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Interview: Gordon MacDonald

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[Easley:] We're talking today *inContext* with Gordon MacDonald. Gordon is a prolific author, a pastor, he's had a fascinating journey in his walk with Christ. Gordon, welcome to the program.

[MacDonald:] Thank you, Michael. It's good to be with you.

[Easley:] Now, I have to begin, first of all, to tell you back in the early 1980s – when did your book *Ordering Your Private World* come out?

[MacDonald:] Well, that came out in the '84 – '85 period.

[Easley:] Yeah. I read that book right when it came out. I was pasturing a little church in Grand Prairie, Texas, kind of at my wits end. That was my self-help period. I had read about eight or nine books on self-help stuff and I read that little book and it really helped me tremendously, Gordon. That book really just popped a lot of things in focus. I remember especially the phrase about trusting the caller not the one who is called.

[MacDonald:] Hmm.

[Easley:] So I want to tell you publicly, thanks for that great work.

[MacDonald:] Well, that means a lot that you would say that. Thank you very much.

[Easley:] You have gotten, I imagine, hundreds, thousands of letters about that book.

[MacDonald:] Well, I've never numbered them of course, but it sure seems like that.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] It's funny. You write a book, and in fact that one was written extremely fast, and you launch it and you don't know that it's going to go anywhere whatsoever and then I guess we'd, in using Biblical language, you'd say God anoints something and you live with it for the rest of your life. And wherever I go in the world people come up to me and tell me that they've read it at some point or another and how it marked their lives so, yeah, it's been a great grace in my life for which I'm thankful.

[Easley:] You and Gail have been married how many years?

[MacDonald:] We've been married for forty-seven years, Michael.

[Easley:] How many children?

[MacDonald:] We have two married children and five grandchildren.

[Easley:] Are they in the area, close by you?

[MacDonal:] Yeah. They all live within a thirty minute range so that we have grandchildren trotting through our house quite regularly and I feel very close to my son and my daughter and their spouses. That again is a grace to have your extended family so close.

[Easley:] Mm hmm. Now, you pastored for many years and before you took your sort of venture into writing, tell us a little bit about that, Gordon MacDonald.

[MacDonald:] Well, I've been – I've had the privilege of pastoring five churches. The first one in seminary was about forty, forty-five people out on the Colorado/Kansas border twenty-five miles from the nearest town and then Gail and I went to Southern Illinois after I got out of seminary for six years and then we spent the bulk of our lives in Lexington, Massachusetts where I had the opportunity to lead pastor at Grace Chapel. We've done several years in the heart of New York City, in Manhattan, -

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonal:] – and now in these latter years when I snuck away from organizational leadership, I get to preach in a church here in New Hampshire almost every Sunday.

[Easley:] Gordon, you had a tough time. You went through some very challenging, dark days and out of that birthed some interesting trails. Will you share a little bit about your journey and some of the things you experienced?

[MacDonald:] Well, Gail and I often divide our lives with the year 1987 and you'll here us often say to each other, "Well, that was before '87 or that was after '87."

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] That was the great year of personal failure in my life and it necessitated me just dropping out of public ministry all together and Gail and I were solid in those moments in our marriage and in our view of life, we just didn't know whether there was ever going to be a future.

[Easley:] Yeah.

[MacDonald:] And you go through a dramatic transition like that where you lose some friends, you make other friends, your view of yourself changes and you discover some great mysteries that God has hidden there for you to find out.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] So I look back at that time by no means with any sense of triumph. It was a very dark, despairing time. But God spoke in the darkness. I think it was George Matheson in the Nineteenth Century who once said, "In the middle of the night God will often sing songs to you like the nightingale that you'd never hear in the day time and He means for you to hear them and sing them to others in the morning."

[Easley:] Hmm.

