



# TRUTH OR TRADITION

*The Battle of Every Age*

*Desmond Ford*

**H**e was a teacher, writer, and preacher, well known to many. Not yet fifty he struck at traditional prejudices and refuted a long-cherished traditional doctrine. He did it in a sacred place cherished by the faithful, and in the presence of the faithful. In so doing, he awakened a storm which was to continue for

years. Strangely, few, if any, of the real scholars of his communion "muttered or peeped." At least 99 percent of them saw no reason to reject what some administrators and many of the laity classified as heresy. The reverberations crossed the broad waters and stirred the minds of believers around the world. The preacher was



maligned and classified among those who sought to destroy the most holy faith.

Yet he continued to minister for years. The latter end of his ministry was more blessed than the first, and had much wider impact.

### Frederic William Farrar

Who? Frederic William Farrar, Doctor of Divinity. The place of his heretical proclamation? The historic Westminster Abbey. The time? November 11, 1877. The subject? His title was: "Hell—What It Is Not." And a little later came his book *Eternal Hope*, enlarging his thesis and including his sermon of November 11.

Hitherto, Farrar had been regarded as a minister of unquestioned orthodoxy and integrity. Now, if one listened to gossip, one would readily have concluded that he had entered into a covenant with the demons of hell, and sold his soul like Faust of old. He was accused of many things that those who knew him well knew to be false. His real words were twisted and perverted and given a meaning he had never intended. So he wrote his book. He reasoned that if anyone really wanted to know what he believed, they could find it by reading rather than by listening to rumors.

The story has often been told, and his own account is found in the volume *That Unknown Country* to which he had contributed Chapter Thirteen. There he tells what happened on that dull, drizzling day. He had walked in the rain from his home to the church, fully conscious of the gravity of what he was about to do. Here are his words:

I had to repudiate a doctrine which had been more or less universally preached by the majority of Christians for fifteen hundred years. I knew that to do so was an act which would cost me dear. I knew that during six centuries of the history of the present Abbey it was probable that no sermon had been preached which even greatly modified much less repudiated with indignation, that popular teaching about hell which seemed to me a ghastly amalgam of all that was worst in the combined errors of Augustinianism, Romanism, and Calvinism.

### Farrar's Heresy

In essence, he was to assert that he did not believe and "no Christian ought to believe,—in any Hell, which can be proved to imply something very much more inconceivable, and something very much more revolting to the reasoned conscience, than anything which is alluded to in Scripture." (*Eternal Hope*, p. xiii.)

He would not assert the heresy of Universalism, though he did hope that a majority of mankind might be saved. (Sadly, the present writer does not share his hopes.) Neither was he to deny the possibility of continued misery for those who willfully persisted in impenitence. The essence of his message was that the popular view of present and eternal hellfire for the lost is not a

biblical teaching. He quoted Jonathan Edwards to disagree with him—"The view of the misery of the damned will double the ardor of the love and gratitude of the saints in heaven." He repudiated the popular notion that "hell is a vast and burning prison in which the lost souls of millions and millions writhe and shriek forever, tormented in the flame that never will be quenched." Farrar repudiated the infamous words from Jonathan Edwards:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell much in the same way as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked.

The world will probably be converted into a great lake or liquid globe of fire, in which the wicked shall be overwhelmed, which shall always be in tempest, in which they shall be tossed to and fro, having no rest day or night, vast waves or billows of fire continually rolling over their heads, of which they shall ever be full of a quick sense, within and without; their heads, their eyes, their tongues, their hands, their feet, their loins and their vitals shall forever be full of a glowing, melting fire, enough to melt the very rocks and elements. Also they shall be full of the most quick and lively sense to feel the torments, not for ten millions of ages, but forever and ever, without any end at all.

In his own sermon Farrar asked his congregation to "conceive an everlasting toothache, or an endless cautery, or the incessant scream of a sufferer beneath the knife, that would give you but a faint conception of the agony of Hell." And, of course, he believes in no such place.

