

Counseling the Broken-World Christian: A Summary and Analysis of Gordon MacDonald's Suggested Approach

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Abstract

Gordon MacDonald describes “broken-world persons” as those who are suffering from self-inflicted wounds—what have been variously called mistakes, errors, bad judgments, misbehavior, or sin. In his book *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, he develops a proposed method for counseling such persons. The following article presents a summary and analysis of his method.

Most Christian counselors probably do not agree with Jay Adams's (1973) assertion that all psychological problems that do not have a biological base are the result of personal sin. While most of us would agree that all human beings are sinners and that there is probably an element of sinfulness in everyone's behavior, we would disagree with the assertion that personal sin is the total or even primary reason that people need help. Often the causes for which people seek help are sins that have been committed *against them* rather than sins they have initiated.

The situation is different when a “broken-world Christian” seeks help. Gordon MacDonald (1990), in his book *Rebuilding Your Broken World* describes broken-world Christians as those people who

live with a certain kind of suffering. Not the suffering that comes through bereavement, an injustice, a persecution, a painful illness, or poverty. These people suffer from self-inflicted wounds: mistakes, errors, bad choices. Another word might be *misbehavior*. The hardest but most descriptive word for such suffering-inducing actions is *sin*. (xv)

MacDonald goes on to describe broken worlds in the following way:

The most common broken world —the primary one I've chosen to write about —is the world that shatters because someone has made a series of bad choices, misbehaved, and now has to live with what he or she has done. [There is] no one else to blame; no handy excuses; no injustices to identify.

Our psychological training often leaves us with little preparation regarding how to deal with problems that are, to a large extent, caused by the client's personal sin. And yet, at least occasionally we are called on to counsel believers in this situation. MacDonald provides a suggested model for broken-world Christians and their counselors

Some Basic Understandings about Broken Worlds

Early in his book, MacDonald *enumerates three frequently held but mistaken beliefs about broken worlds. The first is that broken worlds are rare.* He shows from Scripture that almost all the major characters in the Bible —Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Peter and Paul —to name just a few, suffered one or more broken-world experiences.

Another mistaken belief of many Christians is that *a broken world will never happen to them.* Probably if one had asked the biblical characters if they expected to fall in the way they did, almost unanimously they would have said “no.” For reasons to be discussed later, Christians often fall in areas that they regard as their strengths.

Many high-functioning Christians may also believe, albeit unconsciously, that if their world

were to break, they would have enough energy, resources, influence, and good performance stored up to reduce if not neutralize the bad effects (25). This is also a myth, for as MacDonald asserts: “Few broken worlds touch only one life. Like a hand grenade, the effects of one person’s terrible choices explode outward to wound many others” (35).

Two other biblical insights from the early part of the book can help us develop a basic understanding of broken worlds. One is the wide range of responses a person can offer when his or her world breaks. On one end of the spectrum is Cain who, when God forced him to face his sin, remained arrogant and unrepentant. At the other end is Mary Magdalene who, coming from a life of deep, habitual sin, accepted the Lord’s grace, began a new life, and became one of his most trusted, loving followers. People can respond to their broken worlds either with hardness and lack of repentance or with contrition and a changed life.

MacDonald asserts that “the Bible seems to suggest through the stories of various men and women that broken-world experiences are usually the turnaround moments ushering people into greater and more powerful performance of character, courage, and achievement” (27). Moses murdered a man and spent 40 years on the backside of the desert, but God used this time to prepare him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. David committed adultery and murder, but after experiencing God’s restoring grace he wrote many of his most beautiful and trusting psalms. Peter ignominiously denied his Lord, but at the Sea of Galilee Jesus came to him and restored and recommissioned him. Peter went on to preach his courageous Pentecost sermon and become a prominent leader in the early church.

Initial Stages in the Broken-World Experience

MacDonald identifies three stages that often occur in broken-world experiences. The initial misbehavior usually occurs privately. The initial response of many guilty persons is often shock that they could have committed the sinful act(s). Sometimes they become angry at the prospect that their misbehavior may be exposed, and at anyone who might expose them. This is essentially still a stage of denial (not necessarily that the sin occurred, but of recognizing the full extent of one’s moral culpability).

