

JOHN MACLEOD OF GOVAN

A DISTINCTIVE HIGH CHURCHMAN

One of the most commanding figures in the movement for renewal in worship in the Church of Scotland during the last century was the Rev. Dr John Macleod of Govan. Born in 1840, he was a member of that highland ecclesiastical dynasty which has given so many ministers to the Kirk. His father was the Rev. John Macleod of Morven, his uncle was the celebrated Dr Norman MacLeod of the Barony, and his brother Norman became the leader of the General Assembly and was Moderator in 1899. It was not for John to reach such prominence in the courts of the Church, and he is remembered largely for his work as a parish minister. After a short period at Newton-on-Ayr he became the minister of Duns in 1862. His principal ministry was at Govan, to which he was inducted in 1875. He died prematurely in 1898 at the age of fifty-eight.

Macleod's ministry represents the growing acceptance of changes in the public worship of the Church. Although several of the practices he had introduced at Duns were disallowed subsequently by the General Assembly, Macleod had comparatively little difficulty in establishing the same observances at Govan, and successfully defended them when they were challenged before the Presbytery of Glasgow. The Assembly's judgment about the worship at Duns was not representative therefore of what came to be permitted in the Church's services.

Macleod represents also a particular emphasis among the worship reformers of his time. He was a "high" churchman, concerned not so much with the externals of worship as with the doctrinal truths which form its basis. Not content with joining the Church Service Society, Macleod was one of the principal architects of the Scottish Church Society, formed in 1892 to witness to the place of doctrine in the life of the Church. In this venture he joined others such as George W. Sprott, Thomas Leishman, James Cooper, William Millgan, and H. J. Wotherspoon, who also wished to put theology before ritual. As can be seen in his ministry, Macleod thought it was important that the underlying principles of worship should be explained to the people, and at Govan he gave a large place to the preaching and teaching of the faith. It was partly because of his strength

as a preacher that the changes in worship were acceptable to the congregation. In addition Macleod had a forceful personality and a genius for organisation, qualities which were used to the full in the work of the new society. "Full of Celtic fire, he was . . . the great orator, organiser, practical statesman and real inspirer" of the movement.¹ As Convener of the Business Committee he was responsible for organising the successful first conferences of the Scottish Church Society, and he was its President in 1896-7.

Macleod shared the main theological influences upon the society. In particular he was affected profoundly by the teaching of Professor Milligan of Aberdeen who was its first President. In Macleod's view Milligan had recalled the Church to the truth that the resurrection and ascension were not sequels to the work of Christ but integral parts of it.² Milligan had shown the importance of Christ's priestly office and that, while his priesthood began on earth, its principal functions were now being fulfilled in heaven.³ As a result, the vocation of the Church is to share in the present action of her Lord in his ministry towards the Father on our behalf and in his ministry towards the world.⁴

Macleod was influenced also by the theology of his kinsman John McLeod Campbell.⁵ He opposed strongly any attempt to limit the freeness of the Gospel or to lessen its scope.⁶ In some of his sermons he shows an appreciation of the humanity of Christ which comes from his reading of Campbell.⁷ Macleod spoke of the complete and perfect offering of Christ to the Father, an offering which included a perfect repentance for the sins of men. Mankind is reconciled to God by the life as well as by the death of Christ, a life which he offered up in death, which he brought back from the grave, and which he lives eternally in heaven.

Macleod joined his fellow high churchmen in wishing to trace their theological emphasis in the reformed tradition of the Kirk. They found this "catholic" tradition in the Scots Confession rather than in the Westminster Confession, although they welcomed the latter document's teaching on the sacraments. They found it, too, in the writings of the Aberdeen Doctors rather than in those of the Covenanters. But unlike others, such as James Cooper, Macleod did not give prominence to the traditions of the Church and he was not attracted to Anglicanism as a source of catholic inspiration.

Macleod's distinctive emphasis in the high church movement was upon the immediate relation of the Church to Christ. His conception of the Church, said H. J. Wotherspoon, did not move

“longitudinally” with the stream of time in a doctrine of transmission of grace, but “perpendicularly” between earth and heaven:

“Christ standing over us in our exercise of ministry, fulfilling His own institutions, honouring His ordinances, filling with the water of life those channels which in the days of His flesh He had dug: dry channels unless for His constantly and presently outpoured Gift.”⁸

