

EXPOSITORY SERMON

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LAODICEA – THE LUKE WARM CHURCH

Scripture Reading – Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction

This morning we come to the final and seventh message that Jesus sent to the churches in Asia. Stott writes that perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate at the beginning of the 21st century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, nominal, rather sentimental, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity has become flabby and anemic. We appear have taken lukewarm bath of religion. The evidence shows that the modern Christian church is characterized by an alarming superficiality and its spiritual temperature is generally lukewarm. This was the condition of the church in Laodicea. It was to the church at Laodicea this severe letter was written. Laodicea was an important city in the world of that day. It was for three basic reasons.

- 1. It was an important commercial and banking center.**
- 2. It was an important center for clothing manufacturing. It prided itself on producing magnificent garments.**

3. The city was proud of its medical center. It was famous for its eye salve which was exported all over the world as a sovereign remedy for the diseases of the eye. The Christian church was situated in this city which was abundantly prosperous, universally famous and as a result was filled with pride of its achievements. It is clear that the church had absorbed much of the spirit of the city. The arrogance of the city was contagious. This spirit combined with complacency crept unto the church and tainted it. It was the church in this condition that Jesus sent His message. This letter was the sternest of those that were written to the seven churches.

John Stott with deep insight writes that "in each of the seven letters, Christ lays emphasis on a different mark or attribute which should characterize the church." The combination of these characteristics is that which constitutes the genuine health of the church. It is what Jesus not only thinks of His church, it is what He expects of it. Let us recall what those marks are.

1. For the Church at Ephesus the first priority is love for the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. In his message to the church at Smyrna, Jesus emphasized the need to stand strong and not compromise.
3. Jesus exhorted the Church at Pergamum to hold to the truth no matter what the circumstances.
4. Jesus urges the church at Thyatira live righteously and holily in the midst of a sinful world.
5. Sardis was commanded to be genuine and true. Jesus said let your talk support your walk.
6. Philadelphia was challenged to walk through the doorway of opportunity to spread the Gospel all nations.
7. In the church at Laodicea we hear the condemnation of Jesus on the lukewarmness and apathy of the people of God." He challenges her to maintain the zeal, the fire, and a burning passion fire for Christ and His church. His words are severe revealing the critical nature of the problem among the body of believers. His words are unmistakable. "I know your deeds, that you are neither

cold nor hot, I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” There is no way you can be delicate with these words. They are not given sentimentality. They may not be palatable for they are severe and corrective. They do not fit into a political correct seeker sensitive church. Further more these words were not spoken by an angel or a prophet. They are very words of the Head of the Church the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why it is important to and listen and to hear what the Spirit is wanting to say to us. As we study the condition of this church what is it that is so significant? What is emphasized in this message? What is the core of it? First there is an emphasis on,

1. THE CHRIST WHO IS CREDIBLE. Revelation 3:14.

“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” Jesus is about to pronounce judgment on the church and the question is on “what basis does He do this?” Does He have the right to do it?” Is He a credible judge?” It is obvious that He is. His credibility lies first in His, **a. His Reliability. Revelation 3:14.** These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” Note the unique description of Jesus in these words. “He is the Amen!” Amen means “Indeed!” or “truly!” These are the same words that Jesus used during His ministry. It is a word that confirms something which is stated or done. As one has pointed out “it was used to affirm and guarantee a statement as absolutely true and trustworthy. Jesus is the Amen. He is the affirmation and confirmation of the truth of God because He is the personification of the truth of God. This fact gives credibility to His words and competency to His evaluation of the church. Paul writing to the church in Corinth says that the ministry of Christ fulfills all the promises of God. “For no matter how many promises God has made they are YES in Christ.” His words are credible because of His reliability. He has never needed to retract or modify any statement He has made. He is the unchanging Christ “the same yesterday to day and forever.” **He is the Amen the affirmation of the truth of God because He**

is the truth. Jesus is not only credible because of His reliability, but also because of,

b. His Authority. Revelation 3:14. The message that Jesus sent the church in Laodicea, was founded on His of authority. "These are the words of.....the ruler of God's creation." The word ruler in the Greek has two ideas explicit in it. First it means.

i. Jesus is the origin or source of creation.

ii. Jesus is also the supreme person in creation. He is the ruler of creation.

