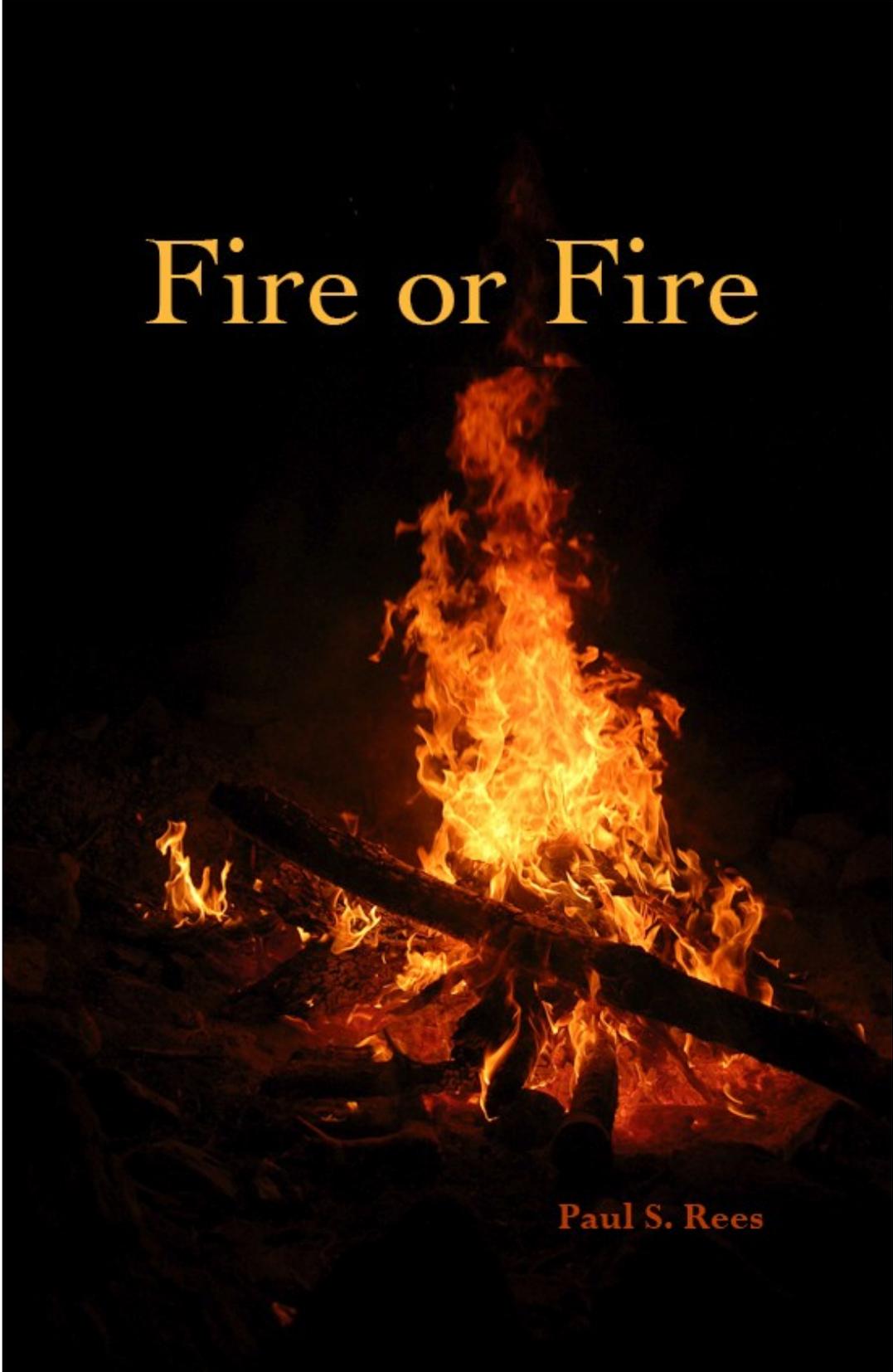


Fire or Fire

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FIRE OR FIRE?

