



## The Burning Bush—Online article archive

### An answer to the challenge of an ecumenical Presbyterian minister



Regent Street Presbyterian Church, Newtownards

The Belfast Telegraph, a sort of unofficial, self-appointed publicist for ecumenism, carried a “Thought for the weekend” article from the pen of Presbyterian minister, Allen Sleith, of Regent Street church in Newtownards. It appeared on January 17th, just before the commencement of the annual “Week of prayer for Christian unity.” In the article Mr. Sleith takes up the issue of the “unity of the Church.” He issues a challenge saying, “to anyone who is opposed to, or apathetic towards the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,

or other similar ventures in the field of what is variously called ‘inter-church relations’ or ‘ecumenism’ or ‘fellowship,’ I wish to put a series of questions for further reflection and possible discussion: . . . ” I would like to reply to Mr. Sleith’s challenge.

These are his five questions directed to those who oppose the concept of modern ecumenism. I will quote them in full and give my response to them.

(1) “How do you read, and practically respond to, the many ‘all’ and ‘one’ passages that reside in the New Testament? Are they to be ignored, suppressed or twisted?”

***Absolutely not! I believe them all.***

(2) “If you still insist on emphasising the Biblical texts that urge separation from other communities who also take the name of Christ at the expense of those texts that speak of the unity of the community, otherwise known as communion or fellowship, how then do you express and embody the unity of the Church? In other words, show us that you’re not just a suspicious sect!”

***That I will happily do at the end of this article.***

(3) “Might it not be the case, irony of ironies for ‘true Bible believers’, that the way in which you interpret Scripture is not quite so pure or sound or spiritual as you suppose but is, in fact, more indebted to, and determined by, a particular ‘tradition’ of interpretation than you care to admit, thus, and perversely, denying the Holy Spirit the freedom to shape your understanding of the text?”

***No. We are more concerned with the perversion of the Word of God by sneering pseudo-intellectuals such as yourself!***

(4) “How is the Church’s message of reconciliation heard in the world when the Churches are still not reconciled within, and to, each other?”

***Again, I will deal with that matter fully at the end of this article.***

(5) “And in case anyone thinks I’m being hard on the ‘hardliners’ and letting others off lightly - what are you, the reader, whoever you may be, doing to love God, and neighbour, and self - and in that order?”



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***We would wish anyone concerned about the well-being of those against whom Mr. Sleith has been firing off these powder-puff missiles, to cease their anxiety since what he obviously deems to be a hard-hitting assault, is more akin to being savaged by a dead goat!***

### Answer

We would like to address those portions of God's Word, to which Mr. Sleith makes a passing reference, in which the unity of God's people is dealt with. Mr. Sleith claimed that he had not the space to "interpret at length such crucial Biblical texts as John 17, Ephesians 4, Colossians 1 and a whole host of others . . ." That is a pity, since had he done so, we may have doubtless seen the lengths to which an ecumenist must go to twist, force, misapply, misrepresent and misinterpret the Word of God, in order to justify the false thesis propounded by ecumenists.

Let us start where Mr. Sleith suggests that he would have started his defence of ecumenism, John 17.

I presume that Mr. Sleith would put forward the standard view of the ecumenist that this chapter contains a call to unity which requires every professing believer in Christ to come together in an organic unity. Protestants of every denomination are required by Christ (it is alleged) to seek to settle their differences with Roman Catholicism, the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, unitarianism, and the host of other shades of 'Christianity' which exists throughout the world, and become an organic whole.

### Not so

That is not what John 17 teaches. It has never been considered to be the teaching of John 17 throughout the history of the people of God. Most certainly, Mr. Sleith's Presbyterian forebears, in the days when the blessing of God was very evidently upon the Presbyterian church in Ireland and Scotland, never considered this to be the teaching of John 17. Just what does Christ pray for?

**He prays for His elect.** Christ calls them ". . . the men which thou (His Father) gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me," verse 6.

**He prays for those identified by their relationship to the Word of God.** ". . . they have kept thy word," verse 6. "For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me," verse 8. "I have given them thy word," verse 14.

**As well as praying for the apostles, Christ prays for future generations of those whom He identifies by their belief in the Word of God.** "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their (the apostles') word," verse 20.

**For these who are united to Christ through faith in His Word, Christ prays that they may be united together.** "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are," verse 11. "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have



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*given them; that they may be one, even as we are one,"* verses 21-22.

Thus Christ is praying for His elect, given Him of the Father, to whom He had given the words of the Father, the gospel of grace, and they had received God's Word and believed it. The unity of that people we utterly believe in and contend for, Mr. Sleith!

### Ephesians

Let us move on to Ephesians 4. I presume that Mr. Sleith is referring to verses 3-6. *"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."* Again, we believe these verses and what they plainly say. Let me summarise the contents of these verses: A spiritual unity EXISTS within the body of believers who have been called by the one gospel to faith in the one God and Father of all, and who have been placed by the baptism of the Spirit in to that body by an operation commonly called regeneration. It is the duty of believers *"with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love,"* verse 2, to *"keep"* (Greek = take care of, preserve) the unity already in existence.

