THE NOTION OF A CLERGYMAN

Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Ghost

It is necessary to give a brief account of the following tract, which is now published for the first time.

It was intended to be published at the time; but the printer and publisher shewed it privately to some of the influential Clergy before it was published, and I was surrounded and entreated not to publish it – I cannot really, at this distance of time, say by whom – and gave way. We can all understand – at least, any who have had deep convictions on points which affect the whole standing of the church of God – how – however deep internal convictions of any such truths may be – a serious and conscientious mind may hesitate as to putting forth what may shock the feelings of many godly persons, and violates established order; and in such matters all ought to be not only conscientious but serious, have the fear of God, and not merely an opinion on that which may work deeply in the minds of any, and affect so sacred a thing, the only sacred thing in the world, as the Church of God. It never therefore appeared. Nor do I, though it may appear to be weakness in myself, regret it at the hands of Him who makes all things work together for good to them that love Him.

I have a deep, abiding conviction that the building up of good can alone give lasting blessing, not the attacking evil. I would press it on every one who seeks good.

I had not the most distant feeling of enmity against any, nor against the Establishment [the Church of Ireland]; I loved it still, I looked at it as a barrier against Popery.

When I left it, I published the tract on "The Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ". [See Part One.] Every one knows, and for myself it is a matter of profound sorrow, and a sign of approaching judgment, that it has ceased to be such a barrier, and, for many, has been the road into it, and that infidel principles have been judicially pronounced to be fully admissible in it.

Christians are thrown – where Paul originally threw them when warning them of the perilous times of the last days – on the word of God, and knowing of whom they have learned anything; as to which we have this word of the Apostle John, "he that is of God hears us" – not tradition, not the fathers in numberless folios, but "us" – not development nor decrees of violent and clashing councils, but "that which was from the beginning", and, I add, the infallible faithfulness of an ascended Lord. But we are thus cast on great principles, I mean scriptural principles and truth. Of this the presence of the Holy Ghost is a cardinal one.

I may add as that which led to this – I mean as to the truth itself in my own soul, that – after I had been converted six or seven years, I learned by divine teaching what the Lord says in John 14, "In that day ye shall know … that ye [are] in me, and I in you" – that I was one with Christ before God, and I found peace, and I have never, with many shortcomings, lost it since. The same truth brought me out of the Establishment. I saw that the true Church was composed of those who were thus united to Christ; I may add, it led me to wait for God's Son from heaven; for if I was sitting in heavenly places in Him, what was I waiting for but that He should come and take me there?

The infinite love of God flowed early into my soul in this process which the Lord was carrying on. Previously I had had, from the first, the deepest possible convictions of sin, and had known and after some years taught that Christ alone could fill up that abyss, but not that He had.

I had passed in the deepest way, fasting – a thing which, I believe, if spiritually used, may be most useful – but then in a legal spirit, and in an elaborate system of devotedness, sacraments, and church-

going, through what is now called Puseyism; but had found that Christ and not that could give peace, but had not found it; I sought it, looked for the proofs of regeneration in myself, which can never give peace, rested in hope in Christ's work, but not in faith, till I found it, as I have stated, when laid by for some time, by what is called accident, from outward labour. The presence of the Spirit of God, the promised Comforter, had then become a deep conviction of my soul from scripture. This soon after applied itself to ministry.

I said to myself, if Paul came here, he could not preach, he has no letters of orders; if the bitterest opponent of his doctrine came who had, he would, according to the system, be entitled.

It is not a wicked man slipping in – that may happen anywhere – it is the system itself. The system is wrong. It substitutes man for God. True ministry is the gift and the power of God's Spirit, not man's appointment. I state merely the great principle. This principle, with a process and with a delay the details of which I cannot recall, and which are immaterial, was under deep pressure of conscience, the source and origin, as a principle, of the following tract – printed, I suppose, now seven-and-thirty years ago. There will be found immaturity in it in expression. The sin against the Holy Ghost, though universally used, is not a scriptural expression.

