

# “How Much Religion is Enough?” (2014)

2 Peter 1:1-8 <sup>1</sup>

At the hinge of the year, one of the things to which many of us give some thought is how we might make next year better in some way than this year has been. Because Kenneth Brooks' recent resurrection reminded us once again that all we take with us into the Life to Come is our character and other people we've led to Jesus, I've been thinking again about Christlike character such as Kenneth had.

On another occasion when I was researching the idea of Christlike character, I came across a sermon my old friend and college roommate, Dwight Moody delivered thirty years ago in Pittsburgh.<sup>2</sup> Dwight's sermon, *How Much Religion Is Enough?* is still so good that I want to share some parts of it with you this morning.

First of all, I'm sure you've noticed that the world is chock-full of religion. Out of the 7,300,000,000 people in the world today, nearly six billion are affiliated in some way with the five major religions of the world.<sup>3</sup> Cathedrals, mosques, temples, synagogues, churches and shrines clutter the architectural landscape of the world.

And our own America may be the most religious country of the world. Somewhere between seventy-five and ninety-five percent of us say we believe in a higher power of some sort. Thirty-nine percent of us go to some kind of religious service every week.<sup>4</sup> Some of us attend worship every day, while others are content with once or twice a year.

While some persons fill their speech with religious talk, their homes with religious books, and their walls with religious art, others are only marginally religious. Content with their baptism as infants or as children, their relationship with religion is one of benign neglect, and all they hope for is to maintain good credit for the life to come.

Well, religion is, after all, intended to prepare a person both for this life and for the life to come. So how much religion does it take to do what religion is supposed to do? **How much religion is “enough”?**

Dwight's answer to this question had three parts, and I'm going to use his three responses as my outline this morning; but I must first offer a disclaimer. Technically speaking, no amount of “religion” is ever going to be “enough.” To ask about “religion” is to ask the wrong question entirely.

The whole point of “religion”—whether Christian or otherwise—is the accumulation of such a preponderance of good works over bad that our higher power is compelled to bless us and welcome us into whatever afterlife we think is out there. But in order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Isaiah's warning that “*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away*” (64:6).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on December 28, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Back then, Dwight was pastor of the North Park Baptist Church in Pittsburgh; today, he is the Executive Director of *The Academy of Preachers*, a national organization that encourages excellence in preaching among young ministers between sixteen and twenty-eight years old. Dwight delivered the sermon that inspired my reflection on June 10, 1984. See [www.academyofpreachers.net](http://www.academyofpreachers.net).

<sup>3</sup> [www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec). These five are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Traditional Folk Religions.

<sup>4</sup> Maryland/DC is the 21<sup>st</sup> most religious state, just barely above the national average. [www.pewforum.org/2009/12/21/how-religious-is-your-state](http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/21/how-religious-is-your-state)

In order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Jesus' clear statement that *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). And in order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Paul's exclamation that *"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Our goal, then, is not to "get religion," "old-time" or otherwise. Our goal is to establish a personal relationship with God through Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Holy Spirit, a relationship of love that over time makes us more and more like our Beloved, as happens when married couples begin to look more and more like each other with the passing of many decades. That's our goal.

With that disclaimer entered in the record, Dwight's first answer to the question was that **"we need enough religion to make us quit our meanness,"** a statement he attributed to the great evangelist Billy Sunday. The point here is that if our religion doesn't make us stop being ornery and selfish and hateful, we don't have enough of it. Religion ought to clean up our act.

When the Jews came to John the Baptist asking for baptism in the Jordan River, he told them, "No, first show me that your faith has changed the way you live" (Matthew 3:8). John's point was that if your religion doesn't make a difference in your behavior, then your religion is not any good (see James 2:14-26).

There is, after all, a reason why the Bible calls being born again the entrance into "a new life" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It's because old habits are meant to be replaced by new patterns of behavior. Honesty replaces dishonesty. Kindness replaces meanness. Gentleness replaces anger, and decent speech replaces filthy talk.

Those of us who are fairly regular in worship and church activities have generally cleaned up our lives with respect to the more obvious moral offenses, but every one of us still struggles with those failures of Christlikeness that are harder to see. Gordon MacDonald, a pastor whose writing I like, wrote a column on this topic during the huge eruption of the volcano in Iceland that shut down air travel across Europe a couple of years ago.<sup>5</sup> I still can't pronounce the name of the volcano (Eyjafjallajökull), but here's what Gordon said about it:

"I grew up thinking I was a pretty calm person and that it was others—not I—who had anger issues. They might have a volcano inside of them, but my interior space, I believed, was an oasis of peace and order. . . . Then one day I discovered [such a volcano] within myself. I became embroiled in a disagreement that caused feelings to ignite in ways I'd never experienced before. All I can say is that I felt the volcanic power of rage. That disagreement captured my mind, and for many days I could hardly think of anything else but my desire to be vindicated and for the other party to be appropriately punished. . . .