These two truths go hand in hand. John wrote some crucial words concerning Jesus in his gospel. They are words which confirm these two truths about Him.. "Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life and that life was the light of man." (John 1:3.) Paul was certain of this when He wrote in His letter to the Colossian church. Speaking of Jesus he said, "He is the image of the invisible God over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before things and in Him all things hold together." Colossians 1:15-17. Describe His indisputable authority. He is the one who spoke the worlds into being. Who made something out of nothing. Who hung the stars in space, and breathed life into creation, and stamped the beauty of Himself on our world. The one who brought order out of chaos; light out of darkness and purpose out of confusion. It is He, writes the gospel writer, that dresses the lilies in a simple splendor, but a splendor that outshines even the glory of King Solomon's court. This He who is the ruler of creation, and that is authority indeed. He is also the head and ruler of the church – His body. He has the authority to direct His church. When speaks to it, indeed when He speaks to us. He does so in encouragement or chastisement – comfort or condemnation – in delight or discipline. It is well to remember that He speaks with all the authority of God, because He is God. Consequently He is competent to make His assessment of

the state of the church in Laodicea. He is the Christ who is credible and competent. Furthermore John reveals that He is,

2. THE CHRIST WHO IS THE COUNSELOR. Revelation 3:15-18.

The basis of His evaluation is in those words "I know your deeds." This knowledge is one which goes beyond human insight. His knowledge is not a passing perception or a superficial awareness of what was going on in the church. "He is the Lord," wrote John, "whose eyes were like blazing fire," penetrating beyond the niceties of an outward demeanor and the façade of religious activity or the finesse of impeccable manners, to the inward man where only reality and truth lie. "I know your deeds." He knows who we are and what we are. He is competent to make an assessment and give advice and correction. He is the all-knowing counselor. Now Jesus does two things here as the Divine counselor. Note,

a. His Diagnoses and Conclusion. Revelation 3:15. Jesus speaks directly to the problem. It is in fact the root problem in the Church at Laodicea. "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other." The church had become the tepid church spiritually. Apathy, lukewarmness and indifference had infiltrated the spirit of the church, and Jesus says to her "I wish you were either cold or hot, but tepid is repulsive to me." One has said that "Jesus preferred the rejection of faith to the way the church professed it." Leon Morris. "To profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic person than for the indifferent one." Their coolness was a denial of all that Christ stands for. Be cold or hot, but not insipidly lukewarm. The word cold in the Greek means icy cold and hot means boiling hot. Jesus Christ would prefer for the church to boil or to freeze rather than to simmer down to tasteless tepidity or lack luster lukewarmness. Addressing a national seminar of Southern Baptist leaders, George Gallup said, "We find there is very little difference in ethical behavior between church goers and those who are not active religiously.....The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkably similar in both groups." This is evidence of