Every sin a Christian commits is a sin against the Holy Ghost; for the Holy Ghost dwells in him, and he grieves that Holy One by whom he is sealed to the day of redemption.

But the principle is one of deep importance, one on which the status of the Church and the Christian depends – the security of the one, as well as that by which he is responsible and judged in his walk, and the ground of judgment of the other.I did not save myself in any way by not publishing it. It was soon bruited about, and of course held, that I charged each clergyman with the sin against the Holy Ghost, which the tract itself entirely disclaims.

It is a question of the dispensational standing of the Church in the world – a statement that that depends wholly on the power and presence of the Holy Ghost, and that the Notion of a Clergyman contradicts His title and power, on which the standing of the Church down here depends. It is the habitation of God through the Spirit. Scripture is clear, that if the Gentiles do not abide in God's goodness, they will be cut off like the Jews.

It equally predicts a falling away, which is not continuing in God's goodness. I believe these times are hasting greatly. I add, that there may be no mistake, that I have an absolute confidence in the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus, the great Head of the Church, that what He builds will endure and be translated to heaven, when God judges the corrupt and evil system – which He as certainly will do – which bears His name, and Christ Himself becomes in glory the blessed witness of His unchangeable faithfulness and love.The doctrine of the church as the house of God – Eph. 2, and 2 Tim. – became developed in my mind much later; and I add here, that I believe the confounding the Church, as man built it, as committed to his responsibility – 1 Cor. 3 – resulting in the great house, with Christ's building – though the former be God's building responsibly in the world – and attributing the privileges of the body to all that are in the house, is the origin of the corruption, which has defiled, and for which God will judge the guilty, professing body with His sorest judgment.

The tract is given as it was printed at first. As I have spoken of myself – always a hazardous thing – I add that at the same period in which I was brought to liberty and to believe, with divinely given faith, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, I passed through the deepest possible exercise as to the authority of the word: whether if the world and the Church – i.e., as an external thing, for it yet had certain traditional power over me as such – disappeared and were annihilated, and the word of God alone remained as an invisible thread over the abyss, my soul would trust in it. After deep exercise of soul I was brought by grace to feel I could entirely. I never found it fail me since. I have often failed; but I never found it failed me.

I have added this, not, I trust, to speak of myself – an unpleasant and unsatisfactory, a dangerous thing – nor do I speak of any vision, but because, having spoken of the presence of the Holy Ghost, if I had not brought in this as to the word, the statement would have been seriously incomplete.

In these days especially, when the authority of His written word is called in question on every side, it became important to state this part also of the history.

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In the statement which I make here, I make no rash or hasty expression of feeling, but what I believe the Lord would press upon the minds of Christians, and that which they must receive: the converse of it He might, winking at the ignorance, bear with in practice, while it did not interfere with and oppose the purposes of His grace, but He cannot when it does. The statement which I make is this, that I believe the "Notion of a Clergyman" to be the sin against the Holy Ghost in this dispensation.

I am not talking of individuals wilfully committing it, but that the thing itself is such as regards this dispensation, and must result in its destruction. The substitution of something else for the power and presence of that holy, blessed, and blessing Spirit, [is the sin] by which this dispensation is characterised, and by which the unrenewedness of man, and the authority of man, holds the place which alone that blessed Spirit has power and title to fill, as that other Comforter which should abide for ever. If the "Notion of a Clergyman" has had the effect of the substitution of anything which is of man, and therefore subject to Satan, in the place and prerogative of that blessed Spirit exercising the vicarship of Christ in the world, it is clear, that however the providence of God may have overruled it, in the ignorance which He could wink at, it does, when stood upon and rested in against the presence and work of the Spirit, become direct sin against Him – pure, dreadful, and destructive evil – the very cause of destruction to the church.I must be observed here to say nothing whatever against offices in the Church of Christ, and the exercise of authority in them, whether episcopal or evangelical in character.

