

Thoughts on Wesley's The Catholic Spirit

SERMON 39 - CATHOLIC SPIRIT

"And when he was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him: And he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered, It is. If it be, give me thine hand." 2 Kings x. 15.

1. IT is allowed even by those who do not pay this great debt, that love is due to all mankind; the royal law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," carrying its own evidence to all that hear it: And that, not according to the miserable construction put upon it by the zealots of old times, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour," thy relation, acquaintance, friend, "and hate thine enemy:" Not so; "I say unto you," saith our Lord, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children," may appear so to all mankind, "of your Father which is in heaven; who maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

Wesley's discussion of the catholic spirit is framed as an issue of love. That we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is a clear command of Jesus (and a command Jesus took from the Old Testament). The other elements of the catholic spirit are subservient to the command to love one another. Are there limits on who counts as our neighbor? Wesley's clear that there are not. One might expect him to draw on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan here, but he instead draws mostly on the Sermon on the Mount.

One of our challenges is that partly because of the success of Christianity over the past few centuries, our culture widely recognizes love as something good. The word doesn't always mean the same thing to each person or in each group. Many of us have had people use the word to try to manipulate us: "If you love me, you will..." If we take Jesus as our primary model of what love looks like in a human life (which obviously has some limitations, since Jesus never married and never had children, two arenas in which we are prone to think about love), then we can see that his way of loving did not universally make everyone happy. His loving people, whether in the crowds, in the company of disciples, or in his biological family, did not lead him to do whatever they wanted or to affirm everything they wanted or did.

Questions to consider:

- To what degree are conflicts and differences in your church framed as issues of love?
- How have you learned to love well in the face of differences?
- What influence has God's universal love, even toward sinners who care nothing for God, had on your own practice of loving others?
- What do we learn from Jesus about love that may be different than what our culture tells us about love?
- How do we avoid manipulating others (or being manipulated) with love talk?

2. But it is sure, there is a peculiar love which we owe to those that love God. So David: "All my delight is upon the saints that are in the earth, and upon such as excel in virtue." And so a greater than he: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another: As I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John xiii.

34, 35.) This is that love on which the Apostle John so frequently and strongly insists: "This," saith he, "is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." (1 John iii. 11.) "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: And we ought," if love should call us thereto, "to lay down our lives for the brethren." (Verse 16.) And again: "Beloved, let us love one another: For love is of God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love." (iv. 7, 8.) "Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." (Verses 10, 11.)

Wesley recognizes a narrow span for a more intense love. We are to have special love for those who are our fellow Christians, for others who love God. One strategy to avoid this clear teaching is to argue that our opponents, even though they *claim* to love God, do not really do so. After all, Jesus also said, "If you love me, keep my commands... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me." (John 14:15, 21) We are tempted to think, "These people who differ from me are *not* obeying Jesus' commands so they must not really love God. They *say* they love God, but if they really loved God they would obey the commands just like we do."

Questions to consider:

- What is the current state of love within your circle of Christian friends? Within your congregation?
- What challenges to love are you experiencing in your congregations?
- What deficiencies or impairments do you see in your congregation's history that were caused by defects or failures of love?
- What excuses are people around you tempted to make to avoid the seriousness of Jesus' love commands?
- What's a step your congregation could take to love each other better?

3. All [people] approve of this; but do all [people] practise it? Daily experience shows the contrary. Where are even the Christians who "love one another as He hath given us commandment?" How many hinderances lie in the way! The two grand, general hinderances are, First, that they cannot all think alike; and, in consequence of this, Secondly, they cannot all walk alike; but in several smaller points their practice must differ in proportion to the difference of their sentiments.

Wesley proceeds with description. We have the clear command of Jesus; we see that the command is not being obeyed. We don't have to watch the news to see the failure of love – we see it in our "daily experience." He identifies two impediments to love: we don't all think alike, we don't all act alike.

Questions to consider:

- Why do thinking and acting differently lead to failures of love?
- In your experience of church how have you seen the failure of love produced by failure to think alike or act alike? Does your congregation have a history of having love derailed by particular disagreements or conflicts? Have those disagreements and conflicts been recognized as such and dealt with?
- When conflicts and differences arise, are you more inclined to acknowledge them or to pretend they're not there?

- How can we bring our practice of love more into line with our claims about love?

4. But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union; yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.

Wesley speaks of “entire external union.” In his context this would be the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the various Congregationalists – and maybe even the Catholics – coming together into a single church. He seems to think such a union of what we call “denominations” to be very unlikely. There exist, between these denominations, differences in “opinions” and “modes of worship” that prevent “external” – can we say “institutional?” – union.

Difference and institutional division are (at least currently) unavoidable. In this sermon Wesley is not writing against that division. But given such division, is mutual love and affection still possible? We’ve already seen that Wesley believes it’s commanded by Jesus. Though love across lines of division may be difficult, even unexpected by the world, Wesley is convinced it’s possible. This love across institutional boundaries and lines of difference is not just a theoretical love, a love in word, but in “good works,” acting for the benefit of the other.

In the Methodist universe we currently experience divisions over theology, doctrine, worship, and practice. We have some who think John 14:6 states a core truth of the Gospel: Jesus is the only way to find reconciliation with God, so all people need to come to faith in him. We have others that think such an interpretation of that text is bigoted and to be avoided. To the former, preaching and teaching universal salvation (all are saved regardless of faith in Jesus) is repulsive because it would leave people liable to God’s eternal judgment. To the latter, preaching and teaching that Jesus is the only way is repulsive as a self-righteous claim that people who by accident of birth have joined a church are superior to those who relate to God in other ways. We have some who think that because “love is love,” all relationships that are identified as rooted in love are to be affirmed. They are repulsed by the idea that our church would not marry any people who want to be married or ordain anyone who is truly called and adequately gifted and equipped for ministry. We also have some who are repulsed by the idea that our church would go against the clear teaching of scripture that marriage is solely a male plus female relationship or that we could consider ordaining pastors who are in and who promote a clearly unbiblical lifestyle.