I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already kindled (Luke 12:49, RSV). Set on fire of hell (James 3:6). TWO KINDS OF FIRE — one divine, the other demonic! Two tongues of flame — one of heaven, the other of hell!

In the early 1930's my friend, Dr. Harold Ockenga of Boston, preached one night in a theater in a city of Poland. Just as he was concluding his sermon and preparing to give the invitation a riot broke out. The service ended abruptly in confusion and panic. It was later learned that a certain religious group had caused the riot, although in the larger background lay the tension between the Communists and the Christian Church. When Dr. Ockenga reached his hotel that night, he found two soldiers waiting for him. They asked to see him privately. In a little room to which they repaired the two men told him that they had been at the interrupted meeting and had heard his sermon. They wanted to know more about the Gospel and to take the steps to salvation through Christ the Lord. Both of them confessed Christ as their Saviour that night.

When they parted, the older of the two soldiers extended his hand to Dr. Ockenga and said: "In Poland it's a race between Christianity and Communism. Whichever makes its message a flame of fire will win."

One's mind makes a swift journey from that little room in Poland to the writing room of the man whom many regard as our foremost living poet, T. S. Eliot. In his Four Quartettes he has these potent lines:

The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre —
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

And then, from both of these quotations, one turns back to the New Testament to listen, on the one hand, to Jesus as He speaks of casting His holy, heavenly fire upon the earth and, on the other hand, to James as he describes for us the appalling mischief wrought by a tongue that is "set on fire of hell."

Reflecting on these contrasting passages we bump hard against a rigorously important truth: only as ideas become inflamed do they count for much. And this, as a further truth to underscore: in the realm of passion — any passion, be it noted — only a higher passion can meet and master a passion that is lower and unworthy. The issue comes down to this: it is fire or fire!

1.

Look now at some of the manifestations of the fire that ravages and never redeems.

Take the realm of our basic instincts and our acquired appetites. Let the sexual urge stand as an illustration of the former and the craving for liquor as an illustration of the latter. Emerson has a passage in which he describes Nature as supplying to man such a large potential of energy in that strange basement powerhouse of his appetites and instincts that he is in perpetual danger of running amuck. He writes: "To insure the existence of the race, she enforces the sexual instinct at the risk of disorder, grief and pain. To secure strength she implants cruel hunger and thirst which so easily overdo their office and invite disease ... we live in youth amidst this rabble of the passions."

"This rabble of the passions!" It is a fierce phrase. It lifts the lid on the fatal flames that are destroying many an undisciplined and unregulated life. It is of these that the Apostle Paul speaks with stark frankness in the first chapter of Romans: "These men deliberately forfeited the Truth of God and accepted a lie, paying homage and giving service to the creature instead of to the Creator, Who alone is worthy to be worshipped for ever and ever, Amen. God therefore handed them over to disgraceful passions" (Romans 1:25, 26, Phillips). 'The fires that should have been confined to the furnace chamber to run the ship were allowed to break out in the stokehold and destroy it.

Or, take the realm of amusements. A shallow view might be taken of all that goes on in our night clubs, our movie houses, our gambling casinos, our race tracks, our prize fights, leading us to remark that Americans must be an extremely happy people. That, I say, would be the impulsive comment to make when you see so many millions of Americans entertaining themselves with a gay recklessness. Actually, as every sober student of the American scene knows, the very abandon, not to say fanaticism, with which masses of our citizens give themselves to the pursuit of pleasure is a sign of the deep and haunting and unbearable discontent that shadows them wherever they go. Lacking the secret of inner contentment, their very boredom turns into a frenzy — a frenzy to be off and have someone or something entertain them.

