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## The Catholic Spirit - properly understood

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Can you believe anything and be a United Methodist? Part of this confusion is amplified by those who have misused a go-to quote of John Wesley from his sermon *The Catholic Spirit* to embrace a form of theological pluralism:

"Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther question. If it be, give me thy hand." (II Kings 10:15)

To be clear, Wesley passionately believed that followers of Christ are to love others who hold differing opinions, and even different core beliefs. We should always practice humility in our discourse with one another. Wesley does affirm tolerance for differing practices when it comes to worship and denominational preferences. The misrepresentation is the implication that Wesley valued, above all else, unity over core doctrinal beliefs.

The real distinction is between what Wesley meant as "opinion" and what he understood as core beliefs of Christian faith. Reverend Wesley understood that each person would have varying opinions upon many different subjects and was willing to admit that he himself was not right all the time. He writes, "Every wise man, 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"

Suggesting that Wesley affirmed theological diversity on core doctrinal beliefs is both inaccurate and damaging to Wesleyan Scholarship. Furthermore, it is harmful to laity who desire to understand and practice our Wesleyan faith. In the sermon, "A Catholic Spirit" Wesley writes, "A man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgement concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine...He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavor to blend them into one..."

Ironically, Wesley saw this same confusion in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as to the meaning of the 'catholic spirit', "There is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood, and more dangerously misapplied." The Methodist founder states in the following outline what the person of a catholic spirit "*is not*":

**"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."

In his Letter to a Roman Catholic Wesley clarifies orthodox beliefs:

- a) **Wesley believed in the primacy of scripture**, "We believe indeed, that all scripture is given by inspiration of God...We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule, both of Christian faith and practice..." Letter to a Roman Catholic
- b) **Wesley affirmed faith in a Triune God** where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are unique yet in perfect harmony with one another. Where Jesus was both savior and Lord and the Holy Spirit enables us to confess faith in Christ and to become holy.
- c) **Wesley describes both the pardon of sins and the promise of eternal life** for those who have repented of sin, "I believe God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel; and that, at the last day, all men shall rise again."

**"secondly**, that a catholic spirit is not any kind of practical latitudinarianism. It is not indifference

as to public worship...This, likewise, would not be a blessing but a curse." He goes on to emphasize that worship of God must be "both scriptural and rational."

"**thirdly**, learn, that a catholic spirit is not indifference to all congregations...no less absurd and unscriptural than the former." A person of a true catholic spirit partakes of the ordinances of God, such as fasting, prayer, and observes the sacraments.

Some may still wonder if you can believe anything and still be a United Methodist. I caution persons not to use *The Catholic Spirit* as a means to support such a claim. I affirm the late Dr. Albert C. Outler, "Wesley is quite specific and adamant about the essential doctrines of Christianity—and quite orthodox! Yet his 'catholic spirit' seeks to find that community of Christians which is constituted by faith and love..." *John Wesley*, p. 92