A second stage occurs when persons recognize what they have done and accept moral responsibility for it. They often feel cheap, unworthy, and dislike themselves. They are likely to experience severe depression and often wish that a serious illness or an accident would end their life. They may be especially sensitive to others in difficulty, and may work extra hard in an attempt to atone for their wrong. Relief comes only when the person is willing to look heavenward and acknowledge one’s sin and one’s responsibility for it.

During this period the person sometimes takes others into confidence—a spouse, a counselor, or a trusted friend. Often there will be agreement to keep the matter confidential as long as the sinful behavior does not continue.

Sometimes a third step occurs, when the sin becomes public knowledge. With this comes painful humiliation, damage to one’s reputation, loss of credibility, and usually loss of leadership responsibilities. Some friends and acquaintances withdraw out of hurt or anger. Some people erroneously state what occurred, or feel free to analyze the individual’s behavior and motives, which only magnifies the broken-world person’s pain and humiliation.

An Important Question

MacDonald says that one of his pastoral advisors posed the following crucial question to him during his broken-world experience: “*Will you concentrate on the pain of this experience and resist it, or will you permit the pain to become an environment in which God can clearly speak to*

you about matters of ultimate importance?” (37–38). MacDonald said that making the choice to let God speak to him was not a one-time decision. It had to be remade several times when the temptation came to avoid the pain and what he could learn from it.

Factors That Predispose Us to Broken-World Experiences

There are several factors that alone or in concert with other factors increase our vulnerability to sin. MacDonald discusses five.

First is *the failure to recognize our sinfulness and our sinful potential* (what theologians often call our sin nature). It is common for Christians to think of their level of sanctification in terms of their *behavior*—the things they do and do not do. We may reach a level where our behavior has been quite good for a significant period. While recognizing that we still have a sin nature, we minimize the danger it poses.

Yet if we are totally honest, a barbarian still lies within our breast. MacDonald quotes with approval Alexander Whyte, who wrote: “To know myself, and . . . to know the plague of my own heart, is the sure and the only key to all other true knowledge.” He also quotes G. K. Chesterton, who said: “The one spiritual disease is thinking that one [is] quite well.”

MacDonald says that we are paradoxes. On the one hand we want commitment, love and order from others, yet there is a dark side of us all that is often anticommitment, antilove, antiorder (148–49). Freud was probably describing this when he discussed the id, and Jung when he described the shadow side of human beings.

Many Christians have trouble believing that the apostle Paul’s struggle with sinful impulses and motivations, articulated so clearly in Romans 7, could have been true of him after many years of committed Christian service. MacDonald’s response, as he reread the book of Romans, was

This book was written by a man who had come to the simple realization that he was a broken-world person, that the people he was writing to were broken-world people, and so his subject had to be personal worlds broken by sin and what can be done about them.
(90)

The first element prompting believers to stumble and behave so uncharacteristically is *our failure to recognize that we all still possess a sin nature*, no matter how much we believe we have it tamed.

A second element is what MacDonald calls an *unguarded strength* or an *unprepared heart*. He provides information from his own life and the writings of other respected Christians throughout church history which makes the point that often the place where Satan finds us most vulnerable is the place where we believe we have nothing to fear.

In commenting on these two elements, MacDonald says:

Talk to broken-world persons who have honestly faced up to the realities of the situation, and they will admit that they were unprepared when it happened, disarmed as it did happen, and terribly disillusioned about themselves after it happened. Quite likely they will say, “When I talk about what happened, I almost feel as if I’m speaking about another person. I want to believe that it couldn’t be me.” (49–50)

A third element that often plays a part in immoral behavior is *environment*. MacDonald is careful to say that before God, there is no excuse for making evil choices. We do no one a favor by giving them excuses for evil performance. However, he also points out that people make

choices in a certain situation that they would probably never make on another day in a different context. He spends considerable time illustrating this. Many travelers, especially business travelers, experience increased temptations when in the loneliness and supposed anonymity of an environment where few people, if any, know them. The temptation of *that environment*, interacting with one's sin nature, may cause believers to act in ways that they probably would not if they were in an environment where they were certain their behavior would become known.

