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The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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“Give Me Thine Hand”: Catholicity in the Wesleyan-Methodist Tradition

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As I write, the denomination that has been my ecclesial home for thirty years is in the throes of schism. The presenting issue involves conflict over a range of questions related to human sexuality, but the conflict is far deeper and encompasses a variety of theological matters. This essay will not endeavor to sort or solve those problems. My point is to alert the reader that questions of catholicity are very much on the table in the Wesleyan-Methodist tradition. Questions of catholicity often involve how believers in different ecclesial structures acknowledge one another's faithfulness to the ancient Christian faith and contribution to the ongoing development of the universal church. An interest in catholicity also often involves a focus on working partnerships across denominational lines that embody the joint affirmation of the other's commitment to our ancient faith.

The current conflict over human sexuality in my own United Methodist Church, however, has taught us that catholicity also has to do with whether—and how long—Christians in conflict can remain in the same formal ecclesial structure. What is required for continued Christian fellowship and communion? How do we work together when we see mission and ministry in a starkly different light? We United Methodists are not, of course, the first to ask these questions. Indeed, similar questions arose as the early Methodists considered their relationship to the Church of England, and others will undoubtedly wrestle with these matters later. Chances are that readers will have considered similar questions in their own ecclesial context. It will become clear below that part of the problem in United Methodism stems from the assumption that the Wesleyan catholic spirit involves a “think and let think” attitude with regard to doctrinal commitments. This paper will argue, however, that this assumption is a misreading of Wesley's attitude toward catholicity and that a faithful Wesleyan catholicity requires, though is not reduced to, doctrinal commitments that embody orthodox Christian belief. To make that case, the paper turns first to the topic of catholicity in Wesley's writings. The chief document is Wesley's sermon “Catholic Spirit” (Sermon 39). Two other sources are also helpful for understanding the way Wesley and the early Methodists sought to embody the catholic spirit: “On Laying the Foundation” (Sermon 132) and his “Letter to a Roman Catholic.” A close reading of these documents will reveal that Wesley's approach to

catholicity involves both specific doctrinal commitments and a heart abounding in love for other believers. Second, the paper will consider how Wesley's catholic spirit was worked out in the early Methodist movement. Third, the paper will analyze how Wesley has been appropriated more recently in the United Methodist Church's conflict over doctrinal diversity and theological pluralism. The case will be made that emphasizing pluralism by appeal to Wesley's catholic spirit is a misappropriation of Wesley's own approach. Indeed, Wesley offers a generous catholicity that is marked by orthodoxy and prioritizes the mission of the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ over personal preference and opinion. To that extent, Christians have much to learn from Mr. Wesley.

Catholicity in the Writings of John Wesley

"Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, then give me thine hand." These words from 2 Kings 10:15 have become something of a slogan for appeals to John Wesley's principle of the "catholic spirit."¹ His sermon by that name was preached on this passage, and it represents an attempt to foster Christian unity despite differences of opinion or varieties of preference.² It may be worth noting at the outset a warning that Wesley saved for the end of his sermon. Reflecting on the term: "a catholic spirit," Wesley remarked that "there is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood and more dangerously misapplied."³ In an effort then to understand clearly what Wesley meant by "catholic spirit," we will work through the major points of the sermon considering what he believed catholicity did and did not entail. What is required for one's heart to be right with another's heart? What matters should not undermine the catholic spirit? And what errors might misconstrue the catholic spirit? For Wesley, there were three especially significant potential errors: speculative latitudinarianism, practical latitudinarianism, and indifference to the local church. We will come to these below.

Unity in Heart and Hand

Wesley's doctrine of catholicity was grounded in his belief that Christians owe one another a special love. For Wesley, this special love was one that embodied the commands of scripture, indicating that love is a defining characteristic of Christian fellowship (John 13:34–35; 1 John 3:11, 16; 4:7–11). And while most believers would

1. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the works of John Wesley are from John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

2. As Thomas Oden notes, "Wesley was concerned here not with Jehu's mixed motives but with the form of reconciliation of human estrangement that is due not to intellectual agreement but to good will"; see Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 1:121.