It were a vain and unnecessary work here to prove the recognition of that on which scripture is so plain.

But they are spoken of in scripture as gifts derived from on high: "He gave some apostles", Eph. 4: 11; so in 1 Corinthians 12, they are known only as gifts.

My objection to the "Notion of a Clergyman" is, that it substitutes something in the place of all these, which cannot be said to be of God at all, and is not found in scripture.

Now, I believe the whole principle of this to be contained in this dispensation in the word clergyman, and that this is the necessary root of that denial of the Holy Ghost which must, from the nature of the dispensation, end in its dissolution. I am quite aware that people will say, that this is not the sin against the Holy Ghost, that it may amount to resisting the Holy Ghost, but sin against the Holy Ghost is quite another thing.

It is not so much another thing as people suppose. At any rate the cause of the destruction of the Jewish system was this very thing: "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye".

I am perfectly satisfied, that however this dispensation may be prolonged in order to the gathering of souls out of the world, of God's elect, it has sealed its destruction in the rejection and resistance of the Spirit of God. But I go a great deal farther, and I affirm, though that were sin enough, that the "Notion of a Clergyman" puts the dispensation specifically in the position of the sin against the Holy

Ghost, and that every clergyman is contributing to this. The sin against the Holy Ghost was the ascribing to the power of evil that which came from the Holy Ghost: and such is the direct operation of the idea of a "Clergyman".

It charges the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the Spirit gives by the mouth of those whom He chooses, whom they are pleased to call laymen, and the righteousness of conduct which flows from the reception of that testimony, with disorder and schism.

I beg to say here, I do not allude to any modern assumption of the possession of extraordinary spiritual gifts.

Now, God is not the author of confusion or disorder, nor of schism, but the enemy of souls is; and to charge the plain testimony which the Holy Ghost gives concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and the effects which it produces, with disorder and schism, is to charge the work of God with being evil, and from the evil one.

But if clergymen have the exclusive privilege of preaching, teaching, and ministering communion, which they claim, and which is the very sense and meaning of their distinctive title, then must it be all evil.

That is, the "Notion of a Clergyman" necessarily involves the charge of evil on the work of the Holy Ghost, and therefore, I say, that the "Notion of a Clergyman" involves the dispensation, where insisted upon, in the sin against the Holy Ghost. Sinners are converted to God, souls called out of darkness, the truth preached with energy and love to souls, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, in the constraint and constancy – in whatever weakness – of the Redeemer's love: men are gathered from evil and wickedness – for I will put the fullest case my adversaries could wish – into the communion of the Lord's love, to bear witness to their sole dependence on His dying love; and this is producing confusion and schism – of which God is not the author, but Satan – because they are not, nor are brought together by, clergymen! What is this but to charge the work of divine grace with proceeding from, and having the character of, the author of evil, which is blasphemy? and this is the immediate and direct effect, the necessary effect, of the notion – the exclusive "Notion of a Clergyman".And this is a thing of very common operation where a number of unconverted clergymen are; and how common this is, yea, how it is the case in a large majority of instances, is well known.

There all the operations of God's Spirit are charged with confusion and schism; and therefore I affirm, that the idea of a "Clergyman", that is, of a humanly appointed office, taking the place and assuming the authority of the Spirit of God, necessarily involves – in its condemnation of what the Holy Ghost does do – in the sin against the Holy Ghost: and I defy any one to shew how it can be otherwise … The "Notion of a Clergyman" consists in acknowledg-ing that, as the source of authority, which, they admit, is not appointed by God at all …Now, the deference and obedience to a spiritual pastor will be just in proportion to the right feeling – to the holiness of mind of the Christian; but in the same proportion will his idea of a clergyman be weakened, and will he judge according to what they are, if they assume any office circumstantially connected with the name.

The value attached to it is a purely worldly thing: a thing of this world, with the pretence of religion in its external character, which is just the destruction of the church – the essential characteristic of apostasy.Let us consider it in its actual operation. If we go to India, the difficulty to be got over, the persons to be soothed and won, so that the gospel should not be hindered, are the clergy; I speak of nominal Christianity in India, as on the Malabar Coast and their Catanars.