Questions to consider:

- In your experience of church, what are some differences, whether of “opinion” or “mode of worship” that have created insuperable barriers to institutional unity with other churches?
- Given the existence of such barriers, what is your church willing to do with churches on the other side of the barrier?
- How central are the things that divide your church from others to your identity as a Christian? To your identity as a church?

- Turning the previous question on its side: Which beliefs and practices are so central to your identity as a church that you will think yourself a very different church if you were to change them? Which beliefs and practices, even if sincerely held and considered important, are less central?

5. Surely in this respect the example of Jehu himself, as mixed a character as he was of, is well worthy both the attention and imitation of every serious Christian. "And when he was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him. And he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered, It is. If it be, give me thine hand." The text naturally divides itself into two parts: — First, a question proposed by Jehu to Jehonadab: — "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?" Secondly, an offer made on Jehonadab's answering, "It is:" — "If it be, give me thine hand."

A first thing to notice is that at least in this case, Wesley's exegesis is not something we would cheer these days. He's building his sermon on a single line taken from the story. He at least recognizes the context, seeing that Jehu, the newly anointed King of Israel (the Northern Kingdom), isn't wholly admirable. While he did get rid of the worst idolatry that characterized the previous dynasty (Ahab's family), he was extremely bloody in his way of doing it. His question to Jehonadab, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?" was a prelude to the implicit follow up ("Or should I go ahead and kill you as I've been killing other people?"). Wesley likes the idea of their hearts being "right" and runs with it. We also might not want to consider what Jehonadab joins Jehu in doing – killing more people. Wesley would not approve of this particular mission or want the Methodists to take up the way of killing to advance God's mission.

There are multiple ways to generalize the question. Most immediate to Wesley's use is the personal. Jehu is inviting Jehonadab into personal relationship with him. Perhaps the question is missional, something like, "Are you seeking to fulfill God's mission as I am?" Jehu asks and Jehonadab responds, "I am," and they go their merry way to accomplish what they think God wants them to do. In this vein we can perceive tension between our liturgy and the way we experience church. When a person unites with a United Methodist congregation our question is, "Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?" In responding "I will," the Jehu being answered is not the pastor asking the question or the people in the space with whom the person is in actual relationship with. The "I will" is directed to the institution as a whole.

There is tension here because while we know what it is to be a member of an institution and to have that institution mediated to us by more local entities and assemblies, our usual and primary experience of the institution is precisely to those local entities and assemblies, to the people we know who constitute those entities and assemblies. The *Book of Discipline* may set forth a uniform way of being The United Methodist Church; the General Conference may be the entity which alone has authority to speak for the whole United Methodist Church; but most of us don't have personal experience of those things. We hear United Methodists and UM institutions speak and imply they are speaking for us all. Our organization as a congregation may be in line with the *Book of Discipline*, but we're on institutional autopilot in the day to day

operations of the church, until we come to points of conflict in which we need recourse to the *Discipline*.

Questions to consider:

- Does your church have a clear sense of its mission, of what God's called it to, and how it is to achieve that mission?
- Does your congregation have a broadly shared understanding of that mission, without deep conflict about its particulars?
- How has your congregation been doing at fulfilling its mission? Does your leadership have a practice of looking at where you are now in relation to where God is calling you?
- How do you introduce new people to your mission and bring them on board?
- How does your current experience of your denominational affiliation affect your sense of mission and your fulfillment of your mission? In what ways has it been a help? In what ways has it been a hindrance?
- How well does your congregation's sense of mission align with your current denomination's sense of mission?
- In what ways is your congregation's sense of mission changing, either as your mission field changes or as you come to know more about your mission field?
- In what ways do you and the people in your congregation experience The United Methodist Church beyond your local congregation? Are these experiences primarily in terms of personal relationships? In terms of interaction with printed materials, videos, or other media?
- Do you experience any tension between loyalty to the people in your local congregation and people in the larger institution? How do you deal with this unavoidable tension in a fruitful way?

I. 1. And, First, let us consider the question proposed by Jehu to Jehonadab, — "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"

The very first thing we may observe in these words, is, that here is no inquiry concerning Jehonadab's opinions. And yet it is certain, he held some which were very uncommon, indeed quite peculiar to himself; and some which had a close influence upon his practice; on which, likewise, he laid so great a stress, as to entail them upon his children's children, to their latest posterity. This is evident from the account given by Jeremiah, many years after his death: "I took Jaazaniah and his brethren, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rechabites, — and set before them pots full of wine, and cups, and said unto them, Drink ye wine. But they said, We will drink no wine; for Jonadab," or Jehonadab, "the son of Rechab, our father," (it would be less ambiguous, if the words were placed thus: "Jehonadab our father, the son of Rechab;" out of love and reverence to whom, he probably desired his descendants might be called by his name,) "commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye nor your sons for ever. Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any; but all your days ye shall dwell in tents. — And we have obeyed, and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us." (Jer. xxxv. 3-10.)

Jehonadab and his family were interesting characters. Wesley acknowledges this. They had opinions and practices outside the Israelite mainstream. Those opinions and practices, however, did not keep Jehonadab from joining Jehu in his mission.

Questions to consider:

- Does your congregation recognize the existence of opinions in the context of Christian faith, or is everything considered a matter of essential truth?
- How does your congregation currently experience and handle diversity of opinion? To what degree do people feel safe letting minority opinions be heard?
- To what degree and in what ways are diversity and tolerance seen as virtues in your congregation? To what degree and in what ways are they seen as vices?