3. Wesley, *Works*, 5:501.

affirm the importance and necessity of their love for other Christians, Wesley was worried that many did not actually practice this sort of special Christian love.⁴ He believed the two great hindrances to this sort of love to be an inability to “think alike” and to “walk alike.”⁵ To those who fell susceptible to these hindrances, Wesley famously replied, “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.”⁶ Matters of opinion would typically involve nonessentials that could be left open to varied interpretations.⁷ In Wesley’s mind, the solution to differences of opinion involved humble acknowledgment that everyone errs.⁸ And while acknowledging that one cannot hold an opinion and simultaneously think oneself in error, he went on to call upon Christians to offer to one another the sort of freedom of opinion that they would expect others to offer them.⁹ As Thomas Oden recognizes, “Disciplined believers honor the legitimate freedom of fellow Christians to hold diverse opinions.”¹⁰

Along with differences of opinion, Wesley also believed that Christian affection should not depend on preferences with regard to modes of worship. He saw a variety of worship preferences as a correlate to a variety of opinions.¹¹ Wesley’s own preference was for the liturgy in the *Book of Common Prayer*. In his 1784 *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, he wrote,

I believe there is no liturgy in the World, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid scriptural, rational Piety, than the Common Prayer of the Church of England. And though the main of it was compiled considerably more than two hundred years ago, yet is the language of it, not only pure, but strong and elegant in the highest degree.¹²

4. Wesley, *Works*, 5:493.

5. Wesley, *Works*, 5:493.

6. Wesley, *Works*, 5:493.

7. Compare with Oden, “These ideas often focus on ancillary matters (*adiaphora*) neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture that could be matters of free interpretation without straining the limits of genuine Christianity.” Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings*, 1:122.

8. Heitzenrater notes that Wesley often presumed theological disputes involved matters of opinion, not essentials, and that those in disagreement often meant the same thing but used different terminology; see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013), 249.

9. Wesley, *Works*, 5:495. Compare Ted A. Campbell, “Negotiating Wesleyan Catholicity,” in *Embodying Wesley’s Catholic Spirit*, ed. Daniel Castelo (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 5.

10. Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings*, 1:122.

11. Wesley, *Works*, 5:495.

12. John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America with an Introduction by James F. White*, Quarterly Review (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 1.

Wesley made only minimal changes to the liturgy used in the Church of England before sending it over to the Methodists who were settling in North America.¹³ Despite his love for Anglican liturgy, Wesley came to believe that it was not appropriate to insist others worship according to his preference, though this had not always been the case. In his sermon titled “Catholic Spirit,” he describes how he formerly believed that everyone born in England ought to be a member of the Church of England and worship in the manner prescribed by the Church.¹⁴ He came to see that view as problematic, however, and decided it would be a matter of presumption to impose his preferred mode of worship on another.¹⁵

Wesley also included matters of ecclesial polity among those things on which different people may hold different opinions. He believed the Episcopal form to be both scriptural and apostolic; nevertheless, his understanding of catholicity meant he could embrace partnerships with those committed to other polities (e.g., Presbyterian, Independent).¹⁶ Here he also includes as a matter of opinion the question of whether infants may be baptized and by what mode baptism should be administered. He sees the question of formal prayer versus extemporaneous prayer in the same way. Wesley sees no reason to dispute over these sorts of matters. Rather, each should act according to the light they have.¹⁷ Whether the question then involved polity or ecclesial offices, forms of prayer, or manner of observing the sacraments, Wesley insisted his only concern was this: “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”¹⁸

But what does it mean to have a right heart? For Wesley, it meant having a heart that is right both with God and with neighbor. To have a heart right with God meant that one had both orthodox beliefs about God and evidence of a personal experience of grace. With regard to orthodoxy, Wesley was looking for a belief in God’s being and perfections, which he lists as eternity, immensity, wisdom, power, justice, mercy, and truth.¹⁹ He was also interested in what a person believed with regard to divine providence: “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?”²⁰ But Wesley was not only concerned with whether people could articulate orthodox doctrines, he also looked for evidence that people walked by faith and gave evidence of God’s work in their life. To have a

13. Those changes included: (1) omitting most of the holy days, (2) a shortened Lord’s Day service, (3) omitting some sentences in the services for baptism and burial of the dead, and (4) omitting some of the Psalms which Wesley found improper for use in Christian worship. Wesley, *Sunday Service*, 1.