"That memorable episode of conflict so many years ago became an important moment of self-discovery in my life. The other person in the engagement and the issue itself became insignificant. What really needed to be dealt with was my own rather large inventory of small and large matters I had simply stuffed and never dealt with. I realized I had some repenting and forgiving to do. I had to become a 'volcanologist' of the spirit, a student of the energy of anger within me: where it came from, how it expressed itself, and how it needed to be processed into something more in alignment with the grace and mercy Jesus so aptly modeled."

One of the things the Bible says about true religion is this: *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one*

<sup>5</sup> Gordon MacDonald, "Our Inner Eyjafjallajökull," [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net), 2010.

another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). So the first question for this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to make you quit your meanness?**

After having “enough religion to make us quit our meanness,” **we need enough religion to motivate us to serve the Lord.** Although many surveys report that most Americans believe that God exists, and they may go to church on Christmas, Easter, and for weddings and funerals, the fact that God exists has no real bearing on how they live their lives. Such people don’t have “enough religion.”

So how much religion is enough? Well, we have “enough religion” when we’re motivated to organize our lives around the inbreaking Kingdom of God, which was the central theme of all that Jesus did and taught. We have enough religion when our commitment to God’s Kingdom causes us to heavily invest our resources—physical, mental, spiritual and financial—in Kingdom causes.

We have enough religion when we give focused attention every week to doing “The Five Things” that are summarized by WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO. We have enough religion when we’re making measurable progress in the development of the seven character qualities Peter mentioned in our text.<sup>6</sup> And finally, we have enough religion when we’re motivated to service that expresses the love of God to others.

Pastor Eric Swanson surveyed his congregation several years ago to find out if his members saw any connection between their personal involvement in ministry and their own spiritual growth. Ninety-two percent of his congregation responded that they did believe that their ministry involvement had resulted in personal spiritual growth (no one said ministry had a negative effect).

Sixty-three percent said that their ministry involvement was as important in their spiritual growth as prayer or Bible study, and twenty-four percent said that ministry was more important than prayer or Bible study. Conversely, fifty-eight percent of his members who were not actively involved in ministry of some sort reported dissatisfaction with their own spiritual growth.<sup>7</sup> So our second question this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to motivate you to serve the Lord?**

Finally, authentic religion should not only clean up our behavior and focus our energies on the Kingdom of God. **We should also have enough religion to make us happy!**

Religion that is dreary, dull, and depressing isn’t worth having. Religion that is joyful and interesting and encouraging and Hope-full is what we need. There’s quite enough in this old world to discourage the soul. This world is full of war, disease, poverty, hatred, greed, anxiety, and guilt. Why add a burdensome faith to all that?

Now the truth is that many people actually do have this kind of religion. They have just enough religion to make them uncomfortable, guilty, and unhappy. Their religion is one of ritual, of rote memory, of irrelevant beliefs and practices. They’re afraid to deny God and to ignore Jesus, but they’re also afraid to go far enough with Jesus to bring them any joy.

It’s crucial to understand that **God intends for those who follow Jesus to be happy,** to be well-adjusted, to be content in their life and work, to have a positive disposition, a bright hope, and an enthusiastic confidence in the future. The Christian Way is a joyful way! “*Sing for Joy!*”—that’s what the Bible says, and it says it over and over again! (Psalm 81:1). Even when he was locked up in prison, Paul instructed us to “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Philippians 4:4).

<sup>6</sup> These seven things are goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Swanson, “What You Get from Giving,” *Leadership Journal*, Spring 2003, 37.

Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision, the organization through which we do our wells in Ghana, made a trip to Haiti after the catastrophic earthquake of 2010 and worshiped in a church made of tarps and duct tape in the middle of a refugee camp. On the front row of the service sat several persons who had experienced amputations as a result of the earthquake. But even after receiving such injuries and disabilities, these folk were clapping and singing and smiling as they sang song after song and lifted their prayers to God.

Richard wrote afterward that “No one was singing louder or praying more fervently than Demosi Louphine, a thirty-two year-old unemployed single mother of two. During the earthquake, a collapsed building crushed her right arm and left leg. After being trapped for four days both limbs had to be amputated.” But on this day, Demosi was leading the choir, leading prayers, standing on her prosthesis and lifting her one hand high in praise to God. And when Richard spoke to her after the service, Demosi praised God for “bringing me back like Lazarus, giving me the gift of life.”