2. And yet Jehu (although it seems to have been his manner, both in things secular and religious, to drive furiously) does not concern himself at all with any of these things, but lets Jehonadab abound in his own sense. And neither of them appears to have given the other the least disturbance touching the opinions which he maintained.

When I contract a plumber, electrician, or other home repair person, I don't ask what they believe about God. I want to know if they're competent, reputable, and affordable to do what I need done. Jehu's looking for competence and enough loyalty that Jehonadab won't turn and stab him in the back.

Questions to consider:

- What roles in your church are open to people who have wrong beliefs or aberrant practices? For example, imagine you have a person who is a docetist, believing Jesus was truly divine but only *appeared* to be human. What roles are open to this person: preaching? Teaching Sunday school? Ushering? Finance committee? Or suppose you have a person who believes adultery is fine if you really love the person?
- What roles, if any, are closed to people who are wrong in some significant way? How does your church think this through and apply the principles?

3. It is very possible, that many good [people] now also may entertain peculiar opinions; and some of them may be as singular herein as even Jehonadab was. And it is certain, so long as we know but in part, that all men will not see all things alike. It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding, that several men will be of several minds in religion as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world and so it will be "till the restitution of all things."

Wesley rightly recognizes that we are limited in our knowledge. Because of human finitude we cannot know or understand everything. Because of human sin, a reality that affects every individual and every institution, our acts of knowing and understanding can be warped or distorted.

Questions to consider:

- In what ways does your congregation recognize the limits of human knowledge and understanding?

- In what ways does your congregation recognize the fallibility of human knowledge and understanding?
- What are some examples of when you or your congregation have had to commit epistemic repentance (that is, you've come to see you were wrong and you've changed your ways)? (Example: Once upon a time many Christian believers had and operated on a conviction that churches should be segregated on the basis of race. Repenting of this idea is appropriate.)
- To what degree are you and your people immersing yourselves in scripture so you can have a sharpened perception of how God operates? Do you read with others (including those outside your community, tradition, and time) to lessen the possibility you're reading your own opinions into the Bible rather than reading what is there?

4. Nay, farther: Although every [person] necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true; (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it;) yet can no [person] be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true. Nay, every thinking [person] is assured they are not; seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: "To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity." This, therefore, he is sensible, in his own case. He knows, in the general, that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes, he does not, perhaps he cannot, know.

Wesley makes an important and too often ignored observation here. It is natural and inescapable for us to think our opinions taken individually are correct. It takes very little analysis or human experience, however, to conclude that if we were wrong at some point in the past, we are likely wrong about something today.

Questions to consider:

- What error checking practices do you have in your life? In your congregation?
- Given the reality of human error, how do you pursue your mission with the required boldness, tenacity, and alacrity?
- Who are models of humility that you look toward as examples you can learn from?

5. I say, perhaps he cannot know; for who can tell how far invincible ignorance may extend? or (that comes to the same thing) invincible prejudice? — which is often so fixed in tender minds, that it is afterwards impossible to tear up what has taken so deep a root. And who can say, unless he knew every circumstance attending it, how far any mistake is culpable? seeing all guilt must suppose some concurrence of the will; of which He only can judge who searcheth the heart.

"Invincible ignorance" can also be thought of as "willful" or "stubborn" ignorance. It's the attitude that says, "Don't confuse me with the facts." Given the negative partisanship of our age, we are especially prone to this defect. We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that our opponents are wrong, so we MUST be right. We refuse to contemplate the possibility that anything they say could be true or helpful.

Questions to consider:

- Have you ever recognized your own ignorance? Are there areas in which you'd prefer to remain ignorant?

- Is there ever virtue in being ignorant? Or, what are some possible situations or conditions in which being ignorant, even willfully ignorant, can be a good thing?
- What are some ways you've learned to move beyond the strongly dualistic position that says something like, "Our group is only and always right, while that other group is always and only wrong?"
- How do you expose yourself to people who differ from you so you might learn from them?

6. Every wise [person], therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, "Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"

This looks like an application of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We would like others to treat us with respect and not coerce us to do that which is repugnant to us or manipulate us into doing their will.

Questions to consider:

- What are some experiences you've had of someone forcing their opinion/belief/conviction on you? How did the experience make you feel?
- To what degree would you rather people argue and reason with you rather than just tell you what to do?
- What are some possible situations in which unity of belief and shared actions are so essential that belief should be compelled? What makes these situations different from those in which we allow people to come to the correct conclusion on their own?

7. We may, Secondly, observe, that here is no inquiry made concerning Jehonadab's mode of worship; although it is highly probable there was, in this respect also, a very wide difference between them. For we may well believe Jehonadab, as well as all his posterity, worshipped God at Jerusalem: Whereas Jehu did not; he had more regard to state-policy than religion. And, therefore, although he slew the worshippers of Baal, and destroyed Baal out of Israel; yet from the convenient sin of Jeroboam, the worship of the golden calves, he departed not. (2 Kings x. 29.)

Jehu was better than Ahab and the other descendants of Omri. He rejected Baal and the Baal worship of that previous dynasty. He didn't turn away from the heterodox worship practices instituted by Jeroboam son of Nebat, the first king who ruled in the north. Wesley observes that none of this came into explicit consideration for Jehonadab.

Questions to consider:

- What are the most constitutive worship practices and beliefs for United Methodists? Do any of these differentiate us from other denominations? Do proposed alternative Methodist ecclesial bodies propose changes in these?
- In various times and places United Methodists have made much of doctrinal and theological pluralism: does the conviction that pluralism is a good thing extend to our liturgical and liturgical practices? Why or why not?

- What is the relationship between worship and believing? Between worship and our Christian practices beyond worship?
- What wrong worship practices – and beliefs about worship and about worship practices – do United Methodists tolerate? Should we be tolerating these? Why or why not?