Macleod was not interested in tracing an institution or a practice to its origins, and “antiquarian ecclesiology” did not exist for him. In his view of ordination he stressed the immediate gift of the Spirit rather than the succession of presbyters, although he did not omit succession altogether as an element in a lawful ministry. He was concerned with the faith rather than with order. High as was his view of the Church, it was never separated from the thought of her living Lord “by whose Spirit alone Word and Sacrament were made effectual, and in union with whom she offered worship acceptable to the Father.”⁹ He was a high churchman if by that is meant someone who holds that the Church has a divine basis and a supernatural life. If, on the other hand, it means someone “who magnifies the Church as something authoritative or regnant or which has powers or is to be valued in itself or exalted for what it is, then he was a lower Churchman than most, a man in the dust, low as the foot of the Cross, crushed there in mourning and almost in despair.”¹⁰

As Wotherspoon remarked, it was difficult to understand Macleod without some acquaintance with this “teaching” he had absorbed with “its sweeping generalisations, its comprehension of the whole Church under sin, its falling back on things as they were at the first, its claim to appropriate the whole riches of the Catholic inheritance, and its sense of the immediacy of the inter-relation between Christ and the Church by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ The teaching had been gained from his reading of Edward Irving and his contact with the Catholic Apostolic Church. Macleod described its effect upon him as “nothing short of revolutionary”.¹² Macleod was influenced by Irving’s regard for the Scots Confession, by his stress upon the incarnation as the basis for the doctrine of the sacraments, and by the place he gave to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Irving’s influence can be seen especially in Macleod’s lengthy exposition of the doctrine of baptism.¹³ Of the two main influences upon Irving’s thought, the reformed standards of the Church of Scotland, and his identification with the “prophetic movement” of his day,¹⁴ Macleod was affected only by the former. He did not

follow Irving in his view of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or in his view of Christ assuming sinful flesh. It has been noted also that

“the picturesque splendour of Edward Irving’s spiritual eloquence had revealed to him a wealth of religious conviction as well as a rich and exhaustive view of the reality of the Church and her heavenly calling which acted as a stimulating and elevating force.”¹⁵

In addition, Macleod became a member of the Catholic Apostolic Church. He came under the influence of the Irvingites while he was at Duns through Sheriff George Dickson and the sisters of Lord Lowe.¹⁶ His connection with the Church remains unrecorded and Macleod did not advertise it publicly. But he did not deny his connection when he was accused of being a member during the Govan Case in 1885. Several of Macleod’s parishioners complained to the Presbytery of Glasgow that he went outside of the Church of Scotland for the means of grace by taking part in holy communion at the Catholic Apostolic Church in Catherine Street, Glasgow. The petitioners said that, in an interview, Macleod had refused to answer questions as to his connection with the Church, and, assuming a hypothetical case, had justified such communion and fellowship.¹⁷ In reply to the accusation, Macleod did not admit or deny his membership. In a letter printed in *The Glasgow Herald* he stated:

“I deny that I have ever, as is, I presume, averred by the petitioners, followed courses which can be proved to be divisive or at variance with my position as a loyal minister of the Church of Scotland.”¹⁸

The Presbytery did not enquire further into his membership of the Catholic Apostolic Church. Macleod’s published writings are included in “A Bibliography of Catholic Apostolic Church Literature” compiled by H. B. Copinger,¹⁹ and his connection with the Church is mentioned by two other writers.²⁰ In the Bibliography he is listed as a “Presbyter, Sealed.” The Catholic Apostolic Church recognised the orders of clergy of other branches of the universal Church, and at the age of twenty every member was “sealed” by the laying on of hands and anointed with consecrated oil.²¹ According to his son, membership of the Catholic Apostolic Church was perhaps the whole point on which Thomas Leishman and John Macleod were not of one mind. Leishman’s loyalty to the Kirk “made him doubt the legality of attaching oneself to, and giving an annual tithe for, the support of a sect.”²²

In his emphasis upon the present relation of the Church to her ascended Lord, Macleod was followed by Dr Andrew Wallace Williamson, who later became the minister of St Giles' in Edinburgh and was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1913. Williamson recounted the profound influence of a sermon which he heard Macleod preach in St George's Church, Edinburgh, when he was a student. He had been inspired by the vision of the

“ever-increasing purpose of the love of God, centring on earth in the cross of Jesus, but culminating in heaven around the throne, the Church above and the Church below united in the possession of one spirit and moving in harmonious effort towards one end, the ingathering and upbuilding of the souls for whom Christ died.”²³

The problems of the Church, said Williamson, seemed for the moment to be irradiated with divine light. After the death of Macleod in 1898, Williamson was invited by the congregation to succeed him at Govan. Other high churchmen testified to the power of Macleod's preaching and the influence it had exercised upon them.²⁴ Macleod's early death robbed the Scottish Church Society of his energy and distinctive emphasis. He combined so many elements in himself that no one else represented his position in all its richness and variety. The Society recognised their debt by founding the Macleod Memorial Lectures in 1900.

