the imagination...helping *begin* the quest to understand ourselves and the world, eventually leading *beyond* those beginnings to the high mountains of God's purposes...where the circle of personhood is brought into an enclosing unity.

I mention this book because I have been working with our son Robin...and Joseph...our friend and founder of Wise Path Books, on a new parallel edition of *Warlock* to coincide with the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MacDonald's birth.

Warlock's example does not point to a vague realm of faerie. That's why MacDonald's realistic novels are pivotally important in understanding his literary vision—they portray *real* people, though fictional, learning to make sense of the world and themselves, and growing into God's fulfilled, obedient, and Christlike sons and daughters.

#### A SEQUENTIAL PROGRESSION

Nor do we use the term prophetic for what we find in MacDonald's novels merely because they arouse feelings of wonder as *Phantastes* did for C.S. Lewis.

We call MacDonald's realistic novels prophetic because in them he points toward the eternal character of God and his purposes for his humanity.

That's what Lewis eventually discovered, though it took him many years to reach the fulfillment of the quest that began on a train platform when he was yet a teen. Lewis discovered not *mere* imagination...not mythopoeia alone...not the exaltation of MacDonald's imagination as a thing to be lauded in itself. Lewis

discovered the eternal purposes of God, about which he wrote with piercing insight in the final chapters of *Mere Christianity*.

The sequence of revelation in *Warlock* is vital. The *boy* begins to imagine high things. At first these imaginings are vague...exactly as they were for Lewis when he speaks of the baptism of his imagination into *goodness*.

By the time young Cosmo reaches *manhood*, he knows where his imaginings were pointing.

The progression is exactly that followed by C.S. Lewis.

As he chronicles his growth from the nebulous beginnings of *Phantastes* to the full understanding of what those beginnings *meant*, Lewis speaks of his decades-long progression into deeper realms of truth. He says that the *full* revelation "came far *later* with the help of many *other* books."

#### SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD LEADS TO SPIRITUAL MANHOOD

*Phantastes* wasn't enough. It was an incomplete teen-age stepping stone at the beginning of Lewis's journey. He wrote, "When the process was complete...I found that I was still with MacDonald...and that I was *now*...at last ready to hear from him what he could not have told me at that first meeting." In other words, what *Phantastes* could not reveal.

Lewis was not content to stop at *Phantastes*. He realized that the higher gold MacDonald had for him was found *elsewhere*.

He discovered that true gold by following the same progression—from the wonder of *spiritual childhood* to the maturity of *spiritual manhood*. It was a progressive revelation that took him far beyond the nebulous beginnings of spiritual *infancy* of 1916.

*Warlock* opens with the boy Cosmo daydreaming about the mystery of water. MacDonald uses a wonder of the natural creation that will ultimately reveal secrets about the Creator himself.

He writes of Cosmo:

*It was a mountain stream, which...went roaring, rushing, and...thundering...down to the river in the glen below...*

*He recognized that what in the stream had drawn him from earliest childhood...was the vague sense...of its mystery—the form the infinite first takes to the...liveliest hearts.*

Many years later, thinking back, just as Lewis thought back to 1916, Cosmo finally knows what it all means.

*At length he saw in God the one only origin, the fountain of fountains...a true picture of the heart of God, ever sending forth life of itself into the consciousness of we who receive it.*

#### THE PROPHETIC FRUIT OF MACDONALD'S IMAGINATION

The prevailing focus when speaking of MacDonald's imagination is usually on his fantasies, poetry, and fairy tales. I take the controversial view that the most profound significance of George MacDonald's imagination is discovered in his *spiritual* vision. His transformational *theological* ideas lift MacDonald's

corpus of sermons and novels into the rarified air of the prophetic. Though they radiate with multitude facets of light, this *particular* claim is not one I believe can be made with equal force about his fantasy or poetic writings.

After fifty years immersed in MacDonald's life and work, it is my conviction that his expansive portrayal of the character and purposes of God, as imagined and articulated in his realistic novels and sermons, will echo throughout eternity with more power than the myriad insights he has contributed in other genres. His "prophetic imagination" was essentially a *spiritual* vision.

#### THE HIGH GIFT LEADS TO THE HEART OF GOD

Imagination is a gift God has given for a specific purpose—that we will grow to *know* him more accurately...that we will *understand* his ways, means, and objectives...and that we will *order our daily lives* by those purposes.

Imagination has been given to help guide us into our ultimate destiny. God's intent is that we will use the gift along the progression followed by Cosmo Warlock and C.S. Lewis, from initial wonder...to the full stature of spiritual sonship and daughterhood.

In our growth into that childhood, the imagination brings many delights along the way. It ignites creativity, deepens us as a sensory, gifted, intellectual, emotional, and choosing humanity. It expands our vistas, widens our horizons, gives meaning to life, love, and the world—love of our fellows...love of nature, poetry, art, story, drama, music, laughter, fantasy, and fairy tale.

All creativity is born in the imagination...which flows from the heart of God. An infinite diversity of fruits of the imaginative gift are shed abroad through our personalities, as delightful bonuses throughout life's journey.

In the revelation of humanity's manifold imaginative fruits of individual expressiveness, we rejoice in *all* MacDonald's writings—fairy tales, novels, fantasies, poetry, and sermons. His was a bountiful life-harvest of imaginative creativity that is still sending down roots into hearts two hundred years after his birth.

#### CLOSING SUMMARY

George's MacDonald's life was suffused with a vision and outlook born in the heart of a Father-God whose goodness is higher than man can comprehend.

His was a vision rooted in an imagination looking ahead and reaching high. In every sermon and novel that came from his pen we find MacDonald's expansive vision *predictively, interpretively, and prophetically* anticipating God's purposes in eternity.

Let me close with a wonderful quote from MacDonald's son Ronald:

"George MacDonald's life *was* religion...his iridescent imagination gave its colour to the religion that was his...his imaginative faculty was a prism, falling through which the Great White Light was disparted into seventy times seven hues of human delight."