8. But even among [people] of an upright heart, [people] who desire to "have a conscience void of offence," it must needs be, that, as long as there are various opinions, there will be various ways of worshipping God; seeing a variety of opinion necessarily implies a variety of practice. And as, in all ages, [people] have differed in nothing more than in their opinions concerning the Supreme Being, so in nothing have they more differed from each other, than in the manner of worshipping him. Had this been only in the heathen world, it would not have been at all surprising: For we know, these "by" their "wisdom knew not God;" nor, therefore, could they know how to worship him. But is it not strange, that even in the Christian world, although they all agree in the general, "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth;" yet the particular modes of worshipping God are almost as various as among the Heathens?

Wesley makes a descriptive claim: worship practices differ among Christians. In 18th century England the contrasts were primarily between Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Catholics.

Questions to consider:

- From what you've experienced, are differences in worship primarily based on denominational differences? To what degree is worship the same across all the Methodist churches you've experienced?
- To what degree do regional, generational, and cultural differences form our worship practices? To what degree *should* these differences form our worship practices?

9. And how shall we choose among so much variety? No man can choose for, or prescribe to, another. But every one must follow the dictates of his own conscience, in simplicity and godly sincerity. He must be fully persuaded in his own mind; and then act according to the best light he has. Nor has any creature power to constrain another to walk by his own rule. God has given no right to any of the children of men thus to lord it over the conscience of his brethren; but every man must judge for himself, as every man must give an account of himself to God.

We see Wesley's individualist conviction here. Each person is accountable to God, so all people should be free to operate in line with the dictates of their own conscience.

Questions to consider:

- How do we experience individual choice in religious practice within our churches? What are the limits we put on individual choice? Some examples: When we use a bulletin in worship, does that mean we all need to sing the same song at the same time and in the same way?
- What are limits that churches, whether local congregations or denominations, put on individual choices?

- How do we act collectively *and* maximize individual choice?
- Under what conditions do we recognize that allowing individual conscience to guide our actions may cause division within groups?

10. Although, therefore, every follower of Christ is obliged, by the very nature of the Christian institution, to be a member of some particular congregation or other, some Church, as it is usually termed; (which implies a particular manner of worshipping God; for "two cannot walk together unless they be agreed;") yet none can be obliged by any power on earth but that of his own conscience, to prefer this or that congregation to another, this or that particular manner of worship. I know it is commonly supposed, that the place of our birth fixes the Church to which we ought to belong; that one, for instance, who is born in England, ought to be a member of that which is styled the Church of England; and, consequently, to worship God in the particular manner which is prescribed by that Church. I was once a zealous maintainer of this; but I find many reasons to abate of this zeal. I fear it is attended with such difficulties as no reasonable man can get over: Not the least of which is, that if this rule had took place, there could have been no Reformation from Popery; seeing it entirely destroys the right of private judgment, on which that whole Reformation stands.

Wesley recognizes the need for a diversity of churches for diverse people to align with. He does not contemplate the more individualistic position held by many today that Christianity is the kind of thing one can do entirely alone, without any church. Wesley is committed to "the right of private judgment" as he sees it displayed in the Protestant Reformation.

If we take Wesley at his word, we must conclude that institutions, even church institutions, can sometimes get things wrong. Being corrected, finding truer ways to align with God, is a good thing. Free exercise of "private judgment" *can* bring correction to institutions. Of course, private judgment can also lead institutions astray.

John Locke famously inclined us to think of church as just another "voluntary association" of like-minded individuals. Sociologically speaking, there's some truth in that. From a Christian point of view, we're greatly impoverished if we leave it there and miss that we are the Body of Christ bound together and united by the Holy Spirit.

Questions to consider:

- To what degree is private judgment allowed in your church? To what degree and in what areas is it encouraged? To what degree and in what areas is it discouraged?
- How do we teach people to exercise private judgment well and in a Christian way?
- How can a church maintain unity in the face of the exercise of private judgment? To what degree must action be coordinated (requiring at least partial relinquishment of private judgment) for a church to discern and accomplish its mission?
- How do we learn to submit our private judgment to the Spirit? How do we discern the calling and the work of the Spirit so we minimize the possibility we're just giving into peer pressure, cultural preference, manipulation, or the spirit of the age?

11. I dare not, therefore, presume to impose my mode of worship on any other. I believe it is truly primitive and apostolical: But my belief is no rule for another. I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, Are you of my Church? of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of

Church government, and allow the same Church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not, Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? nor whether, in the administration of baptism, you agree with me in admitting sureties for the baptized; in the manner of administering it; or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you, (as clear as I am in my own mind,) whether you allow baptism and the Lord's supper at all. Let all these things stand by; we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season; my only question at present is this, — "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"

The Wesley who says this is the same Wesley who gave very precise rules for singing. This is the same Wesley who insisted on controlling his "preaching houses," making sure they preached and maintained the right doctrines. His Model Deed, later the Deed of Declaration, and in our own experience, the "Trust Clause," all sought to ensure that Methodism remain Methodism. When clergy are admitted into full connection, we are asked a series of questions. These include: Have you studied the doctrines of The United Methodist Church? After full examination do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures? Have you studied our form of Church discipline and polity? Do you approve our Church government and polity? Will you support and maintain them? Wesley has affirmed private judgment – and I think the UMC does also. But private judgment has limits in the operation of the Methodist movement and the church that has flowed out of it.

When we consider Wesley as a whole, that is, not abstracting this single sermon from the rest of his work, we see that his focus here is love between people who are adherents of different churches, not how churches themselves operate.

Questions to consider:

- What does it mean to "impose a mode of worship" on another? How is non-imposition compatible with corporate worship?
- To what degree ought we to expect uniformity in Methodist worship?

12. But what is properly implied in the question? I do not mean, what did Jehu imply therein? But, what should a follower of Christ understand thereby, when he proposed it to any of his brethren?