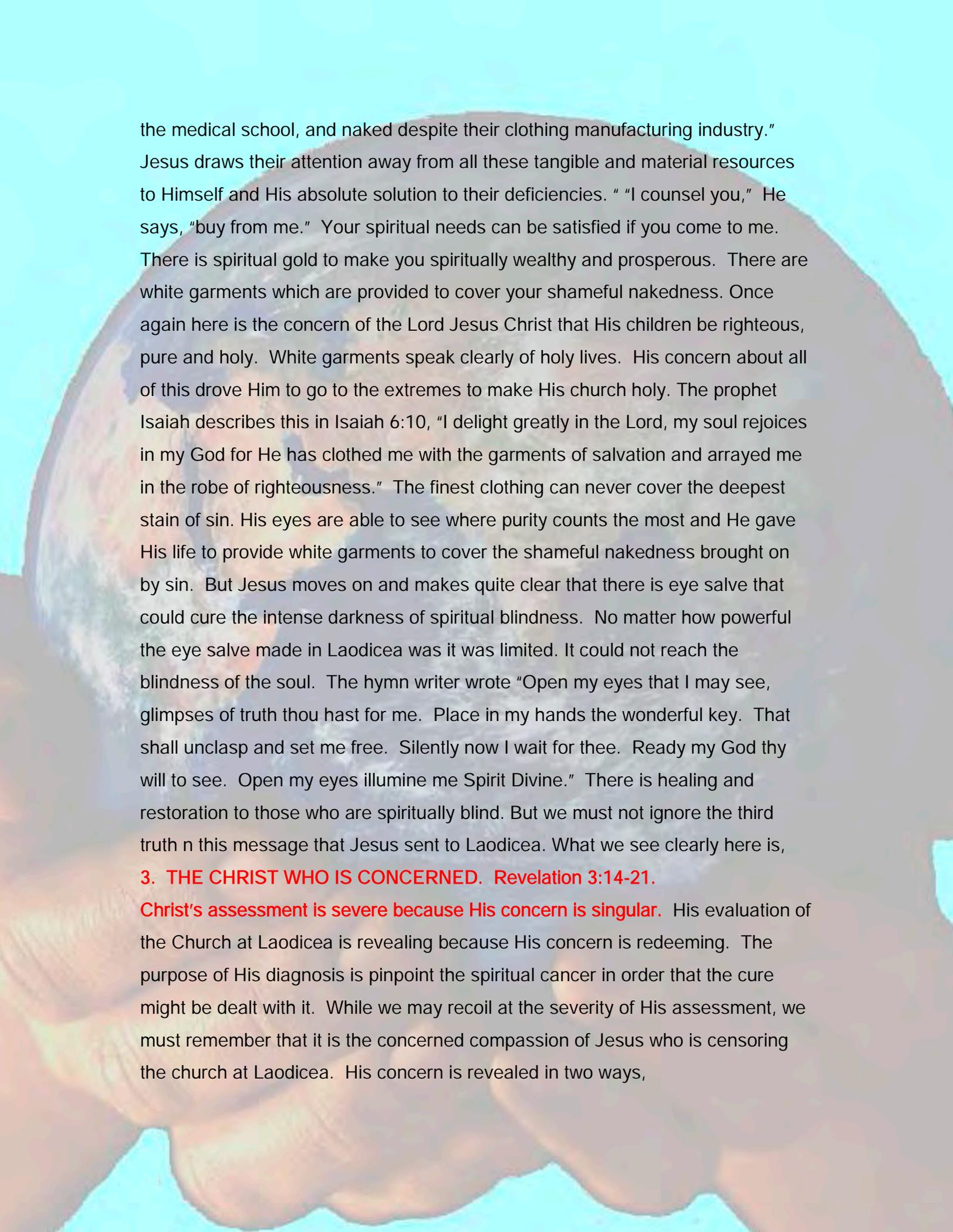
lukewarmness. It is amazing that those who call themselves evangelical Christians live with this spirit of lukewarmness. What is more amazing is that they fault the church because of its tepid spiritual condition when they themselves bring no fire or enthusiasm to the sanctuary. They look around the church seeking for life, enthusiasm and passion, and censor the church when they do not find it. Then look for greener pastures when do they do realize or admit, that they are a part of the lukewarm condition of the church. They look for someone else to somehow create it. No one can create genuine fire for that alone is the prerogative of God. They have failed to look within look within themselves to see if they have the fire. And until they do it is hypocritical to blame the church. They are neither cold nor hot. The igniting of inward fire begins in a humble honesty when we come to place where we pray "change MY heart O God." Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me." For that is where the fire originates and is ignited. That is where the change should take place. That is where passion begins, and it only comes from God. Jesus said to the church at Laodicea "You are not cold and you are not hot....you are therefore lukewarm." That is Christ's diagnoses and conclusion of the condition church at Laodicea. There are two distinctly different perspectives here on the condition of the church. There are two areas of consciousnesses or two levels of comprehension or two areas of awareness as to the spiritual condition of the church. First,

i. The perspective of Jesus who says "I know you are lukewarm...." That was the real condition of the church. Then there is the perspective of the church herself. Jesus pointed this out.

ii. You say that you are rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." One has written that the lukewarm person is someone in whom that there is a glaring contrast between Jesus says or thinks he is on the one hand, and what he really is on the other. Luke warmness is blind to his real condition." (Stott) The church herself or the Christian at Laodicea felt that they were doing well but Jesus said

are "pitiful and wretched." Leon Morris says this means "not simply the wretched one, but the wretched one par excellence." They are poor means they have nothing at all, they are completely poverty stricken, or utterly destitute in spirit." These words were directed to Christian who thought that they were rich having acquired great wealth and said they we do not need a thing. An oriental evangelist preaching in the churches in this country recently said, "Christians this country do not need God for they have everything else." It seems that across the western church that our affluence has caused us to depend less on God and more on stuff. The tragedy is that she does not know it and that is a dangerous attitude to have. This is what the church said in Laodicea, "we do not need a thing." The "to be in no need of anything attitude" is one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual vitality, fire and passion. The church at Laodicea was so self-deceived they were unconscious of their plight, for Jesus said "you do not realize that you are wretched, poor, pitiful, blind and naked." They were numb to their spiritual poverty and their spiritual lukewarmness. That was Christ's diagnoses and conclusion of the church's status in Laodicea. But look at,