Or, let your eye range over the field of freedom. Here again you will see the smoke and flame of a false fire burning hotly. In the right understanding and exercise of freedom may be found our highest satisfactions as persons and as a nation. But if we get our thinking twisted and our conduct warped at this point, more ills can arise than you could list in a Sears and Roebuck catalog. In Godless homes we are today growing an army of boys and girls who will live lawless lives. We are like the people described in a suggestive passage in the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). "Every one did exactly as he pleased," is the way Moffatt translates it.

When we refuse to recognize God as King over the moral order, ordaining laws to be obeyed and duties to be fulfilled, then a general moral anarchy sets in. In his great work, *A Study of History*, Toynbee points out that one of the characteristic signs of a civilization that is on the way out is a widespread contempt for moral law and order. If that be the case, God pity us here in America. The fire of a demonic libertarianism is ranging across our land.

Or, once more, look at those areas of life in which may be seen the lust for power and the passion for glory. Here, too, a consuming fire is burning. We have watched it in

Nazism, and there we have seen it leave a nation in ashes. We have followed its flaming contortions in Fascism, and there we have seen it go down in a holocaust of hate and vengeance and public repudiation. We eye it closely every day as Communism, feeding the fierceness of its passion partly on the oppressions and grievances of subject peoples and partly on the thirst for power, lights new fires and inflames new territories around the world.

Whatever else Communism is, it is no mere speculative theory confined to the simpering lips of women who kill time at afternoon bridge parties. Communism is a burning vision. Communism is a flaming crusade. Communism is the Devil's twentieth century missionary movement compounded of ruthlessness and rapture. What makes it dangerous is the fire that burns in the breasts of its advocates.

Prokoviev, a Russian poet, rhapsodizes about Stalin:

"Stalin" — I say to the universe;

"Stalin" — and I add nothing.

It's the Devil's mysticism. Stalin's name is made to include everything — the party, the country, destiny, absolutely everything. That's fire — dangerous fire.

A young Communist in China was being led out for execution. He turned to his executioners with the words: "I am dying for Communism; what are you living for?" There's fire in it, you see — terrible, destructive fire.

All in all, then, there are baleful fires burning in our world. There are physical lusts that sear the soul. There are cheap thrills that pervert our tastes and our judgments. There are manias for liberty that burn away our anchor ropes in the | moral universe. There are mad seizures of power and glory in which men, like firebugs, will burn down the temples of God and the soul.

What to do about it?

3.

That brings us to this strong, strange word of Jesus Christ: "I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already kindled." Here is the fire that redeems.

Jesus saw the deadly passions that ravaged the lives of individuals and of communities. He saw, too, that man was meant to be a creature of whole-heartedness and devotion. He had more hope of an ardent woman of the street than He did of a frosty Sadducee in the temple. And, most important of all, He saw that only a passion can conquer a passion.

In just one way can an evil, destructive flame be put out of the heart, and that is by the kindling of a hotter, purer fire. T. S. Eliot is right — Scripturally, evangelically right — when he says that man must be "redeemed from fire by fire." As Dr. John Mackay, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, has put it: "Fire or Fire is the issue. In its full Christian setting and significance, I this means the Fire engendered by the Holy Spirit which purifies and inflames man's heart to seek God's kingdom and righteousness." So! Over against the fire that ravages is the fire that redeems. Consider it.

Listening to Jesus in our text, we see, for one thing, the fire of His purpose: "I came to cast fire." Our Lord was not afraid to raise issues. He did not shrink from taking sides. He was no tepid teacher of pleasant platitudes. He laid down the truth of God and made claims concerning Himself that compelled men to line up on one side or the other. He insisted that His followers should do more than give a polite intellectual consent to His words: from top to bottom they must be committed to Him and enlisted as the zestful heralds and the passionate practitioners of His truth.

He had a way of so firing the men and women whom He touched and healed and redeemed that in the early stages of His public ministry, in order to avoid premature excitement, he had to caution them against broadcasting the good news. The caution did not always "take/" either. Mark tells about a leper whom He cleansed, saying, as they parted, "See thou say nothing to any man." But the dear fellow could not contain himself. "He went out," says Mark, "and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter" (Mark 1:45).- A flaming gratitude possessed him. His tongue, so far from being "set on fire of hell," was heaven-lit.