Wesley is again admitting that he's not engaged in pure exegesis. Jehu asked the question in his context; now we are asking the same question in a contemporary Christian context.

The First thing implied is this: Is thy heart right with God? Dost thou believe his being, and his perfections? his eternity, immensity, wisdom, power; his justice, mercy, and truth? Dost thou believe that he now "upholdeth all things by the word of his power?" and that he governs even the most minute, even the most noxious, to his own glory, and the good of them that love him? Hast thou a divine evidence, a supernatural conviction, of the things of God? Dost thou "walk by faith, not by sight?" looking not at temporal things, but things eternal?

Having a "heart right with God" includes elements of believing, experiencing, and living. We believe certain things about God, not just about God's attributes but about God's current activity. We have experience, the supernatural perception of the things of God Wesley likes to call attention to (from Hebrews 11:1). We have the experience "walking by faith," that is, living

in terms of who God is and what God has done and is doing, rather than just in terms of the world.

13. Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, "God over all, blessed for ever?" Is he revealed in thy soul? Dost thou know Jesus Christ and him crucified? Does he dwell in thee, and thou in him? Is he formed in thy heart by faith? Having absolutely disclaimed all thy own works, thy own righteousness, hast thou "submitted thyself unto the righteousness of God," which is by faith in Christ Jesus? Art thou "found in him, not having thy own righteousness, but the righteousness which is by faith?" And art thou, through him, "fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life?"

In Wesley's age, deism was on the rise. Deism, roughly speaking, is the idea that God created everything and then stepped away to let things run. The god of deism is the wise and skilled clockmaker who built such a fine-tuned machine that it requires no intervention – that to claim otherwise is an insult to God's skills. A couple of euphemisms for the god of deism are personified uses of "Providence" and "Heaven." Providence and Heaven are Christian concepts, but to reduce God and God's action to them is not. In this paragraph Wesley goes beyond deism, claiming the centrality of Jesus. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see the Creator of the universe invading human time and space, becoming one of us. In Jesus we see God's covenant with Israel come to its climax. Faith in this Jesus is an essential part of Christianity for Wesley. We don't just believe in a god, we put our faith in Jesus. Having faith in Jesus is more than just believing such a person existed or even that he had valuable things to say. Having faith in Jesus includes trusting him with our lives, now and in eternity. Because he's the one who inaugurated the Kingdom of God, faith includes giving him allegiance *as King*. This King – the Lord Jesus Christ – invites us into relationship with him. He takes joy in our relationship with him. He isn't the kind of king who sits high and mighty on his throne, only occasionally taking time to give us attention.

Wesley is saying that we love not just theists, people who believe in a god – any god, but we love those who share our faith in and commitment to Jesus.

Questions to consider:

- How does your faith in Jesus influence your relationships with others?
- If we honor Jesus as Lord and King, how can we best live as an answer to his prayer in John 17 when we live in a world where division and separation sometimes feel not only natural but necessary?
- How did Jesus handle his relationships with people who disagreed with him? How can his example be a model for us?

14. Is thy faith energoumene di' agapes, — filled with the energy of love? Dost thou love God (I do not say, "above all things," for it is both an unscriptural and an ambiguous expression, but) "with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength?" Dost thou seek all thy happiness in Him alone? And dost thou find what thou seekest? Does thy soul continually "magnify the Lord, and thy spirit rejoice in God thy Saviour?" Having learned "in everything to give thanks," dost thou find "it is a joyful and a pleasant thing to be thankful?" Is God the centre of thy soul? the sum of all thy desires? Art thou accordingly laying up thy treasure in heaven, and counting all things else dung and

dross? Hath the love of God cast the love of the world out of thy soul? Then thou art "crucified to the world;" thou art dead to all below; and thy "life is hid with Christ in God."

When asked to identify the most important commandment, Jesus didn't go for one of the Ten Commandments. He went to passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, replying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus' disciples picked up on this correlation: True love of God is intimately connected with love of people. We see this in Paul, James, and John.

Questions to consider: Wesley asks great questions here and we would benefit from spending time with them.

15. Art thou employed in doing, "not thy own will, but the will of Him that sent thee?" — of Him that sent thee down to sojourn here awhile, to spend a few days in a strange land, till, having finished the work he hath given thee to do, thou return to thy Father's house? Is it thy meat and drink "to do the will of thy Father which is in heaven?" Is thine eye single in all things? always fixed on him? always looking unto Jesus? Dost thou point at him in whatsoever thou doest? in all thy labour, thy business, thy conversation? aiming only at the glory of God in all; — "whatsoever thou doest, either in word or deed, doing it all in the name of the Lord Jesus; giving thanks unto God, even the Father, through him?"

Again, Wesley's questions are sufficient. As you notice they are all appropriated nearly directly from scripture. One of the things we can learn from Wesley is to read scripture not just for information, not just for devotional thoughts, but for questions to apply to our lives and to our life together. The next paragraph fits this mold as well.

16. Does the love of God constrain thee to serve him with fear? — to "rejoice unto him with reverence?" Art thou more afraid of displeasing God, than either of death or hell? Is nothing so terrible to thee as the thought of offending the eyes of his glory? Upon this ground, dost thou "hate all evil ways," every transgression of his holy and perfect law; and herein "exercise thyself, to have a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward man?"

17. Is thy heart right toward thy neighbour? Dost thou love, as thyself, all mankind without exception? "If you love those only that love you, what thank have ye?" Do you "love your enemies?" Is your soul full of good-will, of tender affection, toward them? Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy? Do your bowels yearn over them? Could you "wish yourself" temporally "accursed" for their sake? And do you show this by "blessing them that curse you, and praying for those that despitefully use you and persecute you?"