b. His Directive and Solution. Revelation 3:18. Jesus speaks in metaphorical language, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Jesus adds this significant comment "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent." These words need to be viewed in context of where the church was situated. Laodicea had great banks, so wealth was no problem. It had a strong clothing manufacturing industry so clothing nakedness was no problem. It boasted of some of the finest medical schools of the world of that day. They were famous for producing Phrygian powder for the cure of Ophthalmia- a disease of the eyes. But these were human solutions to physical and material problems. Jesus diagnosed a deeper problem highlighting spiritual deficiencies and there were no resources in Laodicea to meet them. John Stott wrote that they "they are beggars despite their banks, blind despite the Phrygian powders of



the medical school, and naked despite their clothing manufacturing industry." Jesus draws their attention away from all these tangible and material resources to Himself and His absolute solution to their deficiencies. " "I counsel you," He says, "buy from me." Your spiritual needs can be satisfied if you come to me. There is spiritual gold to make you spiritually wealthy and prosperous. There are white garments which are provided to cover your shameful nakedness. Once again here is the concern of the Lord Jesus Christ that His children be righteous, pure and holy. White garments speak clearly of holy lives. His concern about all of this drove Him to go to the extremes to make His church holy. The prophet Isaiah describes this in Isaiah 6:10, "I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me in the robe of righteousness." The finest clothing can never cover the deepest stain of sin. His eyes are able to see where purity counts the most and He gave His life to provide white garments to cover the shameful nakedness brought on by sin. But Jesus moves on and makes quite clear that there is eye salve that could cure the intense darkness of spiritual blindness. No matter how powerful the eye salve made in Laodicea was it was limited. It could not reach the blindness of the soul. The hymn writer wrote "Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me. Place in my hands the wonderful key. That shall unclasp and set me free. Silently now I wait for thee. Ready my God thy will to see. Open my eyes illumine me Spirit Divine." There is healing and restoration to those who are spiritually blind. But we must not ignore the third truth in this message that Jesus sent to Laodicea. What we see clearly here is,