14. Wesley, *Works*, 5:496.

15. It would appear safe to say that Wesley would not approve of today’s so-called “worship wars.”

16. Wesley, *Works*, 5:499.

17. Wesley, *Works*, 5:499.

18. Wesley, *Works*, 5:497.

19. Wesley, *Works*, 5:497.

20. Wesley, *Works*, 5:497.

right heart also meant explicit belief in Jesus Christ as the crucified Lord. Wesley was looking for an affirmation that Jesus is God. He was also looking for evidence that Christ was being formed in a person. Such evidence includes the rejection of works-righteousness and embraces the reality that the reception of righteousness is through faith. Wesley expounds on faith here as love for God and the seeking of happiness in God alone.²¹ Thus, he asks, "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?"²² In addition, having a right heart involved doing not your own will but the will of God. Wesley wanted to see single-minded devotion and surrender. He wanted to see people point to the glory of the triune God revealed in Christ in every action. This meant having a desire to please God in all things—not to earn his favor but instead because you already have that favor. To have a heart right toward God was to hate evil and rejoice in God with reverence.²³ It should be clear, catholicity for Wesley was not merely a matter of affirming the right orthodox doctrinal formulations; he also wanted to see evidence of a living faith that rejoices in the glory, grace, and mercy of Christ.

With regard to a right heart toward your neighbor, Wesley asked: "Dost thou love, as thyself, all mankind without exception?"²⁴ Drawing on the Sermon on the Mount, he called upon believers to love not only those who love them but to love their enemies also (Matt 5:48). This was to be shown by doing good works toward others: "neighbours or strangers, friends or enemies, good or bad."²⁵ Wesley seemed to perceive that he set a high bar for having a right heart, and so he concludes this part of the sermon extending a welcome both to those who are "thus minded" and to those who are "sincerely desirous of it."²⁶ To these, Wesley would say, "Give me thine hand."

But what did he mean by the offer of his hand? If it ruled out divisiveness over matters of opinion, including worship mode and polity, what did it include? For Wesley, "give me thine hand" meant four things. First, it meant "love me."²⁷ And here he had something very specific in mind. Wesley took catholicity to mean that Christians love one another with a special love, a love that is of a higher degree than their love for the rest of humankind: "Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint-heir in his glory."²⁸ This means that believers should

21. Wesley, *Works*, 5:497-98.

22. Wesley, *Works*, 5:498.

23. Wesley, *Works*, 5:498.

24. Wesley, *Works*, 5:498.

25. Wesley, *Works*, 5:499.

26. Wesley, *Works*, 5:499.

27. Wesley, *Works*, 5:500.

28. Wesley, *Works*, 5:500.

extend patience to one another and compassion. Believers should neither envy nor provoke one another. Further, believers should not think evil of one another but should assume the best. Second, the catholic spirit means believers should commend one another to God in prayer. Here, Wesley sees a deep and fervent intercession: “Wrestle with [God] on my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss.”²⁹ Third, the catholic spirit involved believers provoking one another to good works.³⁰ This meant offering instruction and encouragement on the one hand and correction and reproof on the other, all in a spirit of other-oriented love. The end of this in Wesley’s thinking was greater fitness for God’s use and the advancement of the kingdom. Fourth, to take hands with a catholic spirit meant mutual love not in word only but also in deed and in truth.³¹ This was to speak honorably about others and trust that God was at work in other believers, even if there was a difference of opinion on some matters.