Perhaps the most interesting line in this paragraph is Wesley's adaptation of Romans 9:3 where Paul, speaking of his deep love for his fellow Jews who were currently rejecting Christ, says, "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, those of my own race, the people of Israel." Paul is agonizing over the lostness of his own people — those who are now (at the time of his writing) where he was before he ran into Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul himself is echoing Moses agonizing over the people of Israel in Exodus 32:32. What makes Wesley's adaptation interesting is his addition of the word "temporally." Note that this is not the word "temporarily." The latter means "for a short time, soon to be ended." It's a common word we use all the time. The former is much less common.

“Temporally” means “in time.” I’d guess that Wesley means something like, “Could you wish yourself to not experience any of the benefits of life in Christ here and now, that is, prior to the enjoyment of that life in eternity?” We don’t see this limitation in scripture. Moses said, “Please now, forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” Paul’s language also has a finality that Wesley leaves behind.

Questions to consider:

- How much love would it take to be willing to spend eternity separated from God so that others might find life in Christ? What would that kind of love look like in a person’s life today?
- How do we determine who counts as our “neighbor?” When we look at Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, we see good reason to have an expansive understanding of neighbor. But given that we’re finite and have finite resources, how do we follow Jesus well in this area?
- What are some ways people in your congregation learn to love their neighbors? What are common impediments to learning to love?
- How have you learned to love your enemies, people who differ from you in important ways, people who insult you and annoy you? How can your congregation do a better job teaching people to do this?

18. Do you show your love by your works? While you have time, as you have opportunity, do you in fact "do good to all men," neighbours or strangers, friends or enemies, good or bad? Do you do them all the good you can; endeavouring to supply all their wants; assisting them both in body and soul, to the uttermost of your power? — If thou art thus minded, may every Christian say, yea, if thou art but sincerely desirous of it, and following on till thou attain, then "thy heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart."

II. 1. "If it be, give me thy hand." I do not mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not: I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." I cannot: It does not depend on my choice: I can no more think, than I can see or hear, as I will. Keep you your opinion; I mine; and that as steadily as ever. You need not even endeavour to come over to me, or bring me over to you. I do not desire you to dispute those points, or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Let all opinions alone on one side and the other: Only "give me thine hand."

If you read many of Wesley’s sermons you’ll notice he frequently make use of the pattern: Statement of his position, discussion of what he doesn’t mean, discussion of what he does mean. Here he’s entering the “here’s what I don’t mean” phase.

We could take time here to enter the deep conversation about belief formation and the ethics of belief. I’m trying to keep (complex) things short and simple. His claim is that opinions (we can use “beliefs” too) are not under our control. They happen, just as our sensory experience happens. I don’t think this is entirely the case and certainly isn’t in the long term. When we look at scripture we see Paul, for example, say things like, “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5) As we submit ourselves increasingly to Jesus, as we take up the way of discipleship and practice the spiritual disciplines that form us into his image, as we spend time in the Bible (reading, studying, memorizing, meditating), and as the Spirit works in us, our beliefs

and opinions – and even our senses! – will change. Our opinions don't (normally) "turn on a dime." But they do change and as we submit our knowledge and belief formation to Christ they will change.

Questions to consider:

- How do you usually respond when people tell you you have to change your opinion or belief? What kind of person and what kind of context would make you more open to such suggestion?
- Have you consciously submitted your belief/opinion formation to Christ? What disciplines have you taken up to submit to this work of the Spirit in your life?
- In what ways have you found yourself more in love, more devoted, to your opinions than to Christ? What steps of repentance should you consider taking to correct this?
- How is belief formation addressed in your congregation? How might you do a better job?

2. I do not mean, "Embrace my modes of worship;" or, "I will embrace yours." This also is a thing which does not depend either on your choice or mine. We must both act as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of Church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion. It appears to me, that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitable to your own judgment. My sentiment is, that I ought not to forbid water, wherein persons may be baptized; and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master: However, if you are not convinced of this, act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment upon any of the preceding heads. Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight. "If thine heart is as my heart," if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: "Give me thine hand."

Here's another sign that Wesley's focus is on love between, not within what we'd call "denominations." Of course, we're supposed to love each other within our churches and denominations! But we also must love across denominational lines. Institutional agreement, unity in beliefs, and a shared vision of mission are all good things and enable our institutions to do their jobs. But these features do not set the bounds of love.

Questions to consider:

- How do you and your congregation relate to believers in other churches? How healthy are these relationships?
- How do you keep from reducing your ideological opponents to "Straw men?" I've seen the traditionalists in our denomination characterized as "Baptists/Calvinists in disguise" (since we apparently know how BAD it is to be a Baptist or Calvinist). How do we avoid this kind of talk?

3. I mean, First, love me: And that not only as thou lovest all mankind; not only as thou lovest thine enemies, or the enemies of God, those that hate thee, that "despitefully use thee and persecute thee;" not only as a stranger, as one of whom thou knowest neither good nor evil; — I am not satisfied with this; — no; "if thine heart be right, as mine with thy heart," then love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother; as a brother in Christ, a fellow-citizen of the New Jerusalem, a fellow-soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same Captain of our salvation. Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint-heir of his glory.

4. Love me (but in a higher degree than thou dost the bulk of mankind) with the love that is longsuffering and kind; that is patient; if I am ignorant or out of the way, bearing and not increasing my burden; and is tender, soft, and compassionate still; — that envieth not, if at any time it please God to prosper me in his work even more than thee. Love me with the love that is not provoked, either at my follies or infirmities; or even at my acting (if it should sometimes so appear to thee) not according to the will of God. Love me so as to think no evil of me; to put away all jealousy and evil-surmising. Love me with the love that covereth all things; that never reveals either my faults or infirmities; — that believeth all things; is always willing to think the best, to put the fairest construction on all my words and actions; — that hopeth all things; either that the thing related was never done; or not done with such circumstances as are related; or, at least, that it was done with a good intention, or in a sudden stress of temptation. And hope to the end, that whatever is amiss, will, by the grace of God, be corrected; and whatever is wanting, supplied, through the riches of his mercy in Christ Jesus.