The day came, of course, when our Lord made it clear to all of His disciples that they were to be His open witnesses before the world, and to this end He promised them the flame of His Pentecostal Spirit. Fired themselves, they were to share His purpose in firing others.

Look again at our text, and you will see that, beside the flame of His purpose, there is the flame of His passion. I use the word "passion" in its more precise meaning as referring to Christ's suffering and death. Some have been puzzled by the statement that He makes in the verse that follows the text: "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished" (v. 50, RSV).

Why should the Master talk about His baptism when He had been baptized by John three years earlier? The answer, of course, is that the word "baptism" does not always stand for water. Here it stands for blood! Here it speaks not of an ordinance but an ordeal. That ordeal was Gethsemane and Calvary. It was the frightfully expensive way

that His holy love had to take in order to light a path of reconciliation over which guilty, condemned, foolish folks like you and me could walk into the waiting, forgiving arms of the Almighty Father.

It was that quenchless flame of pure, redemptive love that drove Him on, through agony and tears, to the crisis of death and the conquest in resurrection.

What follows is sheer mystery and glory. It is the mystery and glory of that miracle by which common people like ourselves are won over to the Cross. The Cross becomes our obsession — our "magnificent obsession." We feel as Paul did when he cried to the Corinthians: "We thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (II Corinthians 5:14, 15).

"Unto Him!" There you have the secret of great and zestful and impassioned living. "Unto Him!" His Cross has become the altar of your soul where, as in the Holy of Holies of old, the fire never goes out.

"Unto Him" you make your decisions. "Unto Him" you turn over your business. "Unto Him" you dedicate your powers. "Unto Him" you give your unfaltering allegiance. It is this fire of devotion to Jesus Christ that burns with a flame so hot that no lesser fire can survive it.

Go back over that list of false fires that claimed our notice a bit ago. See how this flame of Christ's passion will redeem you from them.

Take the fire of unregulated instinct and appetite. John Donne, the mystical English poet, in his youthful days sported the family crest which consisted, oddly enough, of a sheaf of snakes. It was an appropriate symbol of the vipers of passion which, unholy and unruly, nested in his bosom in his unregenerate days. But the day came when John Donne met Jesus Christ. He was changed by His power and his life passed under the spell of Christ's love. No longer would he display the family crest with its coiled serpents. Instead, he caused to be fashioned a crest of his own in which appeared the crucified Saviour on the background of an anchor. What had brought order and discipline and victory into that inner "rabble of the passions?" Scoldings from his parents? No. Lectures on duty by his teachers? No. Resolutions and floggings of the will? No. Not any of these mainly, but the incoming of Christ's love and the power of devotion which it released in response. John Donne was redeemed from fire by fire.

Or — to mention only one other of the Devil's fires — take the passion for power and glory which, in ruthless and revolutionary form, marks a movement like Communism. I have lately read the testimony of Carol Santiago, a New York girl who was a Communist in the Philippines at the time of World War II. Before she became a card-carrying member of the Party, she visited several churches in New England. But there, she said, "I found nothing that seemed strong enough to meet my needs. Actually the strong currents seemed all to run the wrong way. Gradually I became more materialistic and more radical and after two years I joined the Party."

Later, in the Philippines, she married a young minister, who renounced the Christian Church and turned Communist.

Then came Pearl Harbor and the War. Her husband had to go to sea. She was alone with two small children when the Japanese bombs began falling around Manila. It was then that she got her first dose of a "strong" Christianity. A Christian family took her in — knowing that she was an avowed Communist and atheist. At first she sneered at

their hymns and their Bible-reading. But, she said, "When they prayed for my little son and daughter, the tears came — for the first time I admitted to myself that there was something wrong with me."