Go to Armenia; the difficulty would arise from precisely the same quarter.

Carry the gospel in its power, where would difficulty be anticipated? – from what quarter? From the

clergy. At best, they must be conciliated. Go to Egypt amongst the Copts: the same thing just is true.

Go to the churches in Palestine, and wherever the Armenian Church is spread, the facts are the same.

I do not say, they may not in any case be conciliated; but that the opposition to the truth, when it exists, arises from them.

Go to the Greek Church: it is precisely the same. Their Papas, or priests, the ministers and sustainers of all the corruption and evil of the church, are the great hindrance to all missionary and spiritual exertion.

Their churches are fallen; therefore they proportion-ately estimate the clergy, and they do not the gospel.

But the opposers and hinderers, the persons whose influence is dreaded, are the clergy. Let us look now at the great western body, which is called the church, the Christendom of the world – the vine of the christian profession. Whence is the difficulty in preaching the gospel? Where is the grand barrier of opposition to Christ in His gospel? It is at once known and felt. The word would be echoed by every one familiar with the subject.

But surely we are not to identify the wilful resisters of the truth with those who preach and forward it.

In this point they are identified, they are both clergy, they have both precisely the same title; if a Protestant clergyman has title to this, or whatever title to respect he has, the Roman Catholic priest has the same. I am not talking of mine or any one's estimation of it, but of facts.

And this is so much the case that a priest joining the Established church, whatever his motive might be, acquaintance with or ignorance of the truth, would be at once a clergyman of the Establishment.

His clerical character existed before and his person merely was transferred from one to the other. Nothing could more clearly mark the identity of the two characters.

Their title the same confessedly, the same by the acknowledgment that the title which they insist on distinctively is the same as, and no other than as, it is derived from those whose apostasy and opposition to the truth is the ground of judgment on the vine of the earth, the nominal church of God.

If I am bound to acknowledge the one, I am bound to acknowledge the other in the same title and office.

They are their own witnesses that there is no difference between them in title as clergymen.

Whether the ministry of the priests come from God their "mission" they may determine. But, that we may let no part of the world escape our notice, turn to Protestant Germany.

Who are the hindrances, the bars to the gospel – to truth there finding its way among the people? The clergy. Consult any missionary reports, or continental reports, or Jewish reports, or a Home Mission Society: and the clergy will be universally found to be the hindrances to the propagation of the truth …One question may remain, Why press such a point now? I answer; first, because it is truth. God's truth is always profitable, and the testimony kept up by it in the world. But further, because these things have been brought to such a pass by the prevalency of this very notion that nothing remains but to rescue the saints out of its effects before the tide of Papal power which is founded on it, set in in its full and subduing strength.

Men must rest on the Lord or sink into it. If the notion of a clergyman be anything but evil, dissociation from it is but schism and evil.

But if the work of the Holy Ghost be not evil, then, is that which assumes to condemn it, and charge evil upon it, most evil of all things; and that is the position in which every clergyman stands by virtue of his title, and which is involved in the very notion of a clergyman: the essence of its name, the sign and distinctive name of apostasy and rebellion against God … And let us for a moment look at what the word means, and we shall very remarkably find the same great characteristic mark of apostasy upon it: the substitution of a privileged order whom man owned for the church which God owned, and the consequent depression of the church and the despisal of the Holy Ghost in it, or blasphemy against it.

What does clergy mean? It means in scripture the elect body, or rather bodies, of believers, as God's heritage, as contrasted with those who were instructors, or had spiritual oversight over them; and it is used in the place where the apostle warns such against ever assuming the place in which – in much worse than which – the ministers have now put themselves; for they are not merely lords over, but the whole "cleroi" themselves. The present use of the word is precisely the sign of the substitution of ministers in the place of the church of God: as men are accustomed to speak of "going into the church".