MacDonald does not use this concept as an excuse for misbehavior. Instead, he says that we need to be aware that certain environments produce strong temptations, and avoid those environments or take steps to protect ourselves from temptation when we are in those environments. We should also use our awareness of those vulnerability-producing environments to help warn brothers and sisters who may be exposed to them, and to be more compassionate to those who have fallen because of temptations they faced when in such environments (99–108).

A fourth factor that can lead to unwise choices and behavior is *weariness and exhaustion*. MacDonald says:

I spoke of weariness when I wrote *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* because I had experienced firsthand what it was all about, and I had become sensitive to the number of people who were signaling that they had the same problem. I did not say in that book what I might have: in the context of weariness I made a series of very bad choices that led to falling flat on my face into sin and hurting many people. Weariness is never to be construed as an excuse. It simply suggests that a person may make certain choices in one environment that he would probably never make in another. (121)

A fifth factor that may lead to broken world decisions and behavior are *influences from the past*. These can include basic needs that were not met in one's family of origin, such as the need for love, the need to be affirmed as competent, the need for security, the need to be given guidance in decision-making, and the need for healthy models. Unaddressed guilt is a second major influence from the past that can lead to misbehavior. MacDonald asserts that unconfessed guilt may cause a person to misinterpret reality, and reduces that person's confidence in meeting temptations in the present. Thus it increases the likelihood that the person will continue to make unwise choices (135–36).

A third influence from the past that can increase the likelihood of unwise decision making, according to MacDonald, is *untreated pain*. When people have experienced significant pain and have received no help in recovering from it, the wound can make it difficult for them to trust others, particularly those who remind them of the original aggressor. As needs go unmet, the likelihood of unwise decision making increases (pp. 137–39).

As counselors we are probably most familiar with people whose lives have been adversely affected by influences of the past. One thing MacDonald does especially well is discuss compassionately how these five factors, alone or in combination, can lead to misbehavior. He simultaneously makes the point that to help a broken-world person recover, we must call sin by its proper name. His starting premise is that individuals who have misbehaved (including those who have misbehaved because of influences from the past) must present themselves before God in openness and acknowledge their responsibility and accountability (xvii).

The Process of Rebuilding One's Broken World

MacDonald believes that rebuilding begins with *insight*. Using the story of the prodigal son, he describes this process:

The prodigal son broods in the pigsty. His world is broken into a thousand pieces, and in that shattered condition he slowly comes to INSIGHT. He has begun to measure

his thinking against the truth. What his father had taught him and warned him about was in fact the real story of life. But he hadn't accepted his father's perspective.

Now in his INSIGHT he sorts out his willful blunders; his arrogant, know-it-all attitude; his demanding ways, his choices, his selfishness, his blindness to the occasional warning signs. He sees his inner deceit for what it was and is. Perhaps he occasionally gets up and stomps about in angry frustration as he ponders his own stupidity. Now he can see how much he hurt his father; what he lost by not remaining where the love was genuine and the lifestyle stable and nourishing; how he has accrued consequences to himself that he may have to live with for the rest of his life. The evil in his heart is apparent now; and the cost of permitting it to go unmanaged is quite clear For the first time he is thinking with clarity. (98)

The second step in the rebuilding process is closely related to the first. The person must be willing to *renounce and change the attitudes and behavior that led to the broken-world experience*. Quite often, as in the illustration of the prodigal son above, there was not one problematic behavior, but a *series* of attitudes, thoughts, and choices that led to the misbehavior. This repentance, if thorough, does not operate only with regard to the past. It becomes a *lifestyle*, as the person becomes willing to monitor his or her attitudes, thoughts and behavior in the present and future as well (162).

MacDonald suggests that during this period of personal introspection persons be silent, withdraw from public ministry and activity, and spend their time in personal meditation. He recommends that persons enter an accountability relationship with a group of persons who will help them learn as much as possible from this broken-world experience.

He advises broken-world persons not to defend themselves in the public arena. When public statements or analyses are made by others that are untrue, members of the accountability group should be the ones to decide whether a correction should be made, and be the ones to make it.