### The Horror of Hell

The preacher's words were strong. Talking about the popular descriptions of hell, he declared:

I repudiate these crude and glaring travesties of the awful and holy will of God; I arraign them as ignorantly merciless; I impeach them as a falsehood against Christ's universal and absolute redemption; I denounce them as a blasphemy against God's exceeding and eternal love! And more acceptable, I am very sure, than the rigidest and most uncompromising self-styled orthodoxy of all the Pharisees who have ever judged their brethren since time began—more acceptable by far to Him, the friend of publicans and sinners, who, on His cross, prayed for His murderers, and who died that we might live—more acceptable, I say, by far, than the delight which amid a deluge of ruin hugs itself upon the plank which it has seized—would be the noble and trembling pity—so fearfully unlike the language of divines and schoolmen,—which made St. Paul ready to be anathema from Christ for the sake of his brethren; which made Moses cry to his God at Sinai, "Oh, this people have



sinned: and now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written." (*Eternal Hope*, pp. 72-73.)

In the preface to his book, written within less than a year of the preaching of the famous sermon, he poured out his heart to all:

How any man with a heart of pity in him—any man who has the faculty of imagination in even the lowest degree developed—can contemplate the present condition of countless multitudes of the dead and of the living viewed in the light of such opinions; how he can at all reconcile them either with all that he learns of God and of Christ in Scripture and by inward experience;—how—as he walks the streets and witnesses the life of our great cities—he can enjoy in this world one moment of happiness however deeply he may be convinced of his own individual salvation—is more than I can ever understand. (*Eternal Hope*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.)

Farrar also points out there were few among the clergy he knew who actually preached the orthodox doctrine. He declares it was chiefly ignored even if occasionally given lip service by a word or a phrase or two. Indeed, he claimed that most of the learned in their beliefs were very close to himself.

Between me and the great majority of our most learned clergy and theologians,—between my view and that of many of our wisest and most respected bishops,—the differences are very small; and only lie within that range of opinions in which such differences are absolutely permissible. (*Ibid.*, p.xxx.)

### Three Dangerous Words

In his sermon at Westminster Abbey, the learned preacher's chief complaint was that the popular understanding of three words found in the King James Version, namely, "damnation," "hell," and "everlasting" was erroneous. Said he:

I say, unhesitatingly,—I say, claiming the fullest right to speak on this point,—I say, with the calmest and most unflinching sense of responsibility,—I say, standing here in the sight of God, and of my Saviour, and it may be of the angels and spirits of the dead that not one of these three expressions ought to stand any longer in our English Bibles, and that, being—in our present acceptance of them—in the notion (that is) which all uneducated persons attach them—simply mistranslations. ... The verb "to damn" in the Greek testament is neither more nor less than the verb "to condemn," and the words translated "damnation" are simply the words which in the vast majority of instances the same translators have translated, and rightly translated, by "judgment" and "condemnation." The word *aionios* sometimes translated "everlasting" is simply the word which, in its first sense means agelong....; and which is in the Bible itself applied to things which have utterly and long since passed away; and is in its second sense something "spiritual"—something above and beyond time, as when the knowledge of God is said to be eternal life. So that when, with your futile billions, you foist into this word *aionios* the fiction of endless time, you do but give the lie to the mighty oath of that great angel, who set one foot upon the sea, and one upon the land, and with hand uplifted to heaven swore by Him who liveth for ever and ever that "time shall be no more." And finally in the Gospels and Epistles the word rendered hell is in one place the Greek "*Tartarus*," borrowed as a name for the prison of evil spirits, not after but until the resurrection; in five places "*Hades*," which simply means the world beyond the grave; and in twelve places "*Gehenna*," which means primarily the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, and which, after it had been polluted by Moloch-worship, corpses were flung and fires were lit; and is used, secondarily, as a metaphor, not of fruitless and hopeless, but—for all at any rate but a small and desperate minority—of that purifying and corrective punishment which, as all of us alike believe, does await impenitent sin both here and beyond the grave. (*Ibid.*, pp. 77-80)

Dean Farrar often quoted from those who believed in conditional mortality. He was not in total accord with such, but was very sympathetic. He fully agreed with them there was no present burning hell for the lost. He had a considerable understanding of human nature and was able rightly to speak of "that inveterate prejudice, passing into second habit by centuries of tyrannous tradition, as invincible to all but the noblest soul." He knew also that the fear of hell is not the source of virtue and high motives for a noble life. Instead it is useless as a long-term deterrent. In our own time those trying to warn about the perils in promiscuity have found that fear acts like a drug. Like a drug its influence is temporary only.