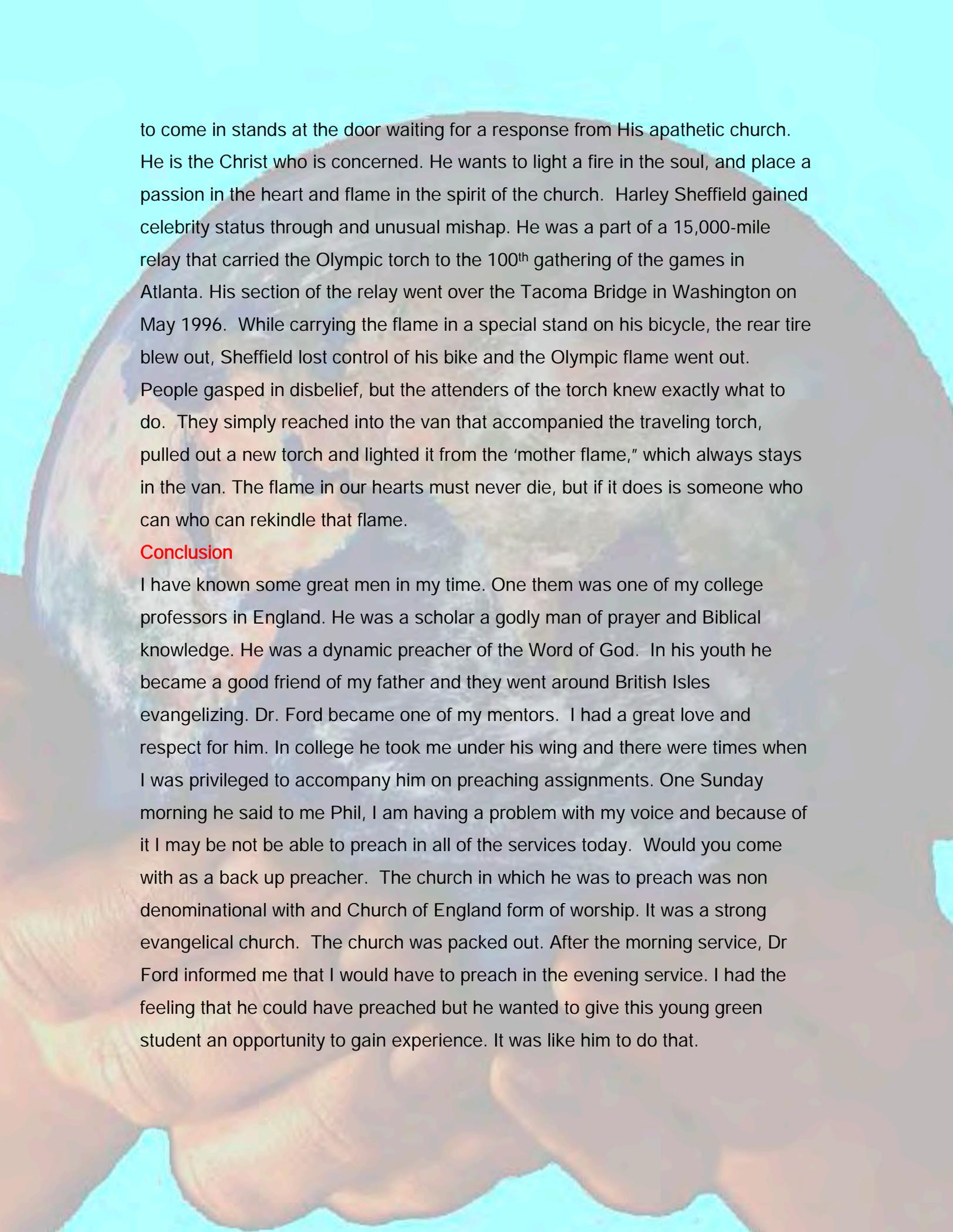
3. THE CHRIST WHO IS CONCERNED. Revelation 3:14-21.

Christ's assessment is severe because His concern is singular. His evaluation of the Church at Laodicea is revealing because His concern is redeeming. The purpose of His diagnosis is pinpoint the spiritual cancer in order that the cure might be dealt with it. While we may recoil at the severity of His assessment, we must remember that it is the concerned compassion of Jesus who is censoring the church at Laodicea. His concern is revealed in two ways,

a. His Declaration. Revelation 3:16. "So because you are lukewarm- neither cold nor hot- I am about to spit you out of my mouth." There maybe surprise at such a strong response of Jesus to the sad spiritual condition of the church. He is expressing His profound distaste and total abhorrence of spiritual lukewarmness. And while His declaration may startle and even shock us, it is clear indication of not only how seriously He considers this disease, but how intensely concerned and burdened He is about it. If we think that this response is too sever, Jerome once remarked that the "the greatest anger of God is when God withdraws His anger from us. If God ever abandons a man, that man must be bad indeed. No man should ever despise the chastening disciplines of life; he should regard them as a compliment." The severity of Christ's condemnation is fruit of His unconditional love. His censure is the birth child of His concern. Verse 19 confirms this "those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, be zealous, Repent." This is the simple doorway to igniting the fire and passion in the heart. Jane Kurashi was a laywomen on the district of which I had oversight in South Africa. One Sunday morning she made her way to an altar of prayer and fully surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Was she a deep dyed heathen sinner? Not at all! She had been member of the church for 25 years. If my memory serves me right she was board member. At that altar she confessed that she had no reality in her spiritual life. She had no fire, no passion and no zeal. But something happened that morning. A dramatic change took place in her heart. She sprang into life. A fire was ignited in her soul. The pastor did not have to beg her to serve in the church. She began to witness and became strong in visitation. The fire was burning in her heart. She came to the pastor one day and said Pastor we need to have a week-end revival. If you arrange it I will finance it. She did not have much. This financing meant providing food for the people. She gave up a week's salary, but she did not complain. You see the fire was burning. What a weekend they had. God the Holy Spirit came in power. There was preaching, praying, praising God and testifying. The Saturday night of the meeting, the service, I believe, lasted all night. While some were testifying in

