

Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel
Sunday morning, October 6, 1946
By Frank S. Hickman

WHEN TEMPLES DISAPPEAR

Text, Revelation 21.22: "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it."

Back in the middle of the 19th century a town sprang up on one of our western frontiers whose distinction was that it would allow no church within its borders. But within a few years that same town sent out a distress signal to the churches to come in and take their normal part in the town's life. Two considerations seemed to be involved in this call: the need for a curb on viciousness, and the reopening of the spiritual outlook of its citizens.

Our present purpose is to trace the story of the temple of religion, or its modern equivalent the church, from one extreme of human experience, where ~~the~~ the temple disappeared through malignant opposition to the other, where it will disappear simply because its high function will have been gloriously fulfilled.

Some modern skeptics have scoffed at the practice of setting special places and times apart as sacred. I remember a brilliant professor of sociology in my college during the first World War who belittled the stories coming back from the trenches that in times of high emergency men found God coming closer to them than at other times. He said that if God is ever near to men he is always near to them, without any change of relation. But another equally brilliant, and more profound, professor took him to task, pointing out that to be near in space is not the same thing as being spiritually near.

It is indeed possible to think of all life as a sacrament, with its relationship with God so firmly and evenly established that it requires

no special times of high worship. But in this present world no such continuity of the spiritual life seems possible. The high sacramental meaning of the best of human lives needs constant refreshment through worship at special times and in special places.

Temples of religion and their functions will continue so long as our humanity remains on its present plane of spiritual strife against the powerful claims of the flesh. But this need not eternally be man's necessity. Our Christian faith, borrowing heavily from the older Jewish, has always believed that the Church is making its way through this world which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, toward a new order wherein the power and law of the Spirit will become so dominant that spiritual impulses will be felt in every pulse-beat of human experience.* In such a state of life, and in such only, can temples safely disappear.

We know that our God-experience is conditioned at every point by our experience with our fellow men. And man's God-consciousness has always been measured by his human-consciousness. When men lived their lives out wholly within clan-walls their god had to be nothing more than a clan-god. Our modern churchly clans are more artificial than the blood-clans of old; but at times they seem just as tightly walled against each other. Temples will never disappear so long as divisions open between one body of religious people and another. Never until we become convinced that one brotherly communion binds all the various peoples of the earth into spiritual unity can we expect John's vision of a City of God with no temples therein to take on reality.

The Christian gospel works its way toward the Celestial City of St. John's vision wherein the hearts of men shall rule rather than their clashing divisive interests: a city with no clannish or coercive temple, "for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it."