

## Foreword

THIS IS A MOST timely book. Timely, because the lives of Americans are increasingly distracted, and diverted—hijacked by the computer into cyberspace where it is possible to live without relationships, without grounding, without connection, without commitments, without ritual, without worship. A great number of wise and insightful observers for several decades now have been calling our attention to the resulting cultural, political, and spiritual poverty.

One of the great storytellers in the Christian tradition is George MacDonald, whose storytelling has entered into the Christian mind as a bulwark against the scourge of meaninglessness. MacDonald was a Scottish pastor who turned his writing desk into a pulpit. In addition to sermons, he wrote novels formed out of a penetrating theological imagination. He wrote novels for children and the young, novels for adults. His stories and poems provide his readers with ways to reclaim as their own a world fragmented by secularism and devastated by the “acids of modernity” as fundamentally a world loved by God, a world of grace and salvation.

The Victorian Age (the nineteenth century) provided the setting in which MacDonald did his work. It was the century in which the Christian community was required to think through and reimagine much of what it had grown up with, not unlike the times in which we are now living. Two major events transpired in that century. One, the rise of higher criticism beginning with David Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, which in effect eliminated the supernatural from its understanding of Jesus’ life—a Jesus without God. As momentum gathered around this publication, the faith of many was shaken. The second event was the advent of the new science of geology that provided evidence that the age of the earth was much older than the traditional seven-day creation had it. This was followed

by the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* that called into question the divine creation of Adam and Eve. The combination of higher criticism questioning the authority of Scripture followed by the evolutionary challenge to divine creation produced a "perfect storm" of doubt and skepticism in both academy and church.

This is the world in which MacDonald wrote. It anticipated the conditions now exacerbated in our times, a depersonalized cyberspace world in which science and religion are so frequently at odds. In the name of the Lord of language MacDonald rescues language from being debased into argument and polemic. He provides us with access to an imagination that cannot be at the service of science alone or religion alone. We need his voice still.

Dr. Gisela Kreglinger has written a study of George MacDonald that brings his voice back into circulation in a fresh way. Using story laced with poetry and parable and metaphor, MacDonald builds within us the imaginative capacity to comprehend the detailed richness of a world penetrated in every dimension by Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

As we give ourselves to the power of story, we are moved from the position of a spectator into a life of active participation. This world and the people in it are not here to be explained or argued with; it is a world in which we have been created as participants in relationship with other participants. We are in a *story*—a story that is overall a story of Jesus Christ. And in this Jesus story, in MacDonald's words, "a thousand truths, unknown and yet active, which, embodied in theory, and dissociated from the living mind that was in Christ, will as certainly breed worms as any omer (jar) of hoarded manna."

It has always seemed a great irony to me that people who put such a high value on Scripture, the moment they begin to write and talk about Scripture characteristically depart radically from the way Scripture itself is written. Scripture is primarily written as story, a story chock full of metaphors, and as poetry. How does it happen that abstract propositions, impersonal definitions, and explanations become the stock in trade for so many in the Christian community? If they do tell a story, it is debased to the level of anecdote or illustration. But if we trust the Bible so thoroughly why don't we trust the way the Bible is written? Why this long ingrained habit of reducing these intricately crafted stories to moral lessons, these wild and exuberant metaphors to doctrinal explanations?

Stories and poems have always and continue to be the best verbal way we have to train our imaginations to see and embrace the particularity of

place and person, *hereness* and *nowness*, the endless complexity of souls, the glorious diversities of place. It is the best verbal way we have for defending our understanding of God and the world around us against oversimplification and reduction, of preserving the ambiguity and mystery inherent in all of life, an ambiguity and mystery even more pronounced when life is understood under the auspices of God and salvation.

The Christian life, as revealed in our Scriptures and proclaimed in our churches in Word and Sacrament, everywhere and always is a matter of flesh and blood, named persons, places you can locate on a map, personal conversations. The centerpiece of this revelation is the Word made flesh, Jesus born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, walking the roads of Galilee, killed in Jerusalem, and resurrection-alive in the most unexpected places. The Word that is Jesus, and all the words leading up to and deriving from this Word that is Jesus are embodied words, words that are given to us in the form of stories and poems that comprise people, time, and place.

The Devil, according to many who think hard about these things, is incapable of taking on flesh. The Word that saves us became incarnate, took on flesh in Jesus—and, if we will, in us. The Devil who would damn us is disincarnate, incapable of flesh. This Devil's characteristic work is to disincarnate words—turn them into abstractions and generalities, cut them loose from history, from the here and now, and distill them down into a “truth” or “doctrine” or “moral,” which we can then use without bothering with the *way* we use them and quite apart from people whose names we know or the local conditions in which we have responsibilities. These de-historicized words can then be wrenched out of the storied context where we first learned them, manipulated at will, used to seduce and make war, arbitrarily stuck here and there, cut and pasted, depersonalized into slogans and ideas, truths and causes quite apart from person and place and time, quite apart from the biblically contextualized word of God. Wonderful truths but without feet-on-the-ground relationships. The Devil is a great intellectual; he loves getting us discussing ideas about God, *especially* ideas about God. He does some of his best work when he gets us so deeply involved in ideas about God that we are hardly aware that while we are reading or talking about God, God is actually present to us and the people whom he has placed in our lives to love, placed right there in front of us. It is the Devil's own work to suggest an inspiring spirituality without the inconvenience of keeping company with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. The Devil loves being

involved in our Bible studies, diverting our attention from the story itself to figuring out the meaning of this or that word so we can use it in an argument, or carry it around as a kind of talisman. He knows there is no harm in letting us read the Bible if he can just get us excited about the basic truths and inspiring passages, “make them our own” as we say, and forget about the world of listening prayer and the Spirit’s presence in everything and everyone all around us. Once he has gotten us in the habit of disincarnating words—turning them into truths or definitions or morals or dogma—he is well on the way to disincarnating *us*, furnishing us with a storyless Christian role, a storyless Christian function. The Devil doesn’t tell stories.

George MacDonald continues to be a strong and intelligent presence among us for keeping us alert and participatory in language that derives from the Word made flesh. Dr. Kreglinger has provided us with a magnificent orientation in this Christ-infused theological imagination.

MacDonald referred to stiffly literal and non-relational uses of language as “mummies.” Whenever I come across that metaphor, I think of Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb with “his hands and feet bound” and telling his disciples “Unbind him and let him go.” George MacDonald is the disciple who has done that for many of us, and hopefully for many more as you read this book.

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