Reflecting on that experience, Richard wrote, “What I witnessed makes no sense to me as an ‘entitled American’ who grouses at the smallest inconveniences—a clogged drain or a slow Wi-Fi connection in my home. Yet here in this place, many people who had lost everything . . . expressed nothing but praise.”<sup>8</sup> The third question for this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to make you happy?**

Well, so how do we get there from here? How do we secure enough religion to make us quit our meanness, to cause us to serve the Lord with gladness, and to give us inner joy that life’s changing circumstances cannot destroy? Time doesn’t allow me to say much at this point, but there are a few things that simply must be said.

Growing in Christlikeness is sometimes called “discipleship.” Sometimes it’s called “sanctification.” Sometimes it’s called “spiritual formation.” But whatever it’s called, this process begins with God’s amazing grace that causes us to dare to believe that we really are loved. That’s why Zephaniah 3:17 has long been my favorite verse in the Bible: “*The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will comfort you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*” That’s where we begin; and happily, it’s also where we end up—in God’s powerful and loving presence in the eternal Kingdom of Light!

Years ago, my friend Bob Pullins routinely organized opportunities for our church members in Bristol to get together to play golf, and since Bob’s resurrection, several younger men, Wally Elliott, Chris White, and Dave Hicks, have undertaken that same project. As I went on those golf excursions, those fellows were especially patient, encouraging me to believe that I might someday actually learn how to play the game.

Wally and Chris and Dave encouraged me to get some golf lessons from an expert before I got too far into learning the bad habits of a beginner, and I did. Casey Barnes was my teacher, and as he was instructing me in some of the fundamentals of the golf swing, Casey told me that he had gone to the Masters Tournament in Augusta to watch the instruction being given to the very best golfers in the world. Casey said that he was impressed that the pros frequently needed to be reminded about the same principles to which he was introducing me—the point being that we never get past practicing the fundamentals.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Richard Stearns, “Suffering and Rejoicing in a Haitian Tent Camp,” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com), January 12, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Just this week, Luke Donald attained the status of being the Number One Golfer in the world, and Jack Nicklaus said of Donald that “There isn’t anybody who spends more time working on his golf game than I’ve seen in Luke Donald. . . . He wears out the practice greens.” [www.pga.com/news/pga-tour/jack-nicklaus-not-surprised-luke-donalds-rise-no-1-based-what-he-sees](http://www.pga.com/news/pga-tour/jack-nicklaus-not-surprised-luke-donalds-rise-no-1-based-what-he-sees)

To say this is to say that the disciplines that lead to spiritual transformation are well known. They include prayer, meditation, study, fasting—yes, even fasting—solitude, service, and worship, among others. As Richard Foster put it, “By undertaking the Disciplines of the spiritual life that we *can* do, we receive from God the ability to do things that under our own steam we simply *cannot* do, such as loving our enemies. The Disciplines . . . place us into the divine stream of things in such a way that God is able to build within us deeply ingrained habits of ‘*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*’ (Galatians 5:22-23).”<sup>10</sup>

And one of God’s very best gifts to us in addition to personal spiritual disciplines is life in the church itself. The fact of the matter is that spiritual strength, depth, and resilience don’t grow among friends we’ve chosen ourselves. God’s kind of love is only learned where we can’t be selective about our associates.

Perhaps this is why the two institutions established by God—the family and the church—are structured as they are. You and I have no choice about who our parents or brothers or sisters will be; yet we are expected to love them and to serve them. Neither can we choose who will or will not be in the family of God; any person who confesses Jesus as Lord must be welcomed. Both situations often lead to aggravations of various sorts, aggravations that God used to polish up our character so that we look more and more like Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we do well to remember that the process of spiritual transformation is very slow, sometimes hardly faster than the polishing of rocks in a stream. Because this is true, if we’re serious about making spiritual progress in 2015, you and I must steadfastly choose to continue our spiritual disciplines, whether we see any progress at the moment or not. There’s a reason for the slow pace of our growth. As Richard Foster noted, “On our own we are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine.”<sup>12</sup>

So here are three summary principles that serve as today’s “bottom line” for the development of Christlike character:

- Practice the traditional spiritual disciplines “religiously.”
- Stay actively engaged in the shaping experiences of life together in the church.
- Never assume that you’ve arrived, because you never will.

**To have this much religion is to have religion enough.**

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, revised and expanded, HarperCollins, 1988, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall Shelley, “Developing Spiritual Fruit Requires Being Around People—Ordinary, Ordinary People,” *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Foster, p. 91.