



Introduction

Alex J. MacDonald

I think I first came across Donald Macleod in April 1973 when he spoke at the Free Church Youth Conference in St Ninian's, Crieff. That was an eventful week for me. I was a divinity student in my final year at the Free Church College, and on the Wednesday I had been summoned to appear before the august Training of the Ministry Committee for the offence of wearing an army jacket to the Dingwall Prayer Meeting (I know, it's difficult to believe now). It was one of many run-ins I had with some of the more conservative brethren in the Church. Little did I think then that the speaker at the Conference that weekend would in later years defend me publicly from some of these attacks, particularly in *The Monthly Record*. But that is typical of the man. At that time he was perhaps more conservative in some ways than now, but he obviously felt that the attacks were unfair and said so. If there is one thing that has remained constant with him over the years, it is his sympathy for the underdog, the mistreated or the oppressed.

We instinctively feel that some people are complex and others are more straightforward. In Biblical terms it is undoubtedly the case that every human being is complex. We are all made in the image of God. Those who appear simple souls on the surface have hidden depths, perhaps undetected by others. However, as a useful rule of thumb,



people are either of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get variety or the what-you-get-is-not-necessarily-what-you-see variety.

Donald Macleod is most emphatically in the latter category. He is not predictable. Over the years people have been constantly taken aback, surprised, shocked and even outraged by the positions he has taken up and the views he has expressed – from his rejection of the Received Text (on which the AV is based) in the early days to his more recent disagreement with the Free Church's position on worship. Some would charge him with inconsistency for changing his views on various issues. I am sure he would retort that only perfect people don't need to change their views and, this side of glory, none is perfect.

Donald's guiding star has been and remains 'What says the Scripture?' And if something does not agree with the word of God, so much the worse for it! There is no tradition or practice that cannot be re-examined in the light of Scripture. He has constantly reminded us of the great Reformation principle – our authority is 'Scripture Alone'.

Another emphasis is the rediscovery of Scottish Theology. While the church at large drank deeply at the well of continental theology, and while Donald is widely read in that area, he has helped a new generation to rediscover William Cunningham, Thomas Chalmers, Hugh Martin, Andrew Melville and John Knox. That being said, he neglects no source that may shed light on the meaning of Scripture, from whatever background, whether it be Barth, Bonhoeffer or Moltmann.

This highlights what has been a growing development in his thinking – the ecumenical. It would be difficult to think of a theologian who has such a wide appeal and recognition as Donald Macleod. He regularly speaks in various church contexts from the solidly Reformed to the broadly evangelical to the decidedly liberal. He has been honoured both by an honorary doctorate from Westminster Seminary and a visiting professorship from the University of Glasgow.

However, what I am sure is more important to him than these honours is that, like his Master, the common people hear him gladly. Donald Macleod makes little concession in his lecturing or preaching to ignorance of Biblical or theological truth, and he makes no apology for Biblical and theological language. Nevertheless, because he makes doctrine come alive, people are drawn in, people of all different backgrounds.

Donald breaks all the rules in preaching (as in other ways). He has no eye contact with his audience, he gazes into the far distance.



Introduction

His voice is low and hesitant as he begins, but by the time he reaches his peroration it approaches the decibel level of an electric guitar! His preaching ceases to follow the natural cadences of human speech, and rises to some esoteric Celtic torrent of its own. And yet... and yet, if you yield to the Spirit speaking through this man, you feel his eyes are seeing far-off things which he is helping you to glimpse, you are drawn into a new world of exciting vistas of undreamed-of theological truth, you are raised by high oratory to a new level of understanding of your God and Saviour.

I never benefited from studying under Professor Macleod (too old, you see), but I have benefited from his ministry on numerous occasions through his sermons and lectures and of course through his books. What always strikes me is his focus on Christ. Evangelical preachers all hold that they preach Christ and him crucified. Often that is more in theory than in practice. As they preach through Scripture, they find it difficult to make the big connections to Christ. Not so with Donald Macleod. Christ is always at the centre.

Donald of course has been through great personal struggles. He was at the centre of the controversy that threatened to put an end to the Free Church of Scotland in the 1990s. These events are well documented and I will not recap them here. However, it ought to be remembered that during those years, Donald Macleod was under attacks and pressures that would have destroyed many of us. It is a testimony to the grace of God that he survived and during those years wrote some of his greatest theological works.

It was, of course, his journalistic skills combined with his theological insight that brought him to national attention when he edited *The Monthly Record* and wrote for the *West Highland Free Press* and numerous other newspapers. While not everyone agreed with what he wrote, everyone avidly read (and continues to read) what he had to say, and he communicated in a strong, forthright and lucid style. His editorials and articles in *The Monthly Record* kept many of us going from month to month (particularly those of us in the ministry). Our spiritual commitment was revived, our vision renewed, and we felt indeed we could do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Undoubtedly one of his greatest contributions to the Free Church of Scotland was securing the validation of the Free Church College course. Few know the huge amount of work that he put into that enterprise. But it is a legacy from which the church, and not just the



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Free Church, in Scotland and beyond will benefit from in years and perhaps generations to come.

How would we sum up Donald Macleod? To attempt that I return to the words I penned as an endorsement (as if any were needed) for one of his books. ‘Donald Macleod is the people’s theologian – or at least would be in a sane world. He combines a profound grasp of the language of Scripture and the history of Christian doctrine with a penetrating understanding of the dilemmas of life at the beginning of the third millennium. Through it all shines his adoration of Jesus Christ and his deep sympathy with people. He never loses sight for a moment that he is addressing people – people who are hurting, or confused or ill-informed or tempted. This is theology straight from the heart of a great preacher of the gospel.’

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