Catholicity in the Early Methodist Movement

Wesley believed the success of the early Methodists was tied to their commitment to the catholic spirit. On April 21, 1777, Wesley preached a sermon titled “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel Near the City-Road, London” (Sermon 132). A substantial part of the sermon offered Wesley’s own account of the birth and rise of Methodism from his days at Oxford in 1725 to the spread of the societies through England and into Ireland and Scotland in 1744.³² In his account of the growth of Methodism, he described the movement in language very similar to the language used to articulate his vision of the catholic spirit. Methodism, Wesley said, was not a new religious movement but as “the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England.”³³ Wesley went on to say that “the old religion” was characterized by “the love of God and of all mankind.”³⁴ While many of the early Methodists were also members of the Church of England, Wesley resisted any inclination either to tie his work to the established Church or to set his movement in opposition to it. Methodist societies, classes, and smaller bands were led by members of the laity and did not depend on ordained clergy to maintain them.³⁵ Rather than giving attention to formal ecclesial status and

29. Wesley, *Works*, 5:500.

30. Wesley, *Works*, 5:501.

31. Wesley, *Works*, 5:501.

32. For Wesley’s time at Oxford, see Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 38-40. See further, Kelly Yates, “Testing the Limits of a ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley, Methodism, and Catholicism” (PhD Diss., University of Manchester, 2018), 105-47.

33. Wesley, *Works*, 7:423.

34. Wesley, *Works*, 7:423.

35. Campbell, “Negotiating Wesleyan Catholicity,” 7.

structure, Wesley focused the Methodist movement on remaining committed to the religion of the Bible, which he saw summed up and unified in the commands to love God and neighbor as the fulfillment of the law.³⁶ In this way, he aligned himself with the broad stream of Christian traditions that look to the Bible as their scriptures. He supplemented this portrayal of early Methodism with an appeal to the early Fathers, which strengthened his insistence that Methodism was not tied to a single ecclesial expression but rooted in the apostolic faith.

Wesley also highlighted the difference between the early Methodists and their contemporary religious movements that were aimed at renewal but resulted in little effect. He specifically names Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, and Quakers.³⁷ The revivals associated with these groups were considerable in Wesley's view, but their impact did not last.³⁸ He attributed this to their sectarianism, which distanced them from their constituencies. By separating from the established church, they were unable to continue in ministry with those who did not separate with them. In fact, he notes many who remained developed prejudice against the groups that broke from the established church. The result, according to Wesley, was that "national reformation was totally cut off."³⁹

In contrast, the Methodists made a point not to separate and form their own ecclesial body. This decision did not come without deliberation and debate.⁴⁰ Some insisted on the necessity of separation, but the Methodists maintained their resolve to remain and do their work from within the Church of England. This kept them from becoming sectarian and opened the door to ministry with a broad range of people.⁴¹ "This," Wesley remarked, "is the peculiar glory of the Methodists: However convenient it might be, they will not, on any account or pretence whatever, form a distinct sect or party."⁴² Their focus on the love of God and neighbor and their resistance to define themselves by polity or worship style—that is, their catholicity—kept them connected with the larger population and strengthened the revival.⁴³

Wesley's interest in catholicity across normal ecclesial boundaries also arises in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic."⁴⁴ While Wesley was critical of potential abuses

36. Wesley, *Works*, 7:424.

37. Wesley, *Works*, 7:427.

38. Wesley, *Works*, 7:427.

39. Wesley, *Works*, 7:428.

40. The 1755 Conference was particularly crucial as the Methodists worked to develop their identity in relation to the Church of England; see further, Ryan Nicholas Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans: Political Division in Early Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 161-75.

41. Compare with Collins, *John Wesley*, 161.

42. Wesley, *Works*, 7:428.

43. For Wesley's attempts to promote unity among the growing societies, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People*, 194-96.