[MacDonald:] And so we look back at that time of seclusion and listening to God speak as a time of real rebuilding. And our marriage came out of it stronger than ever. I think my Christian life took some very dramatic turns and deeper understanding. My view of myself as a man, as a husband, a father and so I look at the years after 1987 as the greatest years of my life and, you know, here I am at sixty-nine, I guess going strong and I'm happier and more enthusiastic about life than ever before.

[Easley:] I wrote you a letter a couple of years after that time and you were kind enough to respond. I don't expect you to remember, but I remember a phrase you used about being a broken individual and what God was teaching you. That term hadn't been tossed around a lot in the early Eighties and your humility is what surprised so many of us, Gordon, because other Christian leaders who had some type of trouble or failure, their attitude, maybe arrogance of sort of, you know, positioning. And you submitted yourself to a group of people, Vernon Grounds among others, and you said, "I'm going to do whatever these godly counselors tell me to do."

[MacDonald:] Yeah. I was surrounded by the most incredible men and women, beginning with Gail, my wife.

[Easley:] Yeah.

[MacDonald:] And then we had six men in our lives that came alongside. We refer to them as the angels and you're right, Vernon Grounds was one of the six. And these people just had incredible care and their commitment was, and I think this is probably what you call restoration, they were not out just to make sure that I somehow gained my footing again, but their ultimate objective was, "We're not going to let Satan gain the victory. We want this guy back on the field someday."

And they, in effect, said to the larger Christian world, "We'll tell you when he's ready."

And so, you know, if you put your trust that God is working with people like that and speaking to you through them, then there is a sense in which you just accept their judgment, you accept their view of things and you open your heart to them and you become to them as much as you possibly can be in terms of transparency and I did that. And it was just an incredible grace.

You know, there were other people who just never wanted to hear from me again, but these were men who said, "We think that you'll have something to say on the other end of this that maybe a few other people need to hear."

And, you know, I guess that's the way it worked out.

[Easley:] Undoubtedly you've heard from a lot of couples who have had similar struggles. I'm sure you and Gail have encouraged a lot of those folks along the way. Any particular insights that you've gained and gleaned from those times?

[MacDonald:] Yeah. It's no one insight. You know, this would take two hours to go through, but the evangelical movement of which you and I are a part probably would say that repentance and grace are its most important messages; and yet I'm not sure we're a

movement that really fully understands the depth and the power of repentance or how to treat a truly repentant person. I don't think we've done our homework on what repentance really means and where I'm leading with this comment is that you get heartbreaking letters from men and women, emails, that don't know where to turn. They don't seem to have the men and women that I had in my life when I needed them twenty-five years ago.

[Easley:] Hmm.

[MacDonald:] So you get letters and emails from men and women who are just having to drop out completely; they lose virtually all of their friends. You know, they go to work at Home Depot or some other type of work which is honorable but it's not the ministry they trained for.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] And no one wants to ever hear from them again. And so there's a lot of people like that who make one fatal mistake. And then, by the way, there's a lot of people we hear from who've made some terrible, a moral error or whatever and it gets hidden and the news never gets out and they go on and everybody thinks that they're just wonderful but they carry the shame and the secret of this kind of sin throughout the rest of their lives.

We don't solicit letters like that, and neither Gail or I try to be in the counseling business. We think that's for people who are both called to it and highly trained in it, but, yeah, we do get those kinds of letters.

I should say, and this refers back to something you said a few moments ago when you talked about getting thousands of letters. Back in '87 we got seven thousand letters.

[Easley:] Wow.

[MacDonald:] We, you know, we kept a count on them.

[Easley:] Wow.

[MacDonald:] And we answered every one personally and that was a great kind of spiritual therapy to come back at people and thank them and respond to them when they had been so kind to get in touch with either my wife or to me.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] And that was a large part of our work that year.

[Easley:] We're talking to Gordon MacDonald today on *inContext*. Gordon, let's fast forward a little bit until today you have written a new work, *Who Stole My Church?* Church is changing. Emergent, emerging, seeker, purpose-driven, all sorts of shrink-wrapped ideas and the church is a different being than when you started.

[MacDonald:] Oh yeah.

