

## Nones and Dones<sup>1</sup>

7-19-15 AM

The Pew Research Center released a report in 2012 titled “‘Nones’ on the Rise” which noted the increase of those Americans who self-identify as having no religious affiliation (called “nones” by the study). A similar demographic (noted by sociologist Josh Packard in his book *Church Refugees*) exists as perhaps a subset of this first group that is identified as “dones”, called such because of their decision to end a pre-existing religious affiliation. These two groups (“nones” and “dones”) represent a growing trend in American culture of those who are non-participants in churches or worship services, but still have some identity of religion. They are neither atheists nor agnostics, but see themselves as unstructured believers. They would likely identify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious”. Chances are, as this group grows, you have met them, and potentially seen brethren drift into this classification.

What has led to this growing trend? The Pew Research study revealed the “nones” and “dones” are composed fundamentally of persons of the most recent generation. It also revealed that the movement’s numbers reflect a corresponding loss in membership in mainstream Protestant denominations. This might clue us in to the core ideology that programmed members of this movement in its formative years; presumably the fundamental unifying Protestant dogma of “saved by faith alone” would be the basis of faith from which this new demographic emerged. This movement then was entirely predictable. It is a natural conclusion that if faith is personal and emotional, then the person who is mindful towards God is spiritually successful regardless of their religious engagement with other believers. Why engage with the more difficult aspects of faith (i.e. works, particularly those of spiritual communing) if the entirety of the value of faith is found without works? If a person is told they will be paid regardless of their labors, it is almost certain that their labors will cease. Thus, the death of formal worship (even unauthorized) among many is a clear offspring of the easy-believism of recent generations. Wisdom IS proven by its children; the worldly wisdom children (James 3:15) of “Faith Only” are “none” and “done”.

Can a person be spiritual but not religious? Among worldly theologians and denominations the term “religion” has fallen out of favor. Even among our more liberal brethren that word has been minimized. One apostate brother writes “*One aspect of religion is that it holds people in bondage. God has no religion. Christ did not die for a religion. The apostles did not establish a religion*”<sup>2</sup>. Yet Scripture uses the word religion (in Greek, *threskeia*, ceremonial observance) to describe the core actions of a Christian (James 1:26-27). What many mean by their mindset (that they are spiritual but not religious) is that their faith is based entirely in emotion, which is nothing new (Proverbs 14:12, Jeremiah 17:9, Proverbs 28:26). Additionally, their religion (for indeed, according to Colossians 2:23, their ideology is a religion) is one which rejects the communal nature of faith and instead makes faith a purely private and individual. Scriptures tell us that Spirituality is not an emotional personal condition, but a condition in which one has conformed themselves to a greater truth of the Divine revelation (I Corinthians 2:14 – 3:1). Ironically, while the “none” and “done” may see themselves as spiritual but not religious, in fact Scripture says they are religious but not spiritual.

Engaging those who are on this road requires a degree of discernment, as there may be more than one underlying reason for being “none” and “done”. Many Christians were once lost among the denominations, and they too were discouraged by the “politics” or inexplicable conduct of these man-made institutions. We might conclude that some have ventured into this mindset lacking a knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson was submitted as a n article to the Guardian of Truth magazine in July, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Dusty Owens, *Why I Left the Church of Christ*, the examiner.org volume 8 No. 6

what primitive Christianity is all about. On the other hand, there are those who simply lack the intellectual work-ethic to make application of the demands of faith. In a society which has become more focused on only engaging in activities that bring immediate and personal satisfaction, the delayed gratification mindset required of true spirituality is now rejected. To the first group we can offer genuine substantive belief, as Phillip offered the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. On the other hand, with others we are dealing with the rich young ruler of Matthew 19 who wanted a faith that was tailored to him rather than a means of reconciliation to which he would need to submit. Jude makes the point in Jude 22-23 that we need to make a discernment in our approach to the lost; Phillip chased the Ethiopian Eunuch, but Jesus let the rich young ruler depart.

It does not take a great deal of explanation demonstrate that morality requires an absolute standard to have value. Jesus made numerous statements to the singular nature of truth (John 14:6), obedience (John 3:5), and salvation itself (Matthew 7:21-23). The “none” and “done” have come to believe that justification is an internal process; thus, righteousness is actually self-righteous, and their religion is one which they have created themselves. As we alluded to earlier, Paul makes this thinking his target in Colossians 2:23 when he says that “these are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion”. Those who reject Scriptural formality in faith lack any objective standard. We are witnesses in Scripture of the result of self-made religion when we consider the people of Israel in Judges, whom we are told failed because everyone did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Ignorance of the nature of truth and the nature of God is the core error (Hosea 4:6).

But perhaps most important to this discussion is the absolute that is stated by Paul in Romans 14:7 – “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself”. True Christianity is a lifestyle that is at its core communal; how can one read Paul’s admonition that we “bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2) and see ourselves as singular in our faith? How can we miss that Christianity is FUNDEMENTALLY a cooperative effort when there are 56 passages in the New Testament that demand our devoted attention to “one-another”? These core passages such as “love one another”, “give preference to one another”, “accept one another”, “serve one another”, or “be subject to one another” have the obvious implication of a close relationship in the church environment; contextually, these commandments are to the members of the local church (as clarified in Ephesians 4:25 with the expression “we are members of one another”). Christianity is a team-sport, and the mindset of the “none” and “done” is that of people who claim to play but won’t join the team. When Jesus described the Day of Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, He made it clear that a particularly important (indeed, in that passage, the only measurement) question for a believer is in regards to our supportive and familial engagement with other believers.

When we come down to it, our “none” and “done” friends are simply renaming the ancient error that has afflicted believers from the first century onward: forsaking the assembly (Hebrews 10:26). It may be that their hesitation to engage is based on legitimate issues; denominational churches have become a mockery of worship and appear to be fundamentally focused on separating their members from their money. Sadly, we have witnessed digression in the Lord’s church in these same areas in the last century. It may be that our “none” and “done” friends are worldly minded and selfish; one personal study I recently had concluded with the gentlemen refusing to obey the Gospel because he did not want to be bound to other believers in a relationship of expectations. We must make it clear to ourselves (to prevent a falling away) and others that Jesus DIED to purchase the church (Acts 20:28); if the church relationship is unimportant, then Jesus died in vain (Galatians 2:21). Our relationship with God is repeatedly defined as being fundamentally tied to our relationship with other Christians; “beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not

know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). They might claim that they do love others, but what they mean is that they do not hate others; yet love is defined in the Bible in terms of our active engagement with others (1 Corinthians 13:4-7), often specifically within terms of the church family, as we see in the context of the "one-another" passages of the New Testament.

Conclusion: Our review of the "none" and "done" trend has revealed several important points. First, we saw that this movement is born of "once saved always saved" theology; as Jesus told us, we can know if something is from God by its fruit. We also saw that many who have come to see themselves as either having no religious affiliation or as being done with formal religion do so either because of their frustration over the worldliness of denominations (a characteristic with which we can sympathize) or it is born of pure self-righteousness. In contrast, we searched the divine word and found that our faith is not a matter of personal interpretation, but that there are absolute standards to which we must conform ourselves. We also have examined the New Testament revelation of the absolute importance of maintaining a communal (with brethren) relationship with God through the church; we have understood that the maintenance of such a relationship is a key part of our final judgment.