In these paragraphs Wesley is getting specific about what kind of love he's looking for.

5. I mean, Secondly, commend me to God in all thy prayers; wrestle with him in my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is wanting in me. In thy nearest access to the throne of grace, beg of him, who is then very present with thee, that my heart may be more as thy heart, more right both toward God and toward man; that I may have a fuller conviction of things not seen, and a stronger view of the love of God in Christ Jesus; may more steadily walk by faith, not by sight; and more earnestly grasp eternal life. Pray that the love of God and of all mankind may be more largely poured into my heart; that I may be more fervent and active in doing the will of my Father which is in heaven; more zealous of good works, and more careful to abstain from all appearance of evil.

Questions to consider:

- Do you notice again how Wesley's language is chock full of scripture and scriptural allusion? How can we shape our own language in that direction?
- Would you consider using this paragraph as a guide as you pray for others?

6. I mean, Thirdly, provoke me to love and to good works. Second thy prayer, as thou hast opportunity, by speaking to me, in love, whatsoever thou believest to be for my soul's health. Quicken me in the work which God has given me to do, and instruct me how to do it more perfectly. Yea, "smite me friendly, and reprove me," whereinsoever I appear to thee to be doing rather my own will, than the will of Him that sent me. O speak and spare not, whatever thou believest may conduce, either to the amending my faults, the strengthening my weakness, the building me up in love, or the making me more fit, in any kind, for the Master's use!

Wesley doesn't believe that "love" is the same thing as "nice." Real love, insofar as it shows real concern for the soul of others, seeks the other's best. When I'm wrong, I need people to tell me. Calling me to repentance is an act of love. For me, my band meeting is where I learn to do this.

Questions to consider:

- Why do you think God chooses to bring correction into our lives by means of other people rather than just doing it all supernaturally?
- Are you mature enough in Christ to desire correction from people who love you?
- How do we become the kind of people who offer and receive correction Christianly?
- In your experience, what are the prerequisites to having this kind of relationship with others?

7. I mean, Lastly, love me not in word only, but in deed and in truth. So far as in conscience thou canst, (retaining still thy own opinions, and thy own manner of worshipping God,) join with me in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand. And thus far, it is certain, thou mayest go. Speak honourably, wherever thou art, of the work of God, by whomsoever he works, and kindly of his messengers. And, if it be in thy power, not only sympathize with them when they are in any difficulty or distress, but give them a cheerful and effectual assistance, that they may glorify God on thy behalf.

Christians who love each other will join in the work of God. It might not be that we can do everything together, but we can do some things together, to advance the influence of the Kingdom of Christ.

8. Two things should be observed with regard to what has been spoken under this last head: The one, that whatsoever love, whatsoever offices of love, whatsoever spiritual or temporal assistance, I claim from him whose heart is right, as my heart is with his, the same I am ready, by the grace of God, according to my measure, to give him: The other, that I have not made this claim in behalf of myself only, but of all whose heart is right toward God and man, that we may all love one another as Christ hath loved us.

Wesley provides a brief summary of what he's said thus far.

III. 1. One inference we may make from what has been said. We may learn from hence, what is a catholic spirit.

There is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood, and more dangerously misapplied, than this: But it will be easy for any who calmly consider the preceding observations, to correct any such misapprehensions of it, and to prevent any such misapplication.

For, from hence we may learn, First, that a catholic spirit is not speculative latitudinarianism. It is not an indifference to all opinions: This is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being "driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine," is a great curse, not a blessing; an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. A man of a truly catholic spirit, has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. It is true, he is always ready to hear and weigh whatsoever can be offered against his principles; but as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any. He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavour to blend them into one. Observe this, you

who know not what spirit ye are of; who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. Be convinced, that you have quite missed your way; you know not where you are. You think you are got into the very Spirit of Christ; when, in truth, you are nearer the spirit of Antichrist. Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.

Only now does Wesley get to using the phrase “catholic spirit.” Many of us, good Protestants that we are, have a conviction that we are NOT Catholics. We’ve experienced discomfort with the creeds where we are expected to declare belief in “the holy catholic church” or that we believe in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Some complain at having to affirm the word, others just go silent. Perhaps we’ve learned that Wesley (and the creeds) isn’t talking about “ROMAN Catholicism,” that ecclesial entity subservient to the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. That’s NOT what Wesley or the creeds are talking about. In these contexts, “catholic” means “universal” or “pertaining to the whole.” We believe the true church is not “just us,” not just Methodists, not just American Christians, but all who have put their faith in Jesus and who are bound together by the Spirit. A “catholic spirit” – we might say “attitude” instead of “spirit” these days – means that we determine to be the kind of person who lives well in the universal body of Christ.

Wesley strongly affirms that a “catholic spirit” is not the same thing as “speculative latitudinarianism.” That’s a complicated phrase with the sense of “in terms of doctrine and theology, anything goes.” Doctrine and theology, what we believe, matters. It is this paragraph that makes me rejoice over the changes in our disciplinary statement on theology that took place in 1988. Before that time the official position of The United Methodist Church was a “pluralism” which seemed indistinguishable from what Wesley calls “speculative latitudinarianism.” It seemed as if any theological position was acceptable as long as it made reference to scripture, tradition, reason, and experience – however those were defined, or whatever content might be drawn from each.

Though the deep commitment to pluralism evident in the Discipline from 1972 until 1988 is no longer the official position of the church, it is still deeply felt as “our position” by many. We see it in the way the UMC marketing slogan, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” has been taken by some as a de facto doctrinal statement. As a doctrinal statement it is clearly minimalist. While Wesley is not looking for a maximalist doctrinal stance for the Methodist movement – and we may not be for the church – the current *Book of Discipline* does provide a more substantial picture of our doctrine.

