

## ARTICLE III.

SOME FALLACIES IN THE VIEWS OF JOHN  
FOSTER UPON FUTURE PUNISHMENT.

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ANY matured views of a writer so cautious and so exact and elaborate as John Foster deserve more than ordinary attention. This is true of his views upon the subject of Future Punishment. It is well known that, in the reaction of his mind from his inherited religious opinions, he tended to reject the deity of Christ and to adopt concerning his person and word the Arian speculations. It is known also that he rejected the doctrine of future eternal punishment, and taught that it is safe to hold that God will not eternally punish human sin. His views are most fully elaborated in the letter, numbered 219 in his published correspondence, which was addressed to his distinguished correspondent, Rev. Edward White, in answer to a letter of inquiries and objections concerning the doctrine of eternal punishment. This letter states the view of Mr. Foster with great clearness, and with great variety of illustration. A single objection is presented with the utmost force, viz., that while sin deserves punishment, eternity of punishment is disproportionate to the sin of a creature so limited in his understanding as man. The discussion is based upon considerations of reason. While it is admitted that the statements of the Scriptures are formidable, the argument does not proceed on scriptural grounds. The aim is to show how exceedingly limited the average man is in his capacity to apprehend such a metaphysical conception as eternity, how inadequately it has been revealed to us, even in the Bible, or by any informa-

tion, and how inconceivably awful is the idea of an unlimited duration of punishment. No person can read this thoughtful essay without realizing, underneath all the ingenious elaboration of its literary form, the intense earnestness of the great essayist. He will detect, also, the marks of that morbid imagination which furnished a lifelong irritation and torment to a man so delicately organized, early broken in health, so painfully sensitive to sentimental impressions, and whose admirable essays indicate, here and there, the corrosion of mind produced by early and long-continued failures and disappointments in his chosen profession of the Christian ministry.

It will not be a difficult task, I believe, to point out fallacies in the ingenious and powerful arguments of Mr. Foster, whose outline has been so well sketched by Mr. Snow.

The considerations now to be named, if not particularly new, are pertinent, and to some may be suggestive and helpful. It may well be, in these times of ferment of opinion and religious unrest, that many thoughtful persons, including men of Mr. Foster's own profession, the Christian ministry, have doubts and questions concerning the eternity of future punishment. It is not undertaken, in presenting these fallacies, to follow any particular order, so much as to present those objections which are at once the most obvious and the weightiest.

As preliminary, however, to an examination of his argument upon the main subject, a very common fallacy, involved in Mr. Foster's discussion, and presented by him with much urgency, deserves notice.

If, he argues, the punishment of sin is eternal, the staple of preaching should be the warning of exposure to so awful a doom. The idea of eternity should be enforced upon man with all possible iteration and vividness of imagery. If Christians really believed in the eternity of punishment, they would not be able to rid their minds of the omnipresent horror which such a conception must inspire. This is a familiar objection.

It is one much pressed by Universalist preachers and writers. It may suggest to us how faithful we should seek to be in exhibiting the warnings of the Scriptures, how diligently we should foster the spiritual temper which led the apostle Paul to pray for the community at Ephesus "night and day with tears."

But is it a well-founded view which is so strongly expressed? Is it true to the facts of human nature? We know of the universal and frightful facts of human sin and misery, and death. But do they rest as an omnipresent weight upon the hearts even of the most devoted philanthropists? Do the physician and the nurse go about oppressed with the familiar facts in which their lives are so absorbed; of surgeries and sicknesses, of incurable maladies, of dying and death? Is it not a merciful provision that it is not necessary that we take a burden which would crush us, in order to be helpful ministers to those in trouble?

Is it true, that, if we believe in the consequences of unforgiven guilt, we should make these the substance of our gospel, in order to warn men of their danger? Did our Saviour and his apostles make warning the main subject in their preaching and testimony? We may well study the examples which they furnish for light upon the proportioning of truth, that we may rightly divide the Word. But an examination of these authoritative examples shows that the reflection of Mr. Foster, and those who use the same line of criticism, is applicable also to these our model preachers. The objection made, however suggestive, is rhetorical, sentimental, and founded in a fallacy. We proceed now to Mr. Foster's arguments.

1. There is an element of fallacy in the assumption that man is competent to estimate the guilt of sin as against God. It is very ingenious in Mr. Foster to speculate that it is more reasonable to infer the comparative slightness of guilt from the finite and limited nature of the agent, than to infer im-

measurableness and infinity from the fact that the Being against whom it is committed is infinite; and further, that if by this reasoning a bad deed is infinitely blameworthy, a good deed, by parity of reasoning, should be infinitely praiseworthy. Our authoritative evidence for the measure of the guilt of sin is the Word of God. The language of the Bible upon this subject is explicit and intense. It teaches that sin in the human race, whether with the light of the Bible or without it, is exceeding sinful, and without excuse. The word "exceeding" is noticeable. It is a word of comparison. This idea may be in it: that human guilt exceeds all the estimation put upon it by human reason. It certainly is an unwarranted and fallacious assumption that any man, even the most appreciative and thoughtful observer of human conduct, is competent to measure the guilt of sin in its relation to a holy God.

2. It is an error, also, to assume that God has not communicated to the human mind, and impressed upon it, the conception of eternity, with sufficient clearness and weight to make it an adequate motive to the sinner, to the average human being. Rather is it not true, that with many persons, even without the teachings of the Scripture, one of the most vivid and habitual of our imaginative conceptions is of eternity? Early it looms upon children. Has not many a child, like one whom the writer has in mind, lived for years in the dread of eternity? How did Mr. Foster know that his own mind was an exception in its sensitiveness (in the fact, not the degree) to this tremendous idea, an eternity of existence? that the thoughts which he expresses are not suggested at some time to all men, as in the well-known story of that British chieftain who illustrated human life by the image of a little bird in a winter storm flying into his hall, and swiftly traversing it to flit out again into the storm, and disappear, that lighted banquet-hall representing human life bordered by the mystery of two eternities?