Now, all this is of the essence of apostasy: power attached to ministry, and its becoming the church in the eye of the world, so that the world can save itself the trouble of being religious by throwing it on the clergy, and so the church and the world be all one thing, and irreligious people do for the church as laity, because religion is the clergy's business, and, if theirs, nobody's – for they do not want it for irreligious laymen – and thus that which has the name of the church, being really the world, serves to exclude and set aside the operations of the Spirit of God in His children as schism and evil; and who is to decide?

The church; but they are the world: and will the world ever receive the Spirit of God? It cannot.

What then? They hold themselves, of course, the church; they have the clergy, which is God's church in their estimation; and the Spirit of God and His work are voted schismatic.

Such is the real and simple meaning of the word clergy so used. But to produce the passage in scripture – Be not "lords, over God's heritage", says Peter, to the elders or instructors; that is, over God's clergy – to give it in its English form of letters, "cleroi".

The bodies of Christian believers were called God's "lots" – the meaning of the original word "cleros" – answering to Deuteronomy 9: 29. Now the clergy have assumed to themselves to be God's lot only, but the only use of clergy in Scripture is, as applied to the laity if you please, contrasted with ministers: charging these to assume no lordship.

Now, the substitution of the clergy for the church is the very moral power of apostasy.

But this is contained, indelibly contained, in the very word in its present use, be they Roman Catholics or Protestants: that is, we find the assumption of clericalism, the secret love of many a fair-held name, to be really, in its character and operation, the sin against the Holy Ghost, and the formal character of the apostasy.

How often have we heard from the mouth of a minister or clergyman – "My flock", as if it were a virtue, so to think: while it is a shocking blasphemy in fact – I do not say wilfully so – which an apostle would never for a moment have thought of daring to utter or assuming to himself. It was God's flock which they might be given to oversee – Christ's sheep which they might be entrusted with a portion of a – "cleros" – lot, to feed and guide. To call them their sheep, or their flock, was to

put themselves in the place of God or His Christ; but they do so because they are clergy – they count it their title as clergy – they would be as gods. Will they say that they are God in the face of them that slay them [the sheep]? I have the utmost affection and value for many of the individuals among the body designated as clergy; and many doubtless there are unknown to me.

But this is not an individual question, but one affecting the divine glory and the whole order of the church – one which is the necessary result of its departure from God, and the form into which that departure was matured and has developed itself; and its present practical result is, that the things by which the Spirit of God would bless the world, or them in it is charged, by virtue of this name, with being that of which Satan is the immediate author; and thus the name and title of the body become the concentration of that which, by its denial of the Holy Ghost and gratuitous blasphemy against Him, brings destruction, necessary destruction, on all to which it is attached. How this came to be so is plain enough, without wearying any one with a parade of learning.

The church had confessedly apostatized, and the structure of the apostasy, that wherein it consisted, remained precisely what it was when the truth came in, with this single difference – that the king took the place of the pope in the appointment of persons to offices in the church, and the control of its arrangements. The church, originally, sunk gradually into worldliness, until it embraced the world, and the world became its head.

The world could not manage spiritual office: it could manage formal, local authority; it arranged these authorities, and did so.

For a length of time, in the prevalence of ignorance and superstition, the nominal offices of the church had more power than secular strength; when this ceased to be the case, civil power re-assumed the supremacy, but the structure remained the same: governing, contending, or governed, the same thing remained.

The world, in authority, arranged geographical secular power – leaving its influence over superstitious feelings to be what it might – so that it might be an available instrument in its hand to manage the world in its mass, not in Christ's to minister to and guide the church. Whether the Establishment has sufficient of this influence to be of any use to the State, is exactly the question agitated at this moment. But what has the church of God to do with this? I cannot see.

It is merely a compound of secular influence and remaining superstition, by virtue of which the church is bound up with the world, and all its real energies cramped.