### Colossians

Let us move on to Colossians 1: 18-23. I am presuming again that these are the verses to which Mr. Sleith is referring. *"And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister."* Again we believe these words without equivocation. Here is our summary of their meaning so that none may be in doubt as to what we believe. In Christ, the Head of the body of believers, the church, all the fulness of grace dwells. Through Him alone are found reconciliation and peace with God, through the merits of His atoning blood shed at Calvary, by those who were by nature and practice aliens and enemies of God. This reconciliation with God is the experience ONLY of those who believe and continue in the doctrines of the gospel preached by the apostles throughout the world.

### Other texts

Mr. Sleith refers to no other texts but, perhaps, in order to remove any doubts about our submission to the Word of God on the matter of true Christian unity, we could look at 1 Corinthians 1:10. *"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."* Or maybe Philippians 1:27. *"Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one*



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*spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."* Or again, 1 Peter 3:8. *"Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous."* We must also refer to Galatians 3:26-29. *"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

All of these texts, and there are many more, plainly indicate that which we have already deduced from John 17, Ephesians 4 and Colossians 1, namely that a blessed unity exists already between all true-born children of God who have been brought into that unity by the operation of the Holy Spirit through faith in the Christ presented in the gospel, and it is the duty of such to maintain that unity.

### **False unity**

Of course, nowhere in these texts, or anywhere else in the Bible, is it taught that those who reject the Word of God and devise a system of redemption that is utterly divorced from the Word of God, even though it may employ the terms of Holy Writ, have any part in this blessed unity in Christ. That is what Mr. Sleith and his fellow-ecumenists would have us believe. He believes that the Roman Catholic church is part of this unity as are Unitarians, idolaters, sodomites and all the other Bible-deniers who abound within the ecumenical movement! Let us recall just who was part of the united body for whom Christ prayed. "I pray for them" Who? They to whom Christ says that He gave *"the words"* which His Father had given Him. They who *"received"* the Word given by Christ, John 17:8. They were believers of the gospel. Christ also prayed for those who would believe on Him through the witness of the apostles, John 17:20. In other words, converts of the gospel through subsequent ages. They, and they alone, enjoy this unity within the body of Christ.

### **Rejectors**

Therefore, those who reject the gospel, such as Roman Catholics, cannot be part of this unity. All efforts to include such are utterly in defiance of the words of Christ. It testifies to the blindness of Mr. Sleith, not to mention his defiant arrogance, that he, and others like him, would twist the very words of Scripture which proclaim the exclusion from the body of Christ of all who reject the teaching of the gospel, in order that they might promote the very opposite of the teaching of Christ. One can only marvel again at the folly and brashness of sinful man. Mr. Sleith's attack upon the views of those he sneeringly calls "true Bible-believers", is of course an attack upon the very views that he himself swore to uphold. This is something most ecumenists of the "Protestant" variety would wish their adherents not to know. Mr. Sleight, as a Presbyterian minister, professes to believe the doctrinal standards of that denomination, the Westminster Confession of Faith. That Confession, in setting forth the teaching of the Bible, clearly states that Roman Catholicism is guilty of engaging in religious practices which are "abominably injurious to Christ's only sacrifice (chapter 29, paragraph 2), by its offering up of the Mass. Since that act is absolutely central to the worship of the Roman Catholic church, it is clear that historic Presbyterianism viewed Romanism as something that was abominable and injurious to the cross of Calvary. Again, the Confession of Faith teaches that Christ is the ONLY Mediator between God and sinful man, chapter 8, paragraph 1. That makes the Roman Catholic system guilty of idola-



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try, since it teaches that Mary and a host of others are also to be sought and prayed to as mediators.

Mr. Sleight defies his own avowed faith in seeking to promote modern ecumenism. But once more, the Confession of Faith declares that the head of the Roman Catholic system, the pope, is "that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition . . ."

Why does Mr. Sleight seek unity with such and castigate those who say that it cannot be God's will and it is nowhere taught in the Bible, that we should seek such unity?

Christians must not be deceived by the pratings of Mr. Sleight. He and all who share his views are terribly mistaken and are teaching a most grievous error.

The duty of the child of God is to keep "*unspotted from the world,*" James 1:27. We are commanded to "*have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them,*" Ephesians 5:11. The logic of such a stance is set forth by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. "*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.*" The concluding verses of that passage clearly indicate that upon our separation from such a false unity depends our enjoyment of the blessings the Father has for His children. christian, consider! Let every Christian who longs for revival and for days of blessing to return to this land, consider if the pursuit of the unholy unity advocated by Mr. Sleight, is not a central cause of the demise of true religion in this Province, so blessed through the witness of Presbyterianism in generations past?

The revival-enjoying Presbyterianism of former times was not pursuing union with Rome but a deeper fellowship with Christ.

All who truly believe the Bible must disassociate themselves from Mr. Sleith and his ilk and obey the call to "come out from among them, and be ye separate." That is the word God would have us think about in the aftermath of another week of prayer for 'Christian Unity' that has seen, again, the follies of false ecumenism displayed.