

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#2):  
CATHOLIC SPIRIT”

(John 17:20-23)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-15-23]

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1. **[11am ONLY... ]** Read CEB Text: John 17:20-23 and Pray.
2. Last week we began a new series called “Christianity the Wesleyan Way,” in which we’re exploring our spiritual heritage as Methodist (or “Wesleyan”) Christians, and how our understanding and practice of that heritage can make a difference in our world today.

A--I began with the disclaimer that my goal in this series is not to make any of us into “good little Methodists,” but instead to help us to become *great* Christians, who just *happen* to have chosen the “Methodist/Wesleyan” *way* of living out our Christianity.

B--And while there *are* some unique aspects to that particular way of believing and living the Christian life that we’ll talk about in the coming weeks, today I want us to begin by focusing on things that we have *in common* with other Christian traditions (like Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and even other *Wesleyan* traditions like GMC, AME and Salv. Army), and how these commonalities can help us better relate to Christians from these *other* traditions.

C--Let me start with a brief “whirlwind” look at six key beliefs and practices that we as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians share along with other Christians around the world (and -- I should add -- these essentials *have not* and *will not* change, regardless of what you may have heard to the contrary from people who've left the UMC):

-II-

3. First and foremost, Methodists of all kinds (incl. UMC) share **a belief in the divine activity of God** – that God not only *exists*, but actively reveals Himself to and in our world today.
 

A--We sometimes express His presence in differing ways: we say God is “*Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*”; “*Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer*”; & the “*three persons of the Trinity*”.

B--But by whatever phrase, it’s an expression of our belief that God is active in our world, and expresses both Himself and His grace to us through various ways & forms.
4. We also believe that this **God loves and offers his mercy / forgiveness to ALL people**.

A--Biblical Christianity teaches that more than anything else, God wants a relationship with each and every of us, and is constantly seeking ways to reach us for that purpose.

B--As we'll learn next week, we Methodists (of all forms) call this "*Prevenient Grace*"-- other traditions have other names for it,<sup>1</sup> but the idea is the same: that God loves us and reaches out to invite us to have a relationship with Him.

5. Yet, along with other Christian traditions, we Methodists also believe that the fullest form of that relationship is made possible by way of **salvation through Jesus Christ**.

A--While there may be other expressions of God in our world, we believe that the *fullest* and most complete expression of God is revealed and made available to us through the necessity of a personal relationship with God's one and only son Jesus.

B--We (and other Christians) use a variety of terms to describe this: "*justification*," "*conversion*," "*new birth/born again*," being "*saved*" -- but they all describe the relationship that God wants us to have with Him through His son.

6. And by whatever phrase we use, we Methodists also believe that this **salvation faith exists to affect our way of life** -- it should make a difference in our actions & behaviors.

A--That is (as with other Christians), we believe that Christianity is *not* simply a philosophy or system of belief *about* life, but a *way of living* itself!

B--After all, Jesus *didn't* call his followers to be or make "*believers*," but to be and make "*disciples*"<sup>2</sup>-- so for us, Christian faith is not simply *intellectual*, but also *experiential*.

C--And while other traditions use words/terms to describe this aspect of Christianity,<sup>3</sup> we Methodists use terms like "*holiness*," "*sanctification*," and "*Christian perfection*."

7. So, from where do we get all of this? Well, like other Christians, we Methodists believe in **the authority and power of the Bible as God's living word** -- ...

A--...that through the inspiration of human writers, God chose to speak uniquely to humanity about how we find our way back home to Him.<sup>4</sup>

B--In that sense, we believe it's the *primary* (though not the *only*) source of authority for Christian belief and practice<sup>5</sup> -- which is why, along with other Christian traditions, we say that it is "*the word of God for all people.*"

8. Finally, we join other Christians in our belief that Jesus taught his followers to celebrate his presence regularly through **the practice of two (what we call) "Sacraments": Holy Communion** (sometimes called "*The Lord's Supper*" or "*Eucharist*"); **and Baptism**.

A--And even though the *manner* in which we celebrate these sometimes differs (and that some Christian traditions have more than two <sup>6</sup>), *all* of us celebrate at least these...