the front of the church as they often do, a witch doctor came into the service and sat down at the back of the sanctuary. He listened intently to those who were testifying. Then all of a sudden he straightened up and bolted out of the church. The weekend brought genuine revival to that church. After it was over Jane and some of the people visited this witchdoctor, and they asked him why he had run out of the church so frightened. He told them that while one of the people was testifying, all of a sudden a shining white form appeared and stood beside the witnessing Christian. And being demon possessed it frightened him. The impact of that meeting will never be calculated, but the spirit of God continued to rest upon that congregation. This happened, all because one woman in the church heard the call of the living Christ, "be earnest, be zealous and repent," and the fire was ignited on the altar of her heart. I have learned over a lifetime years of full time ministry, I have observed and learned that organization is less important than motivation. In the western church we have placed the former ahead of the latter and we are struggling. Unless the fire burns there will be no genuine church growth or authentic evangelism. No effective out reach ministry will take place. A multitude of problems we are seeking to remedy can be solved if we obeyed the living Christ to be earnest, be zealous with a willingness to humble our selves and repent. This is the prescription to lighting a fire in the soul of the church. Jesus demands nothing less than we be on fire because lukewarmness is repulsive to Him. That is why His declaration is so severe. Notice further,

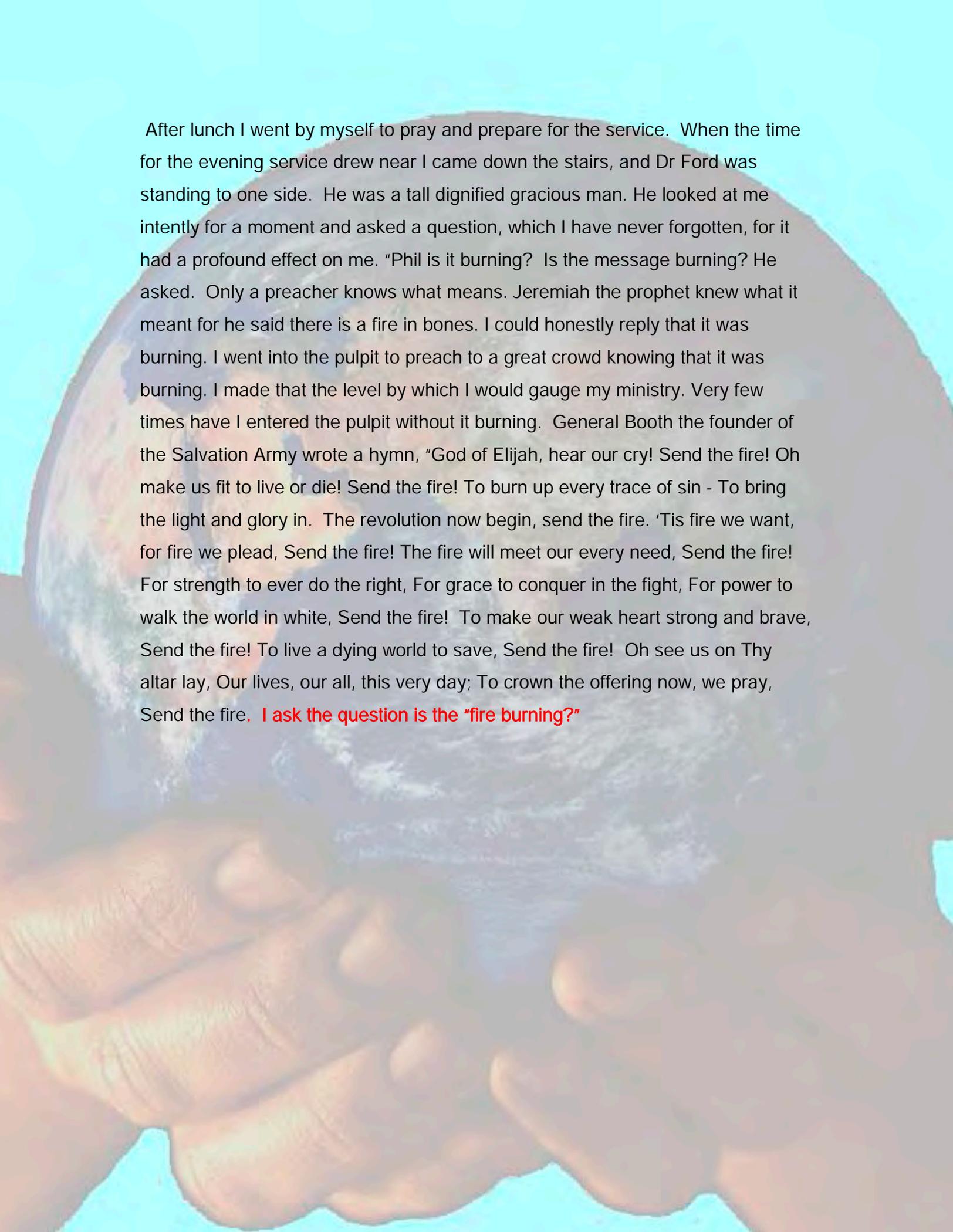
b. His Devotion. Revelation 3:20. Jesus reveals His devotion so powerfully in v. 20. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with Me." In the context of this passage of scripture it is not at the door of the outsider he stands. He stands at the door of the apathetic church. He knocks the door of the lukewarm Christian. He stands patiently waiting to be admitted. **The poet wrote, "O Jesus thou art standing, outside the fast closed door, In lowly patience waiting, To pass the threshold o'er. Shame on us Christian brothers, His name and sign we bear. O thrice shame on us, to keep Him standing there."** This devoted Jesus seeking

