

THE END OF RELIGION

Pastor Sandy Adams
REVELATION 21:22

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

Author Philip Yancey has a friend who works among the down and out in urban Chicago. Once, a prostitute came seeking his help. She was in desperate straits.

The woman was homeless, sick, addicted to drugs. She had no money to buy food for herself and her daughter... Then she dropped the bombshell...

While crying profusely, she confessed to prostituting her own little girl. Yancey's friend could barely stomach her perverse story. Not really knowing how to reply, he asked her if she had ever been to a church for help...

Her answer still haunts him. He says, "I'll never forget the look of astonishment that crossed her face... She cried out, *Church! Why would I ever go there?*"

While Jesus was on earth the misfits - the bag ladies and street people - the prostitutes and the tax collectors - the scandalous of society flocked to Jesus.

Our Lord was known as "a friend of sinners."

Yet, those *same people* don't always feel welcome in the churches that represent that *same Jesus!*

And we ask why?

Well, here's the reason? There's a monumental difference between **religion** and a living, vital, life-changing **relationship** with Jesus Christ. Too many churches and Christians alike, major on religion, but don't really know Jesus! Make no mistake about it - *Christianity* and *Churchianity* are two different entities.

This summer I visited two major cities - **Jerusalem** and **Rome**. And in each place I asked the same question, "What's the principle business of your city?"

Both tour guides answered, "Religion."

In both cities people are passionate about holy sites, and sacred rituals. They're proud of the emblems of their religion. They write their prayers down on paper and slip them through the crevasses of the wall... or bow before their mosque... or kiss the toe of a statue...

Religion promises that being in a holy place, or doing a holy thing, will make you holy and closer to God. After the problems I saw in Jerusalem and Rome, it's safe to say religion fails to deliver on its promise.

Roy Gustafson writes, "Religion is man's quest for God; the Gospel is the Savior seeking lost men..."

Religion originates on earth; the Gospel originated in heaven... Religion is man-made; the Gospel is God's gift... Religion is the story of what a sinful man tries to do for a holy God; the Gospel is the story of what a holy God has done for sinful men... He sums it up, "Religion is *good views*; the Gospel is *good news*." And too many folks today fail to understand the difference.

Religion consists of *rites, rules, rituals, recitations, regulations, relics*... Religion has a select few, or priestly caste - as well as shrines and sacred places...

Religion has a dress code, and admission fee. It sends its detractors to hell and subscribers to heaven.

Religion bills itself as a step-by-step to get you to heaven, whereas Jesus is able to bring heaven to you!

It reminds me of the Sunday School teacher who started her lesson with a question, "Ok boys and girls, how many of you want to go to heaven when you die?"

One five year-old was insulted by a question with such an obvious answer... Tyler raised his hand and said, "Well, of course I want to go to heaven. Why do you think I put a nickel in the offering box this morning."

Out of the mouth of babes... This is the attitude of religion – *how can I buy myself some fire insurance?* What deeds should I do? What hoops do I need to jump through? What dues am I required to pay? What rigors can I put myself through to prove to God how deserving I am of His favor? How can I settle up with God for my sin, and then get on with my life?

Religion is about form and appearance and outward compliance, and political fervor. But the sad testimony of religion is its inability to change man on the inside.

Rather than fill us with love for God and others. All too often religion just sanctions our hate. It may bow a knee to God, or tip its hat to tradition, but time and time again religion proves unable to transform man's heart.

Here's why we don't attract the folks Jesus attracted.

We're too busy doing stuff to make ourselves *look good*, to really *be good*. Religion creates a resume' that inflates our pride, and bolsters our self-righteousness.

And worse, our pet specifications end up a barrier to folks who might want to come to Jesus - but don't get the chance, because we turn them off with our religion.

Author AW Tozer made this observation, "Most men play at religion as they play at games, religion itself being of all games the one most universally played."

Religious people pretend to be morally superior, then play games that promote their perceived superiority.

And one group believes us...

They see our badges of religion and think we're more than we are - and they get discouraged, "*I can never be as good as those guys!*" (If they only knew!)

The other group sees right through us...

They're unimpressed. They see the chinks in our armor. They know that even a pious person is far from perfect. They're turned off by pretense and hypocrisy.

Either way religion doesn't attract anyone. It repels!

Hell will be full of people who never considered Jesus because they were disillusioned by religion.