B--...Because they remind us of *who* we are, *whose* we are, and *what* we can become in and through Jesus Christ.

--III--

9. Now, after hearing these six things, some of you may be thinking, “*Doesn't everyone believe these things? All you've described is basic Christianity.*”

A--Well, all *real* Methodists would agree, & I honestly can't think of any orthodox Christian tradition that *wouldn't* agree on these as the *basics* of biblical Christianity.

B--But the reason I share these is to remind us that if we don't remember the *major* things (the 90-95%) that we share *in common* with each other, we're liable get into conflict over the *minor* things (the 5-10%) that we *disagree* about.

C--And, in fact, that is exactly what's often happened: some of the worst conflicts & even violence in history have been caused by Christians disagreeing with one another. <sup>7</sup>  
(I also believe this is what's been happening in our own denomination over the last few years -- Methodists have disagreed over some of the minor aspects of our beliefs, and even over whether or not those things *are* minor in the first place --all leading some to leave the UMC & form a new Methodist expression: the GMC)

10. So, one question we need to address today's is this: **how should you and I relate to other Christians who believe or practice their faith differently than us?**

A--Well, the founder of Methodism John Wesley addressed this very issue in a sermon he wrote in 1749 called “*Catholic Spirit*” (today's title) which had *nothing* to do with the “Roman Catholic” church, (“catholic = universal”), but instead dealt with how mature Christians can / should relate to those whose beliefs / practices *differ* from their own. <sup>8</sup>

1--In that sermon, he wrote: “*Although a difference of opinion 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.*” <sup>9</sup>

2--In other words, we need to honor & respect those who believe & practice faith *differently* than us. We should show Christ-like humility even while standing firm in our beliefs – we don't have to give up *our* opinions to respect *theirs*.

3--And then, whenever possible, take their hand and *work together* as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ to make a difference in the lives of others. <sup>10</sup>

B--This is exactly what Jesus says in today's scripture from John 17:20-23 (esp. 21-22):  
*"20 I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. 21 I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. 22 I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. 23 I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me."*

C--Imagine how different our world would be if we Christians (and even we Methodist Christians) – instead of fighting amongst ourselves about our differences – would actually *practice* what Jesus prays here?

D--On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared something similar to this in his "I Have A Dream" speech when he affirmed that... *"With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.... And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*<sup>11</sup>

--IV--

11. So how can that happen for us today. Well, as we wrap up, let me offer four "rules of engagement" -- suggested by Wesley himself -- that each of us can practice with Christians with whom we disagree:<sup>12</sup>

A--First, Wesley writes *"Even though we may disagree, **let us resolve not to HURT one another** – Do nothing to one another that is unkind, unfriendly, or that I wouldn't want you to do to me."* (Sounds a bit like Jesus' "golden rule," doesn't it?)

B--Second, *"Let us resolve with God as our helper to **speak no harsh or unkind WORDS about one another**"* by saying *"all the good we can of one another & to one another, and to use only the language of love when speaking about or to one another."*

C--Third: *"Let us resolve to **harbor no unkind THOUGHTS for one another**. Let us examine all that rises in our hearts and suffer no disposition there which is contrary to tender affection."*

D--Finally, *"Let us **endeavor to HELP one another**... and strengthen one another's hands,...[lest] we fall short of the religion of love."*

[You know, it's hard to **hate** somebody you're **helping**; & hard to be **angry** with someone you're **servicing** -- So, the more we **serve** others, the more we'll be able to **love** them]

12. And I'm naive enough to believe that if we Christians will actually live by these four rules, we'll begin to experience the *oneness* that Jesus prays about in today's scripture.

A--Yes, we Methodist/Wesleyan Christians DO have some *unique* beliefs and practices in our faith that we'll begin to talk about starting in next week's series sermon.

B--But we there are many (perhaps even most) beliefs & practices which we share *in common* with other Christians, so we're called to have a "*Catholic* (universal) *Spirit*" which *transcends* our differences and guides us in how we treat one another as members *together* in the body of Christ.