The kindnesses of these Christians kept piling up on the doorstep of her soul. She saw one Christian and then another die from mistreatment by the Japanese, when up to the very end they were seeking to help other people.

One day a Dr. Darby asked her plainly if she was not ready to accept Christ openly as her Saviour. She was not, she told him, but that night she prayed that she might be shown what she was to be saved from. "God showed me my heart as He saw it," she testifies. "He showed me I actually was the very thing I loathed — a hypocrite!"

And she cried: "If that's what I am to be saved from, I want to be saved!" And she was — then and there. Today she is in America doing housework, and if you ask her why she is doing the sort of thing that as a Communist she would despise, her mind goes back to that Christian family where she saw love in warm, flaming action, and she says the reason "I do it is that I may plant the seed that may blossom into another family like the one I've mentioned."

Again: redeemed from fire by fire!

Which shall it be in your case? The fire that roars out of hell to consume the soul with pride and lust and the heat of false philosophies? Or the fire that falls from God's heaven to kindle within the spirit love's glowing ardor and to turn all of your complacent beliefs into burning convictions?

The choice is ours: It is fire or fire.

"Granted," says the concerned reader of these lines, 'but what are we to do if we want Christ's fire to possess and enkindle us?'"

The question is as urgent as it is pertinent. An Episcopal bishop once declared that the great American heresy is to think that because a thing has been said it has been done.

True, the fire that redeems us from the fire that is destroying us is never a self-generated flame. It is the gift of God. But so is the light that springs from the tip of a match when the necessary friction takes place. Even that flame, traced to its ultimate source, comes from the sun — God! Still it was only by meeting conditions that the flame leaped when the match was struck.

If I want to be one of Christ's incendiaries, myself kindled and thus able to kindle others, what shall I do?

1. I can be honest with myself.

I can frankly, with pride-killing candor, admit that I have not been on fire for Jesus Christ and His Church. William James said that religion is either a "dull habit" or an "acute fever." I can be un-evasive in the admission that, if I have been religious at all, such Christianity as I have displayed has been no more than a "dull habit."

My honesty may compel me to face the fact that I have never actually experienced Jesus Christ as the Giver of new life and as the Forgiver of my old sins. Not even "the root of the matter" is in me.

Or, candor may lead me to say that I am a disciple to whom Christ has spoken a healing, forgiving word, but a disciple, nevertheless, with little or no discipline in my life or drive in my spirit. "The Church is full of people whose commitment to Christ is safe and limited." I can humbly confess that I am in that camp. Confessing it, I see how really shameful it is, especially when I look into the New Testament and see that normal first-century discipleship was neither "safe" nor "limited" but hazardous and unlimited. Unreservedly abandoned to Jesus Christ, those trail-blazing Christians "counted not their lives dear unto themselves."

2. I can pray.

I can take something like Dr. Frank Laubach's prayer and make it my own:

"Lord, end this wishy-washy, lukewarm, mumbling religion. Lord, set us on fire. Put the divine fire in us before the atomic fire destroys us and our world. Take away our small thoughts and love. Make us big as the world in vision. Take away our weakness. Fill us with the strength of Jesus Christ. Help the sleeping might of Britain and America to be awakened into glorious action by the power of the Holy Spirit.

"We are sick of our disgusting indifference and Thou art sick of us. Do not spew us out of Thy mouth, but set us on fire. We have been afraid and hid our talent in a napkin. God of courage, sweep out our pitiful timidity. Make us divinely unafraid. Help Christendom to rise, not in fine sounding words, but in deed and in fire and in truth, and change this defeat in the battle for freedom and for Christ to victory.

"Lord, send a Pentecost at any cost; send a Pentecost and begin in me, now. Keep Thy promise, Christ, and baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Face us the other way around. Start us ahead. The altar is ready, the offering is ready. Lord, now send the fire! Amen."

3. I can link myself with a kindled group.

Recently, while in England, I read a history of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, a student group at Cambridge University which for several decades has provided a "combustion center" for the spiritual life of young men attending that famous university. The Christianity of form could be had in the ornate chapels of the school but the Christianity of flame was found in these intimate, informal fellowships.

