

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#2):

CATHOLIC SPIRIT”

(John 17:20-23)

(c) 2012 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-22-12]

--I--

1. [BOTH Services] Read Text [9:30am, MSG; 11am, NRSV]: 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 lives today.

A--And I began with the disclaimer that my goal in this series is not to make any of us “good little United Methodists,” but instead to help us become *great* Christians who 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 to begin by focusing on things that we have *in common* with other Christian traditions (like Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, etc), and how these commonalities can help us better relate to believers from these other traditions.

C--Let me start with a brief “whirlwind” look at a six key beliefs and practices that we as Methodist Christians share along with other Christians around the world:

-II-

3. First and foremost, we Methodists share **a belief in the divine activity of God** – that a divine being not only exists, but actively reveals Himself to and in our world today.
 

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

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--Now, we Methodists call this “*Prevenient Grace*” – other traditions have other names for it,<sup>1</sup> but the idea is the same: that God loves & wants a relationship with each of us.

5. And 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--There may be other expressions of God in our world, but 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--Now we and other traditions use a variety of terms to describe this experience: "justification," "conversion," "new birth/born again," and being "saved" – by they all describe that relationship that God wants us to have with Him through His son.

6. But by whatever term we use, we Methodists also believe that this **salvation faith should affect our way of life** – it should make a difference in our actions and behaviors.

A--Like most other Christian traditions, 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, our Christian faith is not to be just *intellectual*, but also *experiential*.

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

7. And where do we learn all of this? Well, like other Christians, we Methodists believe in **the authority of the Bible as God's living word**.

A--...that through the inspiration of human writers, God has chosen 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. And finally, we also believe 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 that we celebrate them sometimes differs, and that some Christian traditions add more<sup>6</sup>, *all* of us celebrate at least these two,...

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

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, we Methodists would agree, and 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 that we share *in common* with each other, we're liable get into conflict over the *minor* things that we disagree about.

C--And that, in fact, is exactly what's happened: some of the worst violence in history has been caused by Christians who disagreed with one another.<sup>7</sup>

10. So, the question we need to address before we leave here today is this: **how do you and I deal with 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, honor & respect those who believe & practice faith differently than you. Show them Christ-like humility even while standing firm in your own beliefs – you don't have to give up *your* opinions in order 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--You know, this is exactly what Jesus says in today's scripture from John 17:21-22: (MSG) “*Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they [i.e., all Christians] might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be unified & together as we are*” (NRSV) “*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they [i.e., all Christians] also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...*”

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

11. Well, to help us do this, as we wrap up today, I want to offer four “rules of engagement” – suggested by Wesley himself – that each of us can practice with Christians with whom we disagree: <sup>11</sup>

A–First of all, 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 serving; so the more we *serve* others, the more we’ll be able to *love* them]

12. And I believe that if we Christians will actually apply and live by these four rules, we’ll begin to experience the oneness that Jesus prays about in today’s scripture.

A--You see, we as Methodist/Wesleyan Christians have some unique beliefs and practices in our Christian faith.

B--But we also have many beliefs and practices we share in common with other Christian traditions, and 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:**

<sup>1</sup> For example, John Calvin called something similar to this “*common grace*”.

<sup>2</sup> For example, read John 8:31, 13:35, 15:8, and Matthew 28:19

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Baptist tradition simply calls it “Discipleship.”

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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 loudly debated.

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