A background image showing a hand holding a globe of the Earth. The hand is positioned at the bottom, with fingers wrapped around the globe. The globe shows the continents and oceans. The overall image has a soft, slightly blurred appearance.

to come in stands at the door waiting for a response from His apathetic church. He is the Christ who is concerned. He wants to light a fire in the soul, and place a passion in the heart and flame in the spirit of the church. Harley Sheffield gained celebrity status through an unusual mishap. He was a part of a 15,000-mile relay that carried the Olympic torch to the 100th gathering of the games in Atlanta. His section of the relay went over the Tacoma Bridge in Washington on May 1996. While carrying the flame in a special stand on his bicycle, the rear tire blew out, Sheffield lost control of his bike and the Olympic flame went out. People gasped in disbelief, but the attenders of the torch knew exactly what to do. They simply reached into the van that accompanied the traveling torch, pulled out a new torch and lighted it from the 'mother flame," which always stays in the van. The flame in our hearts must never die, but if it does is someone who can who can rekindle that flame.

Conclusion

I have known some great men in my time. One them was one of my college professors in England. He was a scholar a godly man of prayer and Biblical knowledge. He was a dynamic preacher of the Word of God. In his youth he became a good friend of my father and they went around British Isles evangelizing. Dr. Ford became one of my mentors. I had a great love and respect for him. In college he took me under his wing and there were times when I was privileged to accompany him on preaching assignments. One Sunday morning he said to me Phil, I am having a problem with my voice and because of it I may be not be able to preach in all of the services today. Would you come with as a back up preacher. The church in which he was to preach was non denominational with and Church of England form of worship. It was a strong evangelical church. The church was packed out. After the morning service, Dr Ford informed me that I would have to preach in the evening service. I had the feeling that he could have preached but he wanted to give this young green student an opportunity to gain experience. It was like him to do that.



After lunch I went by myself to pray and prepare for the service. When the time for the evening service drew near I came down the stairs, and Dr Ford was standing to one side. He was a tall dignified gracious man. He looked at me intently for a moment and asked a question, which I have never forgotten, for it had a profound effect on me. "Phil is it burning? Is the message burning? He asked. Only a preacher knows what means. Jeremiah the prophet knew what it meant for he said there is a fire in bones. I could honestly reply that it was burning. I went into the pulpit to preach to a great crowd knowing that it was burning. I made that the level by which I would gauge my ministry. Very few times have I entered the pulpit without it burning. General Booth the founder of the Salvation Army wrote a hymn, "God of Elijah, hear our cry! Send the fire! Oh make us fit to live or die! Send the fire! To burn up every trace of sin - To bring the light and glory in. The revolution now begin, send the fire. 'Tis fire we want, for fire we plead, Send the fire! The fire will meet our every need, Send the fire! For strength to ever do the right, For grace to conquer in the fight, For power to walk the world in white, Send the fire! To make our weak heart strong and brave, Send the fire! To live a dying world to save, Send the fire! Oh see us on Thy altar lay, Our lives, our all, this very day; To crown the offering now, we pray, Send the fire. **I ask the question is the "fire burning?"**