44. Wesley, *Works*, 10:80-86.

in the Roman Church, his trip to Ireland in 1747 led to the discovery that Roman Catholics often attended Methodist preaching services.⁴⁵ His “Letter to a Roman Catholic” was written within months of the sermon on the “Catholic Spirit” and is marked by an irenic tone that models the vision of that sermon.⁴⁶ The letter was written in response to violent anti-Methodist mobs, which erupted in Cork in 1749 and was aimed at cultivating tolerance toward Methodists whom Wesley portrayed as only differing on matters of opinion.⁴⁷ The letter begins with the complaint that Catholics and Protestants often think poorly of one another with the result that they are rarely willing to work together, instead behaving quite often with malice and unkindness. He then proceeds to outline in some detail the range of doctrines and teaching on which the two groups agree (trinitarian theism, the person and work of Christ, virginal conception, apostolicity of the Church, and so on).⁴⁸ After these carefully articulated doctrinal formulations, Wesley turned to the now-familiar marks of the catholic spirit. He argues that a true Protestant embraces the “old religion” and loves not only God and neighbor but the enemy, too. He eschews the “endless jangling about opinions” and commends provoking each other “to love and to good works.”⁴⁹ He declares his hope to see the recipient in heaven before using language similar to that used in his sermon on the catholic spirit: “Then if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike.”⁵⁰ The letter concludes with an invitation for author and recipient to be resolved not to do, say, or think evil of each other, but instead to help and strengthen each other’s ministries. To be clear, Wesley was not advocating a return to Rome, but he was interested in expressions of the catholic spirit to cultivate peace and charity across the lines carved by the Reformation.⁵¹

Wesley’s Three Warnings

We return now to the three warnings mentioned briefly above: speculative latitudinarianism, practical latitudinarianism, and indifference to the local church. Attention to these warnings will provide a more thorough understanding of Wesley’s attitude toward catholicity and prepare the way for the discussion of contemporary

45. Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings*, 1:126.

46. Campbell, “Negotiating Wesleyan Catholicity,” 4.

47. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People*, 193-94.

48. See further, Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People*, 4-5.

49. Wesley, *Works*, 10:85.

50. Wesley, *Works*, 10:85.

51. Even with his emphasis on catholicity, Wesley nevertheless gave evidence of bias against Roman Catholicism, which was typical in the Church of England of his day; see his *The Advantage of the Members of the Church of England over the Members of the Church of Rome* (London: 1756). See also Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People*, 194, 304-5; Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings*, 1:126. Compare Henry Rack’s comment on Wesley’s letter: “It was the product of a special situation and not at all characteristic of Wesley’s writings on Catholicism.” Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 2002), 310.

appropriations of Wesley in which the question of worship is at issue. The warnings highlight the potential for misappropriating the notion of a catholic spirit and invite care and thoughtfulness when appealing to it. Wesley saw these as misapplications of catholicity and urged that they be avoided. By speculative latitudinarianism, Wesley meant "an indifference to all opinions."⁵² Catholicity should not be understood as waffling back and forth with regard to one's views. Wesley rebuked those who confused the catholic spirit with "muddy understanding" and insisted that a lack of settled principles was to miss the point of catholicity altogether.⁵³ By practical latitudinarianism, the founder of Methodism meant indifference with regard to public worship. He had no patience for those who might neglect the practice of worship and call it an expression of the catholic spirit. Instead, the person who indeed has a catholic spirit will be committed to the form of worship he or she has chosen. That choice will be both reflective and rational, born out of a deep commitment to worship God in spirit and truth. The third warning that Wesley issued involved an indifference to choosing and committing to a local congregation. Wesley expected the person who exhibits the catholic spirit to be committed in every way to one local church where he or she would receive the sacraments, attend the ordinances of God, join other believers in public prayer, and rejoice in hearing the gospel. Wesley saw participation in the Christian community as essential to healthy Christian growth. Wesley took these three commitments—fixed principles, thoughtful worship, and committed to a congregation—as essential to the catholic spirit.⁵⁴ These were the means whereby his or her heart would be strengthened in love for God and others.⁵⁵

Catholicity and Conflict in Today's Methodism

Two very different approaches to Wesley's "catholic spirit" have emerged in present-day Methodism. For some, the catholic spirit continues to be a way of highlighting doctrinal unity with the Great Tradition of the Christian Church. This paper has argued throughout that this was Wesley's own position. For others, the catholic spirit has come to mean "think and let think" with much less emphasis on doctrinal commitments shared with other Christian denominations. Ted A. Campbell recognizes this when he says, "A consistent trait of the Wesleyan heritage and the Methodist churches has been a notable liberality or openness on doctrinal issues."⁵⁶ Campbell explicitly associates this "liberality or openness on doctrinal

52. Wesley, *Works*, 5:502.

53. Wesley, *Works*, 5:502.

54. See further, Yates, "Testing the Limits," 50-52.

55. Oden notes Wesley's resistance to the presence of latitudinarian tendencies among some in the Church of England in his day. They were disinclined to focus on doctrinal definitions, the sacraments, and church discipline; instead, they emphasized irenic pluralism, doctrinal ambiguity, and minimalism with regard to Christian teaching. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*, 1:124.

56. Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 19.

issues” with Wesley’s catholic spirit.⁵⁷ Indeed, from 1972 until 1988, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* explicitly affirmed that “theological pluralism should be recognized as a principle,” and goes on to observe that “some would wish traditional doctrinal statements and standards recovered and enforced; others demand that they be repealed; some would urge they be perfected; others would insist they be superseded.”⁵⁸ To that point, not all agree that the Methodist identity is grounded in doctrinal diversity. An alternative approach is expressed in the introduction to *United Methodist Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* by now-retired Bishop William Willimon, “I’ve heard people say, ‘What I like about being a Methodist is that you can believe fairly much whatever seems right to you.’”⁵⁹ Willimon responds, however, that such a view is “dead wrong, a scandal to the religious movement that is the lengthened shadow of John and Charles Wesley.”⁶⁰ Likewise, William Abraham has argued that United Methodists have long been plagued by “doctrinal amnesia” and “have systematically forgotten the place of Christian doctrine in their life and service to God.”⁶¹

The issue of doctrinal indifference in relation to Wesleyan catholicity is addressed in detail in an essay by D. Stephen Long, who argues that “the Wesleyan catholic spirit has not been, perhaps never was, ‘catholic.’”⁶² He continues, “In its very identification of a putative ‘catholic spirit’ as a Wesleyan distinctive, Methodism sacrifices catholicity.”⁶³ The problem, in Long’s view, is the notion of essentialism; that is, the idea that catholicity involves boiling Christianity down to its essential doctrinal core. Drawing heavily on Hans Urs von Balthasar, Long argues that

57. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine*, 19. Campbell recognizes that Wesley affirmed doctrinal essentials in his understanding of the catholic spirit but nevertheless indicates that Wesley’s catholic spirit was the source of doctrinal openness as the Methodist tradition developed. So Thomas A. Langford, “Wesleyan theology, as it has advance beyond Wesley, has exhibited characteristic qualities of thought more than it has adhered to distinctive doctrines. Consequently, John Wesley has been a guide to theological reflection more than a definitive doctrinal source.” Langford, *Practical Divinity*, vol. 1, *Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983), 248; compare with John B. Cobb, Jr., “Is Theological Pluralism Dead in the U.M.C.?” in *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 162-67.

58. United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), 69-70. In 1988, the language commending theological pluralism was removed, and the place of scripture as “the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine” was affirmed. United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), 81.

59. William H. Willimon, *United Methodist Beliefs: A Brief Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), xiii.

60. Willimon, *United Methodist Beliefs*, xiii.

61. William Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 12.

62. D. Stephen Long, “The Non-Catholicity of a Catholic Spirit,” in *Embodying Wesley’s Catholic Spirit*, ed. Daniel Castelo (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 51.

63. Long, “Non-Catholicity,” 51.

catholicity "is not about minimal essentials but about the fullness of Christian faith."⁶⁴ While Christianity certainly has a doctrinal core, the Christian faith cannot be reduced to that core.⁶⁵ Such a reduction creates separation between the minimal number of doctrines to be believed and other aspects of the Christian faith like worship and practices. The latter are considered matters of opinion on which people should "think and let think."⁶⁶ Long sees this tendency as "a quintessential Protestant endeavor" that actually undermines catholicity instead of cultivating it.⁶⁷ Catholicity should be about the fullness of the Christian faith, which is not limited to doctrines but includes practices. The problem is the focus on finding the bare minimum required to qualify as Christian.