[Easley:] Even than when I started twenty-seven years ago.

[MacDonald:] Well, in history, you know, we have this - this is a phrase you would know well and others also, the word "paradigm shift". And we've gone through four, five, I guess six major paradigm shifts since the time of Christ and when you go through one of those speeded up historical periods of change, one of the things that's most powerful in change is the way people organize. We're in the internet period now, paradigm shift, and so all kinds of organizations, whether it's business, or education or military or government or even non-profit organizations, they are all changing the way they organize.

And people don't realize that they're in the slip screen of this. And the church is having to reorganize. We've done church the same basic way for three to four hundred years, really back to the time of Martin Luther and now in the next years it's going to totally change, it's as they say sometimes, morph into something. And I'm not sure that most of us have an idea what that's even going to look like.

All we know is that everything is changing and it's responding to economic realities, to cultural realities. And the message doesn't need to change, but the way we live the message and the way we proclaim it is probably going to be dramatically modified in the next ten or fifteen years.

[Easley:] You wrote an article in *Christianity Today* about trouble brewing and you reference to some of the recent shifts. You talked about Willow Creek's study, you talked about a *New York Times* piece, you talk about George Barna's book on the church. Where are you, sort of, in these arguments?

[MacDonald:] I'm not sure I have the authority to answer that or that I can answer that question with much authority. You know, these guys are the experts and I just watch and make comments on it. I must tell you, I welcome the changes. I'm still of a generation that loves to sing *It's Well With My Soul* and *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* and when those songs are sung I get tears in my eyes, but I understand that my grandparents loved a different kind of hymnody too and they were just as upset as some of my generation is when the hymnody changes. And music is one of the deeper core experiences of a church, so that's what we talk about first when we talk about changes.

But every generation offers a new version of the way it wants to worship and praise and it wants to discard the old and embrace the new. And I think the thing we all have to embrace is the notion, if you really believe that you want Jesus proclaimed to people outside and beyond the church then you better be willing to talk their language. It's no fair to send missionaries to another country where they have to learn the language, the customs and cultures of those people before they can communicate and then say, "We're not going to do that here in America," when our church wants to reach out.

You can't keep talking your native language and expect to talk to people beyond the church in that language. You have to do things the way they understand, so I've learned to accept the concept of change, even if it's not making me feel real comfortable, because I want to church to keep reaching out to people who don't know about Jesus yet.

[Easley:] Where do you think exposition falls in this discussion?

[MacDonald:] Well, exposition is a style of preaching and when you're in a body of people who have experience with the Bible, who have a faith journey that's got some years under it, these are people who love to hear the Bible explained to them. So the place of expositional preaching and teaching will always be there.

But you probably don't use that method to talk to a person who's never opened a Bible before and our problem now in these early years of the Twenty-first Century is we're now speaking to generations who have absolutely no Biblical information whatsoever. Sixty years ago almost everybody had a Biblical literacy to them -

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] - they knew the basic names of characters in the Bible and they knew something about Jesus. But now you're talking to people who have no notion whatsoever of how the Bible is constructed, what it says, what it asks for and so you have to start at square one with these people.

And, you know, some people might call it exposition, I would think of it as something different than that.

[Easley:] Cindy and I served in the Washington D.C., Northern Virginia area for almost a dozen years and there is a shift even in our government away from some of the DVD, PowerPoint, fancy technologies and a simplification of message, a clarity of delivery. Do you see a parallel in the local church?

[MacDonald:] Oh, sure. And the word that comes to mind when you say all that is the word "story". We are moving back in time to something that is a millennia old and that's the telling of a story. And, you know, the Bible is a book about stories. I have what I called a story based faith. I was raised in the church and from the earliest days I learned all the stories of the Bible and my faith is all tied into those stories. So, you know, and when today a man or woman becomes a believer, let's say at the age of thirty, we don't start them with stories. We start them with propositions.