Let me make a statement that at first might sound strange to your ears... **God is opposed to religion.**

That's right, the God of the Bible is against religion!

For a time religion was necessary. It was a stop-gap measure. But it was never part of God's original design. And in the end there's no place for it in eternity.

Revelation 21 takes us to the end - when time fades into eternity - when the physical universe is no more.

2 Peter 3 tells us, "*the elements will melt with fervent heat.*" A colossal meltdown occurs. The world with which we're so familiar, will become a distant memory.

And there God will usher in a new heaven and a new earth - *as well, a glorious city appears*. Heaven today is that city. John sees the New Jerusalem descending from God like a bride on her wedding day.

The last 19 verses of Revelation 21 provide us a description of this eternal city. I encourage you to read the chapter. John stretches our imagination as far as it can be stretched! The glories of the celestial city are incomprehensible to even the most *daring dreamer!*

But what's in the city is not the only important revelation! Perhaps more stunning is what's excluded from the New Jerusalem. In verse 22 John notes a significant omission... "**But I saw no temple in it...**"

Today, when you think of the skyline of Seattle the Space Needle comes to mind... St. Louis is synonymous with the arch by the Mississippi... Paris has the Eiffel Tower... San Francisco the Golden Gate bridge... Every picture of London includes Big Ben...

And the great city of Atlanta... has the Varsity...

But in the OT, the Temple built by Solomon - and later Herod's Temple - dominated Jerusalem's skyline.

Whenever we take a trip to Israel we visit the Israeli Museum where they have a model of Jerusalem at the time of Christ. It's enormous - about the size of a fast food restaurant - and you see the Temple in proportion to the rest of the city. Clearly, it was the main attraction.

The Temple of Jerusalem dwarfed all its adjacent buildings, and towered over the city's landscape.

A generation after David conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites, Solomon constructed the Temple. It was built at God's command - after divine specifications.

It stood for over 400 years as the nation's focal point.

Three times a year Jewish males were commanded to go up to Jerusalem and worship at the Temple.

The Temple was the one place on earth that God had promised to manifest His presence and reveal His glory! The Temple was referred to as "God's footstool!"

Thus, it was an unprecedented tragedy, when in 586 BC, the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. It was an act of God's judgment on the sin of the people.

The Babylonians burned the Temple and transported the Jews to Babel where they spent 70 years in exile.

Yet the moment they returned to the land, their first desire was to rebuild the Temple. The prophet Haggai even rebuked the Jews for rebuilding their own houses before they found time to rebuild the house of God.

Five hundred years later when Herod became king he courted the favor of prestigious Jews by remodeling and expanding the Temple. *And this was the Temple visited by Jesus.* Recall our Lord's ominous prediction..

Because of the nation's rejection of the Messiah, not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another.

The prediction came true, forty years later in 70 AD, when the Temple was razed to the ground by Romans.

But my point is this, *a Temple in Jerusalem has always been the Jewish priority!* Even in Israel today, there's a move to rebuild the Temple. On our recent trip we visited the *Temple Institute* - where a group of Jews are fabricating furniture and tools for a future Temple.

A current rabbinical leader in Israel, Nahman Kahane, remarked, "All Jewish history as far as we're concerned is one big parenthesis until the Temple is returned. Life without the Temple is not really living."

For the last 2000 years, and for 50 generations, the Jews have prayed for the rebuilding of their Temple.

And to me, this long and storied saga of the Temple makes it all the more strange that in eternity - in the New Jerusalem - a Temple is conspicuously missing!

How can something that played such a significant role in the city's past - be absent in the Jerusalem of the future? Why is *the Temple* just *temporary*?

Realize, the Temple in Jerusalem was synonymous with religion! It was the bastion of religious practice and passion. Call it "religion's greenhouse" - its hotbed.

The Jewish Temple was the epitome of religion.

The Temple was the site of the altar where *sacrifices* were offered to God... Vows were taken at the Temple... The priests *burned incense* in the Temple...

Outside the Temple, Levites performed *ceremonial washings*... Ordinary Jews and Gentiles alike, came to the Temple precincts to *pray*... *Tithes* were placed in collection boxes that sat in the Temple's outer court...

The Temple was a beehive and a showcase of religious activity. *But there was one problem...*

Though the Temple was close in proximity *to God*, and was permeated with the things *of God* - it never put men and women in actual touch *with God*.