Long sees this problem emerging from Wesley's sermon on the "Catholic Spirit." Wesley himself remained a member of the Church of England and drew on its robust sense of catholicity.⁶⁸ For Long, the narrow focus of "Catholic Spirit" on doctrinal essentials and a heart abounding in love for other believers was fine so long as Methodism existed as a movement within the Church of England. However, Long argues, the doctrinal minimalism that marked the sermon left it unable to serve as a foundation for robust and sustained catholicity as Methodism transitioned from a movement to an independent denominational church.⁶⁹ Over time, instead of connecting Methodism to the larger Church, Wesley's "catholic spirit" (with its strong focus on the "think and let think" attitude) came to be seen by some as a distinctive mark of Methodism and as an alternative to the "confessional" traditions.⁷⁰ This left the door open to the sort of pluralism and indifference that Wesley so vigorously opposed.⁷¹

The widespread notion that Methodism is not confessional is curious in light of the twenty-four "Articles of Religion" that locate Methodism within the historic and orthodox Christian tradition. And a nonconfessional Methodism is certainly not what Wesley envisioned. As we have seen, the "think and let think" attitude that worries Long is not the attitude that Wesley takes with regard to Christian doctrine. Wesley repeatedly insists that the catholic spirit includes a thoroughgoing commitment to orthodoxy and to worship in the context of a local church, even if the worship style was considered a matter of opinion. Long critiques what he sees as Wesley's doctrinal

64. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 52.

65. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 53.

66. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 51.

67. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 51.

68. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 57; compare with Campbell, "Negotiating Wesleyan Catholicity," 2.

69. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 57.

70. Long, "Non-Catholicity," 57.

71. As an example of this, Long points to the continued good standing of United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague, who affirmed an adoptionist Christology based on an interpretation of the catholic spirit as theological pluralism and an alternative to confessionalism; see Long, "Non-Catholicity," 53-55, 57-59.

minimalism, but that very critique highlights the point that Wesley was committed to a set of doctrines and that his understanding of catholicity included a commitment to that defined set of doctrines. Thus, any faithful appropriation of Wesley's catholic spirit will embody those same doctrinal commitments and eschew a "think and let think" attitude when it comes to those doctrines.

As Methodism moves forward, if it is to be catholic, it must recover an understanding of the catholic spirit as that which unites it to the Great Tradition, not that which serves as an alternative to it.⁷² Even now, the United Methodist Church is in schism and appears to be drawing ever nearer to formal division. The misappropriation of Wesley's catholicity as doctrinal laxity has been insufficient to hold the denomination together.

Conclusion

The paper began with Wesley's warning that the term "catholic spirit" has been misunderstood and misapplied. The conflicting interpretations in our own day would suggest those problems continue, and that the warning should be heeded once again. In my view, Wesleyan catholicity cannot be taken as indifference toward doctrine. This paper has made that case through close attention to Wesley's writings on catholicity. When it comes to the doctrines that have characterized the Christian church throughout its history, we are not at liberty to "think and let think." These beliefs define us. They are essential to our identity. They must be guarded and maintained. And those who do not share them locate themselves beyond the bounds of the Christian Church. Christian doctrine is not available to be reinvented, though it will be explained and applied to new contexts in creative ways.

This paper has considered Wesley's own approach in light of the way Wesley has been appropriated in contemporary United Methodism. His vision of the catholic spirit was not one in which doctrine was devalued or underemphasized, though some have misused it in that way. To be clear, present-day attempts to undermine doctrine in the name of Wesleyan catholicity misrepresent Wesley's own view. On the contrary, he insisted that catholicity depended on shared doctrinal beliefs. But neither was catholicity for Wesley a matter of mere intellectual assent. Rather, he wanted to see doctrinal commitments enlivened by a heart filled with love for God and neighbor. Wesley's catholic spirit was theologically robust and actively engaged in the Christian community and witness. That combination allowed the early Methodists to avoid the appearance of and tendency toward sectarianism. It facilitated shared ministry across ecclesial boundaries. If the people called Methodists are to be our best going forward, that double focus on shared belief and shared ministry must be front and center.

72. See further, Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia*, 74-98.