MacDonald recommends that, in place of public ministry, persons devote themselves to a "ministry of the interior." A ministry of the interior includes the following: Worshiping in God's presence, rooting out personal impurity, meditating on eternal truths, offering thanksgiving, praying for the world, and praying for friends (170).

He encourages those going through a broken-world experience to join in corporate worship with a group who know how to praise God, and then to become willing to receive God's grace, as it comes first from him, and then from family and close friends, and then from others. In this regard, he says that broken-world persons cannot demand grace; they do not deserve it, they can only receive it. If some people do not wish to give it, individuals must accept that pain as part of the consequences of the situation (185).

Some people never experience the grace that MacDonald and his wife experienced. In this regard he says:

Without restorative grace broken worlds cannot be rebuilt according to God's standards. Unfortunately, there are many stories of men and women who in their distress felt so abandoned, and so ostracized that they put their own worlds back together in whatever fashion was possible. But this kind of rebuilding process was fueled perhaps by anger or by the need to survive or by the energy that comes from wanting to stubbornly prove themselves. The results of such rebuilding are usually something like my attempts to rebuild an appliance. Several pieces are left over, and the thing doesn't work very well.

And usually such people have subsequently chosen to go elsewhere, lost to the Christian community where they perceived they were no longer welcome. I think that's a

waste. It's also an indication that sometimes we misunderstand one of our central purposes: to rescue the perishing and grace the failing. (188)

The Restoration Process

MacDonald suggests that every broken-world Christian have a support group who will function as a *restoration team*. This team will, over its lifetime, be involved in six different processes. The first step involves the individual *making a full confession to this group*, something that would not always be appropriate to an entire church body.

The second step involves *counseling*, where the individual and certain members of the team (or presumably a Christian counselor acceptable to the team and the individual) can examine the events that led to the misbehavior and seek to fully understand the dimensions and dynamics of the event(s).

A third component is *discipline*. MacDonald describes this in the following way:

The broken-world person cannot take this into his own hands. He needs to trust in a body of mature, godly people whose agenda is rebuilding. . . . Discipline usually means restrictions: being relieved of certain responsibilities, being asked to account to others on personal spiritual activities, and being required to submit to pastoral oversight or counseling. . . . This is not punishment; but it is a recognition that, for everyone's good, a time of withdrawal is wise so that the rebuilding work of Christ and His church can take place. (216–17).

Another important service the restoration group can provide is *comfort*. Probably no one who has not been a broken-world person themselves can know the agony and despair that such a person goes through. The knowledge that one has damaged the name of Christ, has harmed countless people, and that usually there is little one can do to heal that damage, is a pain with which the broken-world person lives for many years.

Another important ministry of the restoration group is *advocacy*. The group can make sure that public information about the broken-world person is accurate, can correct it when it is not, and can confront the tendency to gossip should it appear within the Christian community. Once the misbehavior has been thoroughly confessed and repented, the group can assure (and reassure) the person of God's forgiveness and acceptance. The purpose of the restoration group is to bring healing and restore the fallen Christian to service and usefulness within the body of Christ (217–18).

Finally, MacDonald suggests that the restoration group provide an official declaration when the process has been completed. This is a time when the restoration group says to the church that they believe the individual is again ready for participation in the ministry of the church. This news should be widely circulated so that those who have heard of the fall may also know of the restoration (218).

MacDonald suggests that the broken-world person will probably always live with some residual pain and heartache that inevitably seem to follow misbehavior. This is not something the restoration committee can remove. Like Jacob after his nightlong wrestling match with the angel, the person may always walk with a limp (219).

MacDonald's Closing Thoughts

As he ends his book on rebuilding broken worlds, MacDonald makes two points. In the first, he returns to the metaphor of the race. Recounting heroes from real-life races, he suggests to the

broken-world Christian that the most important thing one can do after one has fallen is to get up, and in the Lord's strength, complete the race.

