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A CATHOLIC SPIRIT

(An extract from a sermon by JOHN WESLEY on Catholic Spirit.)

THERE IS scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood, and more dangerously misapplied than this. But it will be easy to correct any such misapprehensions of it, and to prevent such misapplication.

For first we may learn, 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 tost 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 fixt as the sun, in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. It is true, he is always ready to hear and weigh whatever 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 you are of; you who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit only because you are of a muddy understanding: because your mind is all of 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 that 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.

2. 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 a help thereto, it would, so long as it remained, be an unspeakable hindrance to the worshipping of God in spirit and truth. But a 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.

3. 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 fixt in his congregation as well as in 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 the 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 in 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.

4. But while he is steadily fixt 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 the most acceptable in his sight, and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties, to one particular congregation, his heart is enlarged towards all mankind, those he knows, and those he knows 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. But if 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 be already in this way, go on. If thou have 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.