Let me give you an example. When I think about confession of sin, my mind snaps to the story of David and Bathsheba and Nathan's confrontation and what David says of sorrow in Psalm fifty-one.

But a newer Christian would think about First John 1:9. He would turn to a proposition, where I would turn to a story. And that's - those are two different kinds of expressions of Christian faith. And those of us who grew up in the church, we knew all the stories and we relate our experiences with God through those stories. Well, now I think, and I'm encouraged by this, we're going back to the stories. We're telling the stories of the Bible and we're telling the stories of people's journey with Jesus and that's the way we enter into people's lives. We tell them our story and we want to hear their story and then we ask the question, "How can these stories merge, if you please, at the cross?"

Where, in fact, twenty, twenty-five years ago, we would have started with propositions like, "God loves you and has a plan for your life," and "man is sinful and separated from God." We're probably not going to say it that way much longer because we're saying these things to people who have absolutely no Biblical basis of life or understanding at

all and propositions don't work with them.

[Easley:] I'm fifty, sixty, seventy years old, my arms are folded, I'm sitting in church going, "Well, if they were just committed, they would come to church."

[MacDonald:] Well, that's a falsehood. That's a concept you have if you've spend too many years in church and you've lost touch with the larger world out there. In your lifetime and in my lifetime even our communities have virtually duplicated every ministry that the church used to think it uniquely gave to people. The community has youth programs, it has mental health programs, the only thing the community has failed to duplicate that the church offers is the experience of grace and a restart in life at the cross. So, we've got to go back to that and we've got to tell that old, old story because that's our unique brand.

[Easley:] If you started a church today, Gordon, what would you do?

[MacDonald:] I would start it in my house and I would open the doors at 9 a.m. – I mean, you're catching me with great questions and I'm talking off the top of my head now. I'll probably get in trouble.

[Easley:] That's good.

[MacDonald:] But I would invite people to come to my house at 9 a.m. in the morning and spend three or four hours and maybe spend an hour, an hour and a half just lingering around cups of coffee talking about our week and our experiences and I think that maybe Gail and I are maybe both a little bit good at this. I'd ask questions and get people to talk about issues in their lives that they don't normally talk about with most people and just linger and fellowship.

And then around eleven o'clock I'd say something like, "You know, Gail and I have organized our lives around the Bible and I'd like to give you an example of what that looks like."

And I'd read a passage and ask them, you know, what they heard it saying or what the story meant to them and then I'd tell what it meant to me. And I would just pile week upon week in that kind of stuff. We'd serve food and have hospitality and we would cause people to feel like they belong to each other and then I believe out of that belonging would come a slow process where one by one people would come to belief in Jesus through our modeling of it and talking about it. And, poof, a year and a half, two years later you might have the beginnings of a church.

[Easley:] Years ago I heard one of the so-called mega church writers talk about the church of two hundred being dead. He predicted a very sad future for these churches. Unfortunately, many of the churches that are two hundred and down are struggling terribly. It really becomes more of a ministry of a club.

[MacDonald:] Well, there's truth to that, Michael, but I would be very careful to – with that man's prophecy because if gasoline goes up to six dollars a gallon, you're going to see some dramatic changes on the part of people's driving habits and their choices of time use. The mega church, interestingly enough, which I admire and deeply respect, is a product of three things: It's a product of the interstate highway system which comes

after 1960, it's a product of modern management techniques and it's a product of computer information abilities.

You couldn't have a mega church before 1960 in most places unless it was at the center of a major city where there was mass transportation. Now most mega churches sit on the edge of town at the crossroads of interstates where people can drive for twenty to forty miles to get there. But when it starts costing you ten, twelve dollars to make a forty, fifty mile round trip, you're going to start asking how many times a week I can go to that church. And you're going to shorten the tether, or the distance, that you're going to drive.

And that's going to bring you back to the neighborhood. And we're going to see people starting to say, "I want to go to a church I can walk to or drive very few miles to."