Human-initiated sacrifices, vows, outward washings and baptisms, the burning of incense, rote prayers, tithes – never put folks in a right relationship with God.

Religious activities taught lessons, and illustrated truths – but by themselves they were never able to cleanse a person's sin and make a bad heart better.

God saw religion as a means to an ends - but He never intended for it to be an end in itself.

Realize, for a thousand years, the Temple doors stayed open for business - yet a whole millennium of Temple operation produced sad spiritual results...

The Temple stressed and **focused on the distance** between man and God without doing anything to close the gap. It **fostered a deception** in our minds that we're better than we are. It **formed a distraction** that impeded real worship. It became a substitute for God.

Here's what I want to talk about with the rest of my time... *What's wrong with religion? It focuses on distance - it fosters deception - and it forms distraction.*

First, understand the Temple, and the religion it so epitomized, **focused on the distance between God and man** without doing anything to end the separation.

The Temple was divided into various courts...

The **inner sanctum** was home to the presence of God - but it could only be visited by one person, the High Priest, and he could enter only once a year.

The next area, or **Holy Place**, was for priests only.

And the **third court** was the Court of Israel – which doubled as *the Men's Only Club - the Augusta National of Ancient Israel...* Women and Gentiles were still on the outside looking in. If the Temple were the Georgia Dome, most of us would be sitting in the nosebleeds!

It's funny really, though the Temple was abuzz with religious activity, no one in its precincts was really getting through to God. Individual sin kept everyone separated from God. The Temple was a place to remember what God was like, and plead for His mercy. But it didn't bring anyone in contact with God Himself.

Today, Jews in Jerusalem pray at the Wailing Wall. These stones are a remnant of the retaining wall that use to surround their ancient Temple. Jews believe that prayers prayed here are more likely to be answered.

I ran across a photo of an orthodox Jew holding up a cell phone in front of the stones so his friend on the other end could offer a prayer - *technology and religion on a joint venture!* And this is religion in a nutshell...

Folks assume religion brings them closer to God. In reality it shows the separation between them and God.

The Temple was a place where people did a lot of God-stuff, but never got to know Him personally. In a sense, they were around God, the things of God, the worship of God - but that's not how you know God!

People today make the same assumption...

They come to Church, and start doing God-stuff, and acting religious, and hanging with a religious crowd, but you don't come to know God through osmosis.

Godliness isn't a germ you catch by proximity.

Only Jesus can bridge the gap between us and God.

You can know God, but it happens when you choose to follow Jesus. Religion illustrates our separation - it's *Jesus alone that closes the distance*. He forgives our sin, changes our heart, puts us in contact with God.

Last year the NBA had a lengthy labor dispute. The players wouldn't agree to terms with the owners so the owners locked them out of their arenas and facilities.

The pro basketball players practiced on their own and held a few exhibitions – but it wasn't the same. It wasn't real basketball! It was a lock-out.

Understand, *the Temple was the ultimate owner lock-out!* In the Temple worship it was obvious God had barred man from His presence. God was waiting until we agreed to His terms and embraced His Son Jesus.

For centuries people came to the Temple to practice on their own - and put on their personal exhibitions - but it wasn't the real thing! It was a *game* – not *God*.

Religion is an owner lock-out. It's all about *distance*.

And second, the Temple failed because it **fostered a deception in the mind of man**. In OT times, after a while of going to the Temple, people thought they were right with God just because they entered its doors.

This is the phenomena that occurred in Jeremiah 7...

The people of Judah felt that they were immune from God's judgment because Jerusalem - *their capitol city* - was home to God's Temple. Yet the prophet Jeremiah warns them in 7:3-4, "**Amend your ways and your doings... Thus says the Lord of hosts... Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.'**"

He's saying don't trust in Temple activity! Religion won't spare you God's judgment. God isn't looking for *religious observance*, but for *heartfelt repentance!*

Here's what happens to religious people... **They develop a false sense of security**. Because they support the *work of God* – and hang out with the *people of God* – they assume God must be pleased!

It's like the fellow who went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras... His friend saw him boarding the bus with a Bible under his arm. He shouted, "**Where you going?**"

His buddy answered, "**New Orleans! I hear the girls are plentiful, boos are cheap, the parties are wild! I'm going to Mardi Gras.**" His pal replied, "**Well, why do you have a Bible under your arm?**" He shouted back, "**I'm having a good time I plan to stay over until Sunday.**"

And today there're scores of folk just as naive and deceived. Acting religious – toting a Bible, attending church, paying a tithe – won't make you right with God.