Speaking of his contact with a similar group on this side of the Atlantic, one man said:

"I was quite satisfied with routine church services and church work until I went to Northfield in the great days when John R. Mott and Robert E. Speer and others like them were speaking to hundreds of schoolboys and undergraduates. I never knew till then that Christianity was a mighty worldwide force that changed the lives of men. They awakened a hunger in me that had not been there before, as they did in tens of thousands more."

We are affected by our exposures. I can therefore expose myself to a healthy, hot-hearted group who are bent upon having "all there is going" in Christian discipleship.

Perhaps this should be added here: if there is no such group near where you are,

start one. Talk it up among a few of your acquaintances. Subscribe to such a magazine as "Faith At Work." Order from this magazine's office (61 Gramercy Square, New York 10) several copies of the little booklet called Creating Christian Cells. The do-nothing posture is fatal. Get going!

4. I can trust.

The authentic fire of Christ's love and sacrificial passion is not mine to create; it is mine to receive. I can not work it up; I can only surrender to it. Turn to Matthew 3:11 and let the last part of it "soak in": "He (Christ) shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire." You are ready to be done with all known sin, inward and outward; you are ready to commit yourself to a life of prayer, by which is meant the daily contact with God, the sincere asking, the quiet listening; you are dedicating your will without reservation to the will of God. Now take Him at His Word: "According to thy faith be it unto thee." Believe that now He possesses you by His Spirit. Now He smashes that false self-life that has made you an in-growing rather than out-going person. Now He commissions and energizes you to make your contribution to the biggest business in the world — making Christian disciples everywhere. Shun negative and skeptical thoughts as you would shun a viper. As faith functions the fire will burn!

5. I can share.

"If it were true," says Sam Shoemaker, "that the ego had been brought up under the Cross, and nailed there with Christ, we should come away with our hearts on fire, and our faces shining, and our lips only too ready to make known the wonders of His grace." There you have it: lips, too long silent, unsealed and "ready."

Gamaliel Bradford, who took the lives of both saints and sinners as his province, once wrote: "The true religious idealist, the true purveyor of the gospel, no sooner receives the light himself than he is seized with this passion for distributing it. As we see, for example in Moody, or Booth, the instantaneous result of conversion is the impulse to convert others, to share as widely as possible the greatest joy and benefit that this world or any other has to give."

This sort of witnessing has been too long left to city missions and to cozy midweek meetings of the "faithful" in our churches. The fiery discipleship which Christ offers to all of us will take the testimony to the pagans around us.

It will mean that fire-baptized laboring men will find ways and means of cracking open the labor union movement, which now is almost entirely indifferent to the Christian Church. It will not be done by repeating the worn cliché "Jesus Saves." It will be done by guided penetration into the lives of these men by laughing with them as well as by praying for them, by going out of our way to let them know how much we care about them. There'll be plenty of rebuffs and failures. But — there'll be victories! Victories that a placid, timid, unimaginative, complacent Christianity will never, never win!

It will mean that flame-lighted business men will get their Christian commitments "out in the open" put from under the "bushel" Jesus talked about, out where it will count.

Yes, it will mean all this, and a hundred things more: more fire in the parson's sermon, more fire in the deacon's prayer, more fire in the school teacher's technique,

more fire in the devotional life of the family, more fire in the missionary outreach of our churches. Fire! More fire! Christ's kind of fire — for intellect, emotions and will; for homes, churches and nations! That, and nothing less, it will mean!

So, with Amy Carmichael, let's look at Christ and say:

FIRE OR FIRE?

From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher,
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakening,
(Not thus are spirits fortified, Not this way went the Crucified)
From all that dims thy Calvary
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay,
The hope no disappointments tire,
The passion that will burn like fire.
Let me not sink to be a clod:
Make me thy fuel, Flame of God."