3. But if it were granted that the assumption is true that

men have no such conception of eternity as constitutes it a powerful warning of the consequences of sin (supposing these to be eternal), another fallacy is to be noted in the assumption, that the conception of eternity is necessary as a motive to deter from sin: that such a conception, the most powerful and vivid, would effectively restrain the sinner. What foundation is there for this notion? What does the idea of eternity add as an effective restraint to the ideas of loss and death as consequences of disobedience? It is not denied that the consideration of eternity has weight among the motives dissuading from sin. But how much weight has it, relatively, as compared with the guilty consciousness of sin, the reproach of sin, loss and death through sin? Men lose opportunities through wrong-doing: they lose them forever. They lose property, friends, health, reputation: so that these can never be regained. They lose limbs, vital organs, and life itself as consequences of sin, distinctly foreseen and inevitable. These losses are final. In a true sense they are, and are known to be, eternal deprivations. Mr. Foster reasons, that, if it were known and realized that the punishment following sin is eternal, men would be deterred from it. In view of the observable facts of life, is this sound reasoning? Explaining their insensibility, the Bible shows that the trouble with sinners is, that, with so many motives to dissuade from guilt, they do not consider.

4. Again, it is a fallacy to assume that the punishment of sin is arbitrary instead of necessary. Whatever positive inflections there may be, the essential fact in punishment is its inevitableness. The lost man goes to *his own place*. He separates himself from God. He cannot be with God unless he chooses to be with him, and, by his character, is fitted to be with him. If eternally unfit, he must be eternally separated. He must be under the divine displeasure as long as he remains impenitent: if forever, forever. The teaching of the Bible is that the penitent man will be saved from sin.

Whenever and wherever he repents he will be forgiven and saved. The word "uttermost" must mean as much as this: if in hell he should repent, he would be saved. We could only know from a revelation that no soul once lost will repent: that this life is the exclusive point of opportunity: that at the judgment, the final state is fixed. But though the revelation upon this subject is explicit, the final state is not arbitrarily fixed in either world. Such is not the biblical representation. Really, the eternal future is determined by the man himself.

5. This suggests still another fallacy in the view which we are examining, viz., this objection of Mr. Foster does not make account of the well-known fact, that character ever tends towards, and at length reaches, a state of final permanence; a fixed and final determination to holiness or to sin. The indications are that, by many, this state is reached before death, as was the case with Judas. The heart becomes fully set to do evil. The instances carefully given of this result of the abuse of opportunity, scattered throughout the Bible, are among the most solemn warnings of God. Cain becomes reprobate. Esau sells his birthright. The Sodomites become confirmed in their unspeakable depravities. Ahab sells himself. Ephraim is joined to his idols. These are a few of the pertinent and conspicuous examples. But if character becomes permanent, what force is left to the objection to the element of eternity in punishment?

6. It is further to be remarked, that it is a dangerous and fatal fallacy to hold and to teach that it can ever be safe for men to die in their sins. Mr. Foster does not consistently teach this, but he certainly implies it when he teaches, that, as concerns the element of endlessness in punishment, the sinner is safe. He reasons to the conclusion that one is safe. But how much weight shall be allowed to speculative reasoning upon this subject, when we have an authoritative divine revelation?

7. This leads to the final observation, that it is a fallacy

to assume that the language of the Scriptures admits of such a treatment that we can safely reject from its teaching concerning punishment the idea of eternity. Mr. Foster does not seriously undertake this biblical discussion. He does no more than suggest it. He uses only general terms. It is his opinion that the Greek may be susceptible of an interpretation in which the idea of eternity is explained away; it may be probable that the biblical punishment is something less protracted than unending. In referring to his treatment of this entire subject, his pastor and distinguished friend, Robert Hall, makes these extremely weighty observations: "For my own part I acquiesce in the usual and popular interpretation of the passages which treat on the future doom of the finally impenitent. My reasons, in brief, are as follows: I assume it as a maxim that we are utterly incompetent to determine *a priori* what is the amount of guilt incurred by such as reject the overtures of the gospel; and, further, that God has been pleased to make it the subject of express revelation; that the terms expressive of the duration of future misery are as forcible as the Greek language supplies; that the same term is applied to the duration of misery as to the duration of happiness, or even the eternity of God himself (Matt. xxv. 46; Rev. xix. 3); that the exclusion of the impenitent from happiness is asserted in the most positive terms: 'they shall *not* see life,' etc., etc.; that 'their worm dieth *not* and their fire is *not* extinguished'; that positive terms may be understood in different degrees of latitude, but this is impossible respecting negative terms, since a negative admits of no degrees."

This brief criticism cannot be brought to a conclusion more appropriately than by recalling the comment of Dr. Chalmers upon Mr. Foster's speculations; a comment as applicable to premature speculations of our generation as to the period of John Foster half a century ago. This passage is from a volume entitled, "Scriptural Readings": "I wish that

my friend, Mr. Foster, could have adjourned some of the difficulties which exercised him to the day when all things shall be made manifest. I greatly wish that he could have restrained his speculation on the duration of future punishment, and acquiesced in the obvious language, or at least the obvious, practical lesson and purpose of Scripture, upon this question—which was to cut off every pretext of postponing the case of their eternity from this world, and to press home on every unsophisticated reader of his Bible the dread alternative of now or never.”