The polar opposite of “speculative latitudinarianism” is something like what we call “fundamentalism.” This approach maximizes what is considered “essential doctrine,” often to the point where nothing is considered subject to legitimate diversity of opinion. Wesley and the Methodist tradition that has followed rejects this position as well.

Questions to consider:

- How well taught are you on basic Christian doctrine? In what contexts does your church teach doctrine?

- Does your church make any effort to differentiate between doctrine that is essential and that which is subject to legitimate diversity?
- In your experience of church which do you see as the greater temptation locally: a speculative latitudinarianism or fundamentalism? What about in the denomination beyond the local church?

2. From what has been said, we may learn, Secondly, that a catholic spirit is not any kind of practical latitudinarianism. It is not indifference as to public worship, or as to the outward manner of performing it. This, likewise, would not be a blessing, but a curse. Far from being an help thereto, it would, so long as it remained, be an unspeakable hinderance to the worshipping of God in spirit and in truth. But the man of a truly catholic spirit, having weighed all things in the balance of the sanctuary, has no doubt, no scruple at all, concerning that particular mode of worship wherein he joins. He is clearly convinced, that this manner of worshipping God is both scriptural and rational. He knows none in the world which is more scriptural, none which is more rational. Therefore, without rambling hither and thither, he cleaves close thereto, and praises God for the opportunity of so doing.

Where the last paragraph argued that a catholic spirit is not the same as saying “anything goes” with respect to doctrine and Christian belief, this one claims similarly that it is also not the same as saying “anything goes” with respect to Christian practice. As Methodists we have convictions about worship and liturgy and the shape of the Christian life. In many cases these convictions differentiate us from other denominations.

Questions to consider:

- How does your church inculcate Methodist convictions regarding worship, liturgy, and practice in its people?
- How does your church draw clear distinctions between Methodist teaching and the teaching found in other church traditions in practical matters in ways that promote love and humility alongside confidence?
- Given the internal conflict the United Methodist Church has had for decades, many have not trusted educational literature produced by the general church because of theological differences: how then can our churches recover genuine Methodist convictions in the face of using study materials created by other church traditions?

3. Hence we may, Thirdly, learn, that a catholic spirit is not indifference to all congregations. This is another sort of latitudinarianism, no less absurd and unscriptural than the former.

But it is far from a man of a truly catholic spirit. He is fixed in his congregation as well as his principles. He is united to one, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship. There he partakes of all the ordinances of God. There he receives the supper of the Lord. There he pours out his soul in public prayer and joins in public praise and thanksgiving. There he rejoices to hear the word of reconciliation, the gospel of the grace of God. With these his nearest, his best-beloved brethren, on solemn occasions, he seeks God by fasting. These particularly he watches over in love, as they do over his soul; admonishing, exhorting, comforting, reproving, and every way building up each other in the faith. These he regards as his own household; and therefore, according to the ability God has given him,

naturally cares for them, and provides that they may have all the things that are needful for life and godliness.

When we have a “catholic spirit” we are still committed to a particular congregation. We don’t live as if being a Christian is something we can do on our own. We commit to a church and dive in deeply, participating fully in its life.

Questions to consider:

- How does your church teach and encourage the communal nature of Christianity, i.e., that Christianity is a “team sport?”
- Our culture has seen a trend (accelerated by the pandemic) toward “spiritual but not religious,” or “Christian but not committed to a church.” What are some effective ways your congregation has stood against these trends? How have you maintained your own commitment to the church and life together with other disciples in the face of cultural forces pushing the other direction?

4. But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation, — his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection, neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character: Catholic love is a catholic spirit.

5. If, then, we take this word in the strictest sense, a man of a catholic spirit is one who, in the manner above-mentioned, gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart: One who knows how to value, and praise God for, all the advantages he enjoys, with regard to the knowledge of the things of God, the true scriptural manner of worshipping him, and, above all, his union with a congregation fearing God and working righteousness: One who, retaining these blessings with the strictest care, keeping them as the apple of his eye, at the same time loves, — as friends, as brethren in the Lord, as members of Christ and children of God, as joint-partakers now of the present kingdom of God, and fellow-heirs of his eternal kingdom, — all, of whatever opinion, or worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; who love God and man; who, rejoicing to please and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works. He is the man of a truly catholic spirit, who bears all these continually upon his heart; who, having an unspeakable tenderness for their persons, and longing for their welfare, does not cease to commend them to God in prayer, as well as to plead their cause before men; who speaks comfortably to them, and labours, by all his words, to strengthen their hands in God. He assists them to the uttermost of his power in all things, spiritual and temporal. He is ready "to spend and be spent for them;" yea, to lay down his life for their sake.

6. Thou, O man of God, think on these things! If thou art already in this way, go on. If thou hast heretofore mistook the path, bless God who hath brought thee back! And now run the race which is set before thee, in the royal way of universal love. Take heed, lest thou be either wavering in thy judgment,

or straitened in thy bowels: But keep an even pace, rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints, and grounded in love, in true catholic love, till thou art swallowed up in love for ever and ever!

In these last paragraphs Wesley has summed up his whole. When we have a “catholic spirit,” that means we love each other. We love each other across the boundary lines of culture, church, ethnicity, ideology, nation, etc. We love each other because we have all been made in the image of God. We love each other because God first loved us and gave his only Son for us.

Questions to consider:

- In what ways do you find Wesley’s picture of a “catholic spirit” attractive? In what ways unattractive?
- What are the biggest challenges you face as you seek to be a person of “catholic spirit?”
- What can your church do to help you and others develop a “catholic spirit,” a spirit of love for all?

[Indented text, commentary and questions to consider, are by Richard Heyduck (rheyduck@gmail.com); the rest is John Wesley, with the text taken from the Jackson Edition of his works, now in the public domain.]