



The Heresy Hunt. The heresy hunt is the very expressive if somewhat vulgar and inaccurate title that has been allotted by the press and public of the North Island to the action of the Auckland Presbytery in objecting to certain doctrines being preached by a recognized member of their church. 'As was inevitable,' said the Professor, 'public sympathy has, to a great extent, been with the delinquent, if we may so call him, and a good deal of vapouring about narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and persecution has been heard from the man in the street. This is, I take it, due entirely to misapprehension of the true circumstances of the case. Let us for a moment endeavour to see the matter from the point of view of the principle involved, leaving on one side the utterly unimportant individual concerned.'

The Case in Brief. A certain Presbyterian minister is alleged to have preached certain doctrines and proposed certain beliefs which are not in accordance with the Presbyterian faith. He has used a Presbyterian church for the purpose, and is being paid as a Presbyterian teacher. The attention of the government of the Presbyterian body has been directed to the matter, they have made certain enquiries, and signified their decision

that if the allegations are true the said minister must either desist from propagating ideas which are not those of the Presbyterian order, or must go elsewhere to do so. Surely there is little "hunting" here. If this man—Mr Neil—were being driven from pillar to post merely for preaching certain doctrines and denying certain dogmas, it would be a disgraceful thing, an infringement of the liberty of thought and speech—an unheard of occurrence nowadays. But he is not. Mr Neil has perfect liberty to preach what he likes, but he is not allowed to preach it where he likes. He was chosen, and solemnly swore to preach a certain formula of religion which a section of society believe to be the best. In order that they may be taught and guided according to this formula, this section of society—in this case Presbyterians—build themselves churches, and these churches are handed over to men who have solemnly declared themselves believers in the Presbyterian doctrine; and since man cannot live on nothing, money is provided to keep them in more or less comfortable circumstances.

Not 'What' Was Preached, but 'Where.' But after a time one of these said teachers, who has been allotted a teaching place and a livelihood, finds that he no longer believes in the doctrine he is sworn to disseminate. It is manifest he cannot go on propagating belief in which he has himself lost faith, upholding dogmas which he has begun to regard as mischievous and wrong. He must preach the word as it is revealed to him. To do otherwise would be base and dishonest. But, on the other hand, having discovered that his faith is no longer that in which he was ordained, no longer that for the teaching of which he was provided with a church and a livelihood, is he not bound in honour to relinquish both church and livelihood, which are no

longer honestly his? For, most assuredly, they are not. A Presbyterian church is erected for the teaching of Presbyterian doctrines, and if the minister in charge changes his opinions, he is absolutely unjustified in using that building for his own purpose, or indeed any other purpose than that for which it was put up.

The Approval of the Congregation no Justification. Nor can it be admitted that the approval of even a majority of the congregation affects the ethics of the question. If the parson has changed his belief, and if he has the sympathy of a majority of his congregation his course is clear. He must leave the church in whose teaching he no longer believes, and taking his followers with him, found some other. No possible blame could attach to such a proceeding, it would, indeed, commend the admiration of broad-minded men and women as the straightforward declaration of religious independence. There is, moreover, another phase to the congregation argument. A man may obtain a magnificent church in a magnificent position by the confession of a certain faith. Once installed, his faith changes, and he preaches the old congregation out of the church, while at the same time he fills it to overflowing with a new one who never contributed one farthing towards the erection of the building, while those who did so for the specific purpose of having certain doctrines taught, are driven out in the cold. Their remonstrances are met with defiance and insult. "You can go elsewhere. I will hold this pulpit and you may go, and I will get a new congregation." It needs no logic to understand the gross injustice and dishonesty of such a proceeding, or the stupidity of calling the ejection of such a person persecution.

The subject is perhaps not one which can be discussed in detail in this place. A misconception existed which I have endeavoured to set right. A quantity of sympathy was wasted over a persecution, so-called, which was no persecution, and a wrong idea of the principle involved in the inquiry was prevalent. Whether Mr Neil's formula of religion or that of the Presbytery is correct is a subject on which it would be unwise, indeed, to embark. There are probably no two men whose religious views exactly tally, and a religious discussion invariably ends in bitterness and vexation of spirit.

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