Second, he encourages broken-world Christians with the fact that they have a unique ministry to fulfill. He says:

We broken-world people live with a strange irony. Not for one moment would we ever wish to repeat what caused the original collapse. But we cannot ignore the fact that when restoration has had its way, we may be in a better position to offer insight and grace to others than we ever were before. We should never imagine ourselves heroes or worthy of special attention. But we do have a stewardship: a responsibility to testify to the pain, the grace, and the joy of reentering the fellowship of God and His people. (223)

Analysis

Contemporary psychological training does not usually tell us how to provide counseling when the problems a client is facing are primarily a result of his or her misbehavior or sin. Many theories and techniques with which we are trained are based on the assumption that if a person is experiencing guilt feelings, these are likely to be due to an overly strict conscience code or to excessively high personal expectations. Few if any of those theories and techniques teach counselors how to deal with the client who is experiencing *real guilt*. As a result most of our programs, from the standpoint of Christian counseling, are lacking in this regard. I believe this book would be a wise addition to the curriculum of every Christian counseling and seminary program.

One principle O. Hobart Mowrer (1961, 1964) discovered and incorporated into integrity therapy is that the most effective way to encourage a client to acknowledge true guilt is through counselor self-disclosure. Persons who experience a broken-world will usually be defensive during the early stages of their self-analysis. One thing that makes this book so helpful to such a person and to the counseling process is that MacDonald shares his own personal broken world in a very open, nondefensive way. His writing is neither judgmental, nor does it rationalize sin. He shares the themes of his story (but not the specific details) in such a way that the reader can easily identify with him and say, as he or she reads, "That is my story too."

One reason the Psalms have remained such a blessing to Christians over the centuries is that the psalmists often put into words the emotions that many believers could experience but not articulate. In a similar way, MacDonald expresses the fear, the anxiety, the deep depression, the self-loathing, and the feelings of unacceptability with which most, if not all, broken-world believers struggle. He puts into words feelings that, were a person not able to identify them, he or she might act out, often in detrimental ways.

Many Christians are concerned that only a small percentage of believers, after falling into sin, work through that issue satisfactorily and come back to become active within the body of believers again. Some appear to abandon their faith and their Christian lifestyle completely. A smaller number seem to retain their Christian beliefs but never again become active within the body of faith. Only a few continue in the faith and once again become active, serving Christians. If all pastors could read and employ the restoration model suggested in this book, I believe that a much higher percentage of those who fall could be reclaimed for the kingdom of God.

There are several other excellent books available on the topic of church discipline and restoration of broken-world Christians. These include *Church Discipline that Heals*, by John White and Ron Blue; *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline*, by Don Baker; and *Church Discipline and the Courts*, by Lynn Buzzard and Thomas Brandon. Three other books include one or more chapters on church discipline: *Running the Red Lights*, by

Charles Mylander (two excellent chapters); *Christian Counseling and the Law*, by Steve Levicoff; and *Church Ministries and the Law*, by H. Wayne House. Excellent articles on the subject include ones by Quine (1992), Phillips (1986), and Merrill (1983). The list above is only a sampling of what is available.

The uniqueness of MacDonald's book is that it is one of the few written from the perspective of the broken-world person to broken-world persons and their counselors. The others are written by pastors or lawyers primarily for pastors and church boards.

MacDonald lists five factors that can lead to broken worlds —failure to recognize our sinful potential, an unguarded strength, a tempting environment, exhaustion, and influences from the past. A sixth factor that often leads to broken worlds is the vulnerability that comes from unmet needs. For example, when a couple does not meet each other's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs, they both are living in a heightened state of vulnerability to temptation. I am certain that MacDonald would agree to this addition to his list.

There is much of value in *Rebuilding Your Broken World* for every believer, whether he or she is a pastor, a Christian counselor, a broken-world person, or anyone with the potential to experience a broken world. Bill Hybels, the well-known pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, said about this book: "Must reading for all Christian sinners. . . I read it twice!"

By recognizing more clearly the existence of our sin natures, understanding how our sin nature may interact with tempting environments, or with exhaustion, or with unresolved needs and hurts from the past, all of us can benefit from the discussions found in this book. And the biblically based discussions of God's restoring grace, incarnated in the restoration team who ministered to MacDonald and his wife, can be a model and encouragement to all of us to do likewise.

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