Farrar believed that the doctrine of hell brought infidelity and temptation and misery to men. Hell appealed to the lowest motives and the lowest characters, making people the willing subjects of sad and "often puerile superstitions." (*Preface*, lxi.)





We have one more admonition from Farrar, and our list from him is complete.

Phrases which belong to metaphor, to imagery, to poetry, to emotion, are not to be formulated into necessary dogma, or crystallised into rigid creed. Tested by this rule, nine-tenths of the phrases on which these views are built fall utterly to the ground. But even were this otherwise, yet, once more, in the name of Christian light and Christian liberty;—once more in the name of Christ's promised Spirit;—once more in the name of the broadened dawn, and the day-star which has arisen in our hearts;—I protest at once and finally against this ignorant tyranny of isolated texts which has ever been the curse of Christian truth, the glory of narrow intellects, and the cause of the worst errors of the worst days of the corrupted Church. Tyranny has engraved texts upon her sword; Oppression has carved texts upon her fetters; Cruelty has tied texts around her faggots; Ignorance has set knowledge at defiance with texts woven on her flag. Gin-drinking has been defended out of Timothy, and slavery has made a stronghold out of Philemon. The devil, as we all know, can quote texts for his purpose. They were quoted by the Pharisees, not once or twice only, against our Lord Himself, and when St. Paul fought the great battle of Christian freedom against the curse of Law, he was anathematised with a whole Pentateuch of opposing texts. But we, my brethren, are in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. Our guide is the Scriptures of God in their broad outlines;—the Revelation of God in its glorious unity;—the Books of God in their eternal simplicity, read by the illumination of that Spirit of Christ which dwelleth in us, except we be reprobates. Our guide is not, and never shall be, what the Scriptures call "the letter that killeth;"—the tyrannous realism of ambiguous metaphors, the asserted infallibility of isolated words. But if this must be made simply and solely a matter of texts;—if, except as a dead anachronism, we mean nothing when we say, "I believe in the Holy Ghost!"—if we prefer our sleepy shibboleths and dead traditions to the living promise, "I will dwell in them and walk in them;"—then by all means let this question be decided by texts alone. I am quite content that texts should decide it. Only, first, you must go to the inspired original, not to the erroneous translation; and secondly, you must take words, and interpret words in their proper and historical significance, not in that sense which makes them connote to you a thousand notions which did not originally belong to them; and thirdly, you must not explain away, or read between the lines of the texts which make against the tradi-

tional view, while you refuse all limitation of those on the misinterpretation or undue extension of which that view is founded. Now I ask you, my brethren, where would be these popular teachings about hell—the kind of teachings which I have quoted to you and described—if we calmly and deliberately, by substituting the true translations, erased from our English Bibles, as being inadequate or erroneous or disputed renderings, the three words, "damnation," "hell," and "everlasting"? (*Ibid.* pp. 71-77.)

### This Special Edition

And why, some may ask us, are you turning to this subject in this month's magazine? First, because many will recognize the parallel between the good Dean's experience and that of others who have protested heresies over the centuries. Second, I believe the time is drawing near when the whole of evangelicalism in this country will be stirred over this very issue. We say, "in this country" advisedly. Many Bible scholars in Europe have already gone on record as agreeing in essence with the positions we have quoted from the former Dean of Westminster Abbey.

Looking at the current scene in America, we find several similarities with the situation in England in the nineteenth century. First, even those ministers who profess to believe the doctrine of a present, endless burning hell rarely preach upon it. You and I know men, Christians of unquestioned integrity, whom God is mightily using to proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who believe in an existing hell of fire and torment. Yet they rarely make it the subject of their discourses before local congregations or in the media. We must ask why this is so. Some may remember the history of Aaron Burr after hearing a sermon on hellfire. He declared as he left the church, "I believe God is a great deal better than many people believe." And when the famed Robert Ingersoll heard a similar sermon his reaction was, "If that's God, I hate Him."

Second, many of our brethren who preach the everlasting gospel so well are fully assured it is the love of God that binds souls to their Maker. They know fear does not bind the soul to God.

Third, we are sure that for some of them there are considerable doubts about a biblical basis for the traditional teaching on hell.

We at GNU have purposed to pursue the subject further. We are willing, should the Lord so indicate, to do so even in public meetings. We are willing to publicly discuss the topic of hell with any proponents of differing viewpoints. ❖