This system, or structure, goes by the name of clergy, whether it be the pope, or from the pope down to the lowest curate, who may be entitled, by virtue of it, to hold a place in the world which otherwise he may not have had; or if a Christian, to labour in some field where his labours may be ill-employed, and his usefulness thrown away; but the church is lost in it.

I admit, as fully as any one can do, that many of the clergy are most valuable men. They may have eminent gifts for various offices, which the exigency of the times may require; but the effect of this system, by which they form part of this great worldly structure, is to deprive them of the opportunity to stir up, or to bar the exercise of, whatever gifts God may have made them partakers of. The operation of the Reformation was to introduce a statement of individual faith, and to break off, generally, all without the limits of the Roman Empire, from the immediate power of Rome and Popery.

It in no way separated the church from the world, but the contrary; and, while it changed the relations, left the principles of the structure just where it was.

The King's Arms took the place, in the rood-loft, of the image of Christ.

Christ and His Spirit ruled in neither case, save in honour. I verily believe, that the principle of a clergyman, as it is part and parcel of the structure of popery, will reintroduce the power of popery as far as the name of religion remains; for as it hangs on the doctrine and principle of succession, not on the presence of the Spirit, there is no ground on which a Protestant minister, as a clergyman, can prove his title, which does not validate the title of the Pope and his followers more even than his own.

His happening to have right doctrine does not make him a clergyman; his having false doctrine does not make him not one.

The layman or dissenting minister, who holds the same doctrinal truth, is not a clergyman.

The popish priest, who conforms to the Church of England, is not ordained to become so: he has that already which makes him a clergyman.

Nay, in point of fact, the truth was not preached in the Church of England for the greater period of its distinct existence; and in the vast majority of instances the clergy still do not preach the truth; and the rest of the body would not allow them to be Christians at all. Is it not manifest that the term clergyman, of such amazing influence on the minds of men, is the distinctive title of that association which has grown up from the decay of the church, and now forms the common though varied ground of its association with the world, and a hindrance to cramp the operation of God's Spirit; the cementing title of that vine of the earth, which is cast into the wine-press of the wrath of God; and which charges evil upon the operations of the Spirit of God, as rebellion to its authority, not acting within its limits, or in conformity to its secular arrangements and appropriations of service, appropriations of territory formed neither by, nor with reference to, the Church of God at all; and when the Spirit of God operates by individuals within its limits – for God chooses whom He chooses – making them at once schismatics from their brethren, who do not comply with their geography, or acknowledge authority which they pretend to reverence – because it is of the system – but really despise, and violate at the same time all the arrangements, for the sake of which they are rejecting their godly and faithful brethren? If it were not for this term "Clergy", the link and bond of the great evil of the earth, and of pernicious influence over the minds of men, where would be the occasion of schism, save in that which is ever to be subdued?

Or where would be the opportunity to charge the fruits of God's Spirit upon the author of confusion?

Or what else is it that consummates the occasion of judgment to the system – of which it has taken the place of the energy and spirit – and always opposed the blessing? Has there, I will ask, ever been an opposition to, and hindrance of, the truths of God, of which the clergy have not been the human authors, and in which they have not been the real and active agents? The clergy, then, is the specific title which identifies the church and the world, not God and the church; and as the world necessarily denies, rejects, and will blaspheme the Holy Ghost, because it is the world, and cannot receive it, the tendency of this name is solely to involve the church, corporately, in the same thing, and is to be viewed as the grand evil, the destroying evil, of the day.

What is the remedy? The recognition of God's Spirit where it is – personally seeking for that holiness and subjection of spirit which will discern, own, and bow to its guidance and direction, and hail its blessing as the hand of God, wherever it operates, in the measure and way it does so – that other Comforter sent to abide with us, whatever else did, for ever; and working in obedience, that we may possess its joy – boldness, as against all that grieves it – against joining the world, which cannot own or receive it – or denying the truth, of which it is the witness. The Lord give us to discern things that differ, and to separate the precious from the vile.

J. N. Darby.