The Church of Scotland was deprived also of his contribution to the General Assembly, just two years after he made an impact with his proposals for reform. He was instrumental in the setting up of a Church Reform Committee in 1896, and was appointed its Convener. The Committee's suggestions echoed several features of the programme of the Scottish Church Society: the need for greater presbyterial superintendence, pastoral training for divinity students, the organisation of lay help in the Church, and the need to put the Church's finances on a better footing.²⁵ It became apparent that the proposals were too wide and far-reaching to gain general acceptance. The Committee came to be known as a “Church Society” affair and its recommendations were not passed by the Assembly of 1898. A few months later John Macleod was dead. Although it was not given to Macleod to achieve much in the courts of the Church, his influence can be seen in the work of Wallace Williamson who did so much to promote the Union of 1929.²⁶ Macleod's main contribution to the Church was through his work in the parish, and his ministry will be the subject of a future article.

NOTES

1. J. F. Leishman, *Linton Leaves*, including a biography of Dr Thomas Leishman and some sidelights on Catholic Reunion, edited by his daughter, preface and biographical sketch of the author by the Rev. R. S. Kirkpatrick, D.D. (Edinburgh, 1937), p. 142.
2. Milligan's best known works were *The Resurrection of our Lord* (London, 1881), and *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord*, The Baird Lectures, 1891 (London, 1892).
3. John Macleod, in A. M. Milligan, *In Memoriam William Milligan, D.D.* (Aberdeen, 1894), pp. 43-4.
4. John Macleod, in Scottish Church Society, *Annual Report*, 1896-7, p. 12.
5. A. Wallace Williamson, *Dr John Macleod, his work and teaching*, The Macleod Memorial Lecture, 1901 (Edinburgh, 1901), p. 11.
6. R. H. Story, Address at the Dedication of the Macleod Memorial Window in Govan Parish Church, 25th November 1899, in *The Glasgow Herald*, 27th November 1899.
7. John Macleod, *The Seven Sayings of our Lord on the Cross*, A course of Seven Sermons, preached in the Parish of St Constantine, Govan, during the year 1890 (Privately Printed, 1928), pp. 62-3. Cp. J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, Fourth Edition (London, 1959), pp. 165-6, 305.
8. H. J. Wotherspoon, "John Macleod of Govan," in *The Constructive Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, 1920, p. 673. Cp. Williamson, op. cit., p. 39; Thomas Leishman, Sermon preached at Govan Parish Church, August 1898, in the *Govan Parish Magazine*, September 1898.
9. Williamson, op. cit., p. 41.
10. Wotherspoon, op. cit., p. 672.
11. Ibid., p. 672.
12. Ibid., p. 671.
13. John Macleod, "The Holy Sacrament of Baptism", in Scottish Church Society, *The Divine Life in the Church*, an affirmation of the Doctrine of Holy Baptism, with contributions relating to the Scottish Church, her history, work, and present need, Conferences, Second Series (Edinburgh, 1895), Vol. I, pp. 9-196.
14. A. L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and his circle* (London, 1936), p. 110.
15. Williamson, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
16. J. F. Leishman, *Linton Leaves*, pp. 164-5.
17. *General Assembly Papers*, Church Cases, 1885, Scottish Record Office, CH1/2/305 (i), pp. 30, 32.
18. *The Glasgow Herald*, 25th May 1885.
19. Begun Easter 1908, obtainable from the Catholic Apostolic Church Library, Gordon Square, London. I am grateful to the Rev. Dr C. Gordon Strachan for drawing my attention to this Bibliography.
20. Drummond, op. cit., p. 235; Roderick Lawson, *Persons who have influenced my life* (Paisley, 1903), p. 107. I am grateful to Mr William Lyle for drawing my attention to the latter reference.
21. Drummond, op. cit., p. 235. Cp. Revelation 7: 3f.
22. J. F. Leishman, *Linton Leaves*, pp. 164-5.
23. Williamson, op. cit., pp. 4-5.
24. S. M. Dill, in Scottish Church Society, *Annual Report*, 1908-9, p. 32; J. M. Campbell, in Scottish Church Society, *Annual Report*, 1927-8, p. 17; Wotherspoon, op. cit., pp. 665-6.
25. Theodore Marshall, *Dr John Macleod and Church Reform*, The Macleod Memorial Lecture, 1906 (Edinburgh, 1906), pp. 16-19.
26. Norman Maclean, *The Years of Fulfilment* (London, 1953), pp. 282-4.

DOUGLAS M. MURRAY, Callander