It's no surprise that the Pharisees hung out in the Temple. The Pharisees were pompous hypocrites.

They were proud of their religious zeal. They worked hard at the particulars of religion to prove their own righteousness. But in Matthew 23 Jesus calls them, "**whitewashed tombs**" – they looked pure and spiritual on the outside, but inside they were dead and corrupt.

Religion can be a façade. It's a hook where a proud person can hang up his pride and self-righteousness.

As William James once put it, "**Religion is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism.**"

Ever seen eyeblack under a baseball player's eyes?

Eyeblack is a mixture of crushed charcoal, and paraffin, and beeswax, and petrolatum. Supposedly it reduces the glare that bounces off a player's cheeks.

But recently an ophthalmologist at John Hopkins School of Medicine was asked, "**Does it do anything?**"

The doctor answered, "**Probably not.**"

When I read that article I was so disappointed! For years I put tar under my eyes *and it did me no good!*...

One of my boyhood heroes, Boog Powell of the Baltimore Orioles, wore eyeblack every game for 17 years. Boog summed up why he used it, "**I don't remember it ever doing any good, but you looked cool.**"

Religion and eyeblack serve the same purpose. Neither does anything, except make you look cool!

The Temple and religion in general fosters a deception – you look more spiritual than you really are!

And third, the Temple failed because it **formed a distraction that got in the way of real worship**. Over time the Temple actually became a substitute for God.

In the OT Jews became more devoted to the Temple than to God Himself. Over time the form replaced what it represented. The symbol distracted from the reality.

This is what Jesus saw up-close and personal...

In reality, all the Temple sacrifices, over all the years, pointed to the ultimate sacrifice - Messiah's work on the cross... The Temple vows, and tithes, and prayers, and washings – all in their own way pointed to Jesus.

But when Jesus came, Jews were so enthralled with the symbols they rejected the Savior. At His trial they even accused Jesus of speaking against their Temple. It was one of the reasons they gave for crucifying Him.

Blaise Pascal once said, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” It was the religious crowd - not the Romans - that cried for Jesus to be crucified!

When Leonardo Da Vinci finished painting the Last Supper he showed his masterpiece to a friend. The man noticed what a remarkable job Leonardo had done with the chalice in Jesus' hand. It was exquisite!

Immediately the artist grabbed his paint brush and blotted out the chalice. Leonardo later explained, “Nothing should distract from the Lord.” In religion *the things of God* become a distraction from God Himself!

Cleveland is the home of very loyal football fans. Today they support the “New” Cleveland Browns.

But prior to the *New Browns* every Sunday for 46 years the city threw tailgate parties, and headed to the stadium to cheer on the *Old Browns*... That is until 1996 when Browns' owner Art Modell moved the team to Baltimore and changed its name to the “*Ravens*.”

But a strange phenomena occurred the first Sunday in September 1996... even though there was no longer a Cleveland team fans still showed up at the Stadium wearing Browns jerseys and waving Browns pennants.

After tailgating that Sunday, they still went into the stadium to cheer and holler for their absentee Browns.

And this is the perfect illustration of mere religion.

It talks about God – cheers for God – wears God clothes - and does God-stuff - but it's all a substitute for experiencing God Himself. People play the game, and miss out on God. Religion ends up a deadly distraction.

In a sense, Karl Marx was right with his infamous statement, “Religion is the opium of the masses.”

Religion does keep men in a stupor. It keeps them hung over. It deadens their senses to their need for a real, vital, living, growing relationship with God.

This is why there's no Temple in the New Jerusalem!

The Temple speaks of religion – and there'll be none in eternity. Religion is replaced by God Himself. Read the rest of Revelation 21:22. John also records what is included in the city, “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”

In the New Jerusalem the symbols will vanish in the wake of the substance. The forms flee away in the face of reality. There will be no need for a Temple when we're living in the presence of the Lord and the Lamb!

In Revelation 21 *the end of religion has come!* The Temple is replaced with a true relationship with God.

When the Lord and the Lamb are the Temple there'll be no **distance** between man and God. Both will live together and forever in perfect harmony... **Deceptions** won't develop when the Lord is the Temple. Truth and trust will reign in the hearts of men... And there will be nothing to **distract**. We'll all see Jesus face to face!