So, I would suggest to you it's quite possible we're going to see a reinvigoration of the small neighborhood church and people are going to find that their denominational identities are far less important than their neighborhood identity. So I would suggest to you that we're going to see a new era in churches.

I'd also add that it's going to become very, very expensive to maintain these large buildings and campuses. With fuel costs the way they are and inevitable taxation of property, we may be looking at a different issue or a different reality twenty-five years from now.

[Easley:] What do you think the top one, two, three things are, Gordon, that a church must do to change and minister in a context but yet not stray from the text of explaining who the person and work of Christ are?

[MacDonald:] The greatest sign of the authenticity of a church from the day that Jesus launched it was relationships and beyond that, service. You know, Jesus makes it very clear in that famous comment in John thirteen. "The world will know that you are my disciples by the way you love each other as a reflection of the way I have loved you."

That's all about relationship, Michael. I grew up in a tradition where it was frankly all about doctrine and people found it very easy to break relationships over doctrine.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] But I see with hopefulness that we're beginning to rediscover, given the younger generations, that the great authenticating mark of the Holy Spirit is the reconciliation not only of each of us to God but our reconciliation to each other. So that's the first great mark. Behold, how the believers love one another and they accept each other's differences and needs and, you know, we start crossing the age and the gender and the racial and the economic lines and we find God's life in each other as Jesus has come into us.

The second great mark of the church down through the centuries has been its ability to go out and freely serve people who are weaker than we perceive ourselves to be. Every time I open the Gospels I see Jesus turning His face toward the weaker person in the group or who's perceived weak.

[Easley:] Hmm.

[MacDonald:] He turns His face toward the child. He turns His face toward the sick and the diseased, to the poor, to the gross sinners. He turns His face toward women because women were perceived to be the weaker in that society. Every time you look at Jesus He's moving in those kind of directions. And I sometimes feel like the organized church in America has lost its smell for the weaker brother or the weaker sister and that's being recovered because we now have a younger generation that demands that that credibility be there. They're not interested in the words of my generation.

[Easley:] Mm hmm.

[MacDonald:] They're saying, "You know, how are you replicating the life of Jesus as He encountered people?"

So, I think that the church of the Twenty-First Century is going to go back to something, may I put it this way, of the way Saint Frances saw the world. He saw weak, struggling, hurting, lost people and wherever he saw them he went to them one by one by one. And that's the church of the future, I believe.

[Easley:] Someone's listening right now, Gordon, and they don't know a thing about Christ and they hear you and me talk about all these platitudes. What would you tell them?

[MacDonald:] Well, what I just said is – you know, I know what you're trying to say, but it's not a platitude to me, it's as genuine and real as anything I've ever believed in my life. And I would simply, if I was talking to a person who had never heard about Jesus, I'd say, "Let me tell you about the most influential, most unique character in all of history. His view of creation, His view of broken people and everything He did to march toward them and bring healing and wholeness.

[Easley:] We're talking to Gordon MacDonald today on *inContext*. Gordon, thanks so much for being with us.

[MacDonald:] It's good to be with you, Michael. Thank you very much.

[Lepine:] You know, I love the way that conversation dovetails directly into what we've been studying here on *inContext* as this week we've been looking at what the Bible teaches about who Jesus is. And, again, I want to encourage listeners to go to our website, incontextradio.org. If you missed any of our conversation with Gordon MacDonald, you can listen to the audio online or you can make arrangements to download an mp3 of the interview if you'd like.

There's also information there about our study on why we believe what we believe that includes messages from Michael on the Bible, the trinity, the doctrine of inspiration, the person of Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit and Satan. There's a companion Bible Study guide and we also send a copy of the *Moody Handbook of Theology*. All the details about this special resource can be found on our website, incontextradio.org, and we hope you'll stop by today and make arrangements to get a copy of the complete study on why we believe what we believe.

Well, have a great weekend and I hope you can join us back on Monday when we're going to look at what the Bible has to say about salvation. That's on Monday's edition of *inContext* with Michael Easley.