13. [PRAYER: "*O God, forgive us for allowing the ways we often handle our differences to hurt the witness of your church in our world -- that by our intolerant divisions and disrespectful conduct towards those with whom we disagree, we've caused others to be turned off to you entirely! Forgive us and have mercy on us! Instead, with the help of your Holy Spirit, help us be disciples who have a truly "catholic spirit" in our attitudes and behaviors towards others. As you son prayed, help us to truly be unified and one in you. For we pray all of this in his name, the name of Jesus, Amen.*"]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

- 1 For example, John Calvin called something similar to this "*common grace*".
- 2 For example, read John 8:31, 13:35, 15:8, and Matthew 28:19
- 3 For example, the Baptist tradition simply calls it "Discipleship."
- 4 Notice: as Methodist Christians we do *not* believe the Bible is the *literal* words of God (as believed in the Muslim religion about the *Qu'ran*), nor that it is completely "*inerrant*" or "*infallible*" about *every* subject (as believed in some Christian traditions, like some Baptist churches), but that it was written by humans and contains everything necessary for humans to find their way back to God. So, it is "*inerrant*" of sorts as to matters that deal with salvation, but NOT necessarily as to other subjects like science, history, etc.
- 5 Though scripture is the primary source of authority in Christian life, historic Wesleyan Christians also believe that tradition, experience, and reason combine with scripture to form what we call the "*Wesleyan Quadrilateral*," helping us understand about our faith. Regarding scripture itself, though we agree that it has authority as the "word of God," as to *how much* authority (i.e., how it came about, what subject/topics are covered by that authority, etc.) we might disagree with some other traditions. As rule, for example, Wesleyan Christians do not believe it is "*infallible*" or "*inerrant*" in the way Baptist or Reformed Christianity often asserts.
- 6 For example, the Roman Catholic tradition celebrates *seven* Sacraments (of which Eucharist and Baptism are two), and the Primitive Baptist tradition adds "*footwashing*" as a third Sacrament.
- 7 For example, in the middle ages in Europe, remember the persecutions and burnings at the stake that took place during the "Inquisition"? And think about the violence that used to take place in Ireland between Protestants and Catholics. And consider that even today, some of the worst "church fights" often occur over differences of opinion involving church beliefs and practices. And yet, the amazing thing is that most Christians agree on 90-95% of things, but hold intense animosity towards each other regarding the 5-10% that we don't agree on!

<sup>8</sup> In Wesley's day (as in ours), many Christians had a very low tolerance for beliefs/opinions which *differed* from theirs. And Wesley saw how this intolerance then (as today) hurt the witness of the universal church and the cause of Christ in the world, and so he urged his Methodists to have what he called a "Catholic Spirit." It was a spirit of humility, love, and respectfulness towards Christians who hold opinions or practice their faith in ways that are radically different from our own.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, cited in Albert Outler *John Wesley*, p.93 (Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit," Intro, ¶4). Of course, having a "catholic spirit" does NOT mean "*anything we want to believe is OK*" – in Wesley's own words, it's "*not an indifference to ALL opinions*" (Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in Outler, p. 100). Instead (as Wesley once put it), "*As to opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.*" (From the tract "The Character of a Methodist," in Outler, p.92). If an issue "*strikes at the root of Christianity*" (i.e., goes against the *essentials of faith*), then it can/should be vehemently protected.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley's most famous quote for this is from 2 Kings 10:15, where King Jehu asks this question of Jehonadab (a man whose religious beliefs & practices were very different from Jehu's): "*Is your heart with my heart? ...if so, then give me your hand.*" (Wesley, cited in Albert Outler, *John Wesley*, pp.97-99, in his sermon "Catholic Spirit," Intro, ¶5). In other words, "*If you love God like I do, and we agree on the essentials of faith, then let's work together to share our faith, and not argue over the details!*"

In another place in that sermon, he summarizes his view of what a Christian with a "Catholic Spirit" looks like: "*A [person] 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"* (--From Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit," Section 3, Paragraph 5).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963, cited at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/17/i-have-a-dream-speech-text\\_n\\_809993.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/17/i-have-a-dream-speech-text_n_809993.html).

<sup>12</sup> These come directly from Wesley's "A Letter to a Roman Catholic" (written in 1749), ¶17.