What's written in Revelation 22:4 is what makes heaven so heavenly. John tells us, “They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their forehead.” We'll see Jesus for ourselves, and He'll fill up our thoughts!

This is why temples are temporary! Religion is a lame-duck! It's the Lord and the Lamb that will capture our hearts and lead us into the ways of God forever!

This one verse, Revelation 21:22, provides us a major detail of a future, celestial city - it has no Temple.

Yet this fact also has a profound influence on my priorities today! *As a believer in Jesus why am I trying to be all religious when they'll be no religion in heaven?*

I don't have to worry about dotting every religious “i”, and crossing every legalistic “t”. I've been set free.

Adhering to religious rules and observing religious rituals shouldn't be my priority! I need to be fixated on following the Lord and the Lamb! God wants me trusting in, walking with, and relying on the Lord Jesus.

Here's the Christian's duty in a nutshell... To sum it all up, God Almighty wants us madly in love with Jesus!

Martin Luther put it, "[Faith is under the left nipple.](#)"

It's in our hearts! God wants our passions aflame and on fire with love for the living Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jesus bore our sin. He secured us a permanent pardon. There's no longer a need *to tiptoe through the Temple*. You can move past Temple-stuff - go straight into God's presence. You can live in the inner sanctum where God dwells - not in the outer courts of religion!

For the follower of Jesus *the end of religion has already come...* and a living, loving, liberating relationship with the Lord and the Lamb, has begun!

As Christians our job is not to push religion – it's not to mandate to society a list of laws and liturgies. God hasn't called us to invite folks to the Temple of religion.

He doesn't want us to foster the notion that religion somehow gives you an advantage with God. It doesn't!

The only thing that's going to matter in heaven is the Lord and the Lamb. That's why our only task now is to lift up Jesus. Our job is to invite irreligious sinners - *just as they are, right where they're at* - to come to Jesus!

This is why we don't want CC to come across as a "[religious place.](#)" We don't follow a religious calendar, or have overtly religious traditions. We're lite on pomp and circumstance. We don't light candles, or burn incense. The pastor doesn't wear religious vestments.

Unless you count hole-y jeans...

This is why there're no icons in our hallways, or relics at the altar, or symbols on the walls... We don't want you to have to jump over the religious-stuff to get to the God who loved you enough to die in your place!

We just want to be a environment where folks can walk in and meet firsthand with the Lord and the Lamb.

Even when we erected our building we didn't want it to look churchy. I was happy when the neighbors thought a bowling alley was moving in. The absence of a steeple and stain-glass windows is deliberate.

Here's the deal, *If there won't even be a Temple in the New Jerusalem why would we build one now?*

I remember in our childhood church we felt as if we needed to whisper in the sanctuary. It was as if the Almighty was behind the curtain and nowhere else.

We assumed God only lived in stained-glass houses.

A couple of weeks ago I officiated a wedding at another church. It was a formal and liturgical setting. And all the old religious feelings came flooding back.

Suddenly, there were two sets of rules. A religious protocol that applied to God's house - and then the regular rules for everywhere else. *And this is what religion does - it creates an artificial separation.*

Religious people and places and activities are made to appear more righteous to God, while secular places and people and activities seem inconsequential.

Neither is true. Religion doesn't give an advantage, and secular is no less important. All that matters now is the Lord and the Lamb - and all of life should be *brought under His authority and lived to His praise.*

Realize, I don't want to be a church that's *churchy* or *religious*. As a matter of fact, **I am against religion!**

Religion highlights the [distance](#) between man and God... It [deceives](#) us into thinking we're more than we really are... And it [distracts](#) us from true worship.

I mentioned earlier all cities have famous landmarks.

Rome has the famous Colosseum... Moscow has its Red Square... Marietta, GA has the Big Chicken...

Jerusalem of old was towered over by the Temple...

But the future city we're all longing to see... the New Jerusalem... it's skyline will be dominated by the Lord and the Lamb. Jesus will be the bright light of eternity.

That's why I'm praying that today Jesus will fill up every skyline, every headline, every byline of your life!
I pray He'll dwarf all that goes on in this Church.

It is not about religion! It's not about jumping through hoops and doing backflips for God – it's about Jesus!

[Yielding your life to Him, embracing His life for you!](#)

All God has for you He's wrapped up in Christ!

May religion come to an end in your life, and may God reveal Jesus, in all His glory and grace, to you!