Meaning and Significance of the Bicentennial for Methodism Today *

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I AM challenged by the word, “today.” This is an hour in which new and vivid ideas are at large in the world and in our nation. Can our celebration of the Bicentennial of Methodism relate itself in significant ways to these ideas? Can we get our great church in step with the needs of the times, even as we glory in her past and re-evaluate her ancient landmarks?

Freedom is the watchword of the hour. In a sense that neither Rousseau nor Voltaire comprehended nor achieved, Wesley gave freedom to men. The French Revolution that was to secure liberty, equality and fraternity among men, changed the face of Europe but failed in its objectives. Wesley’s revolution in the lives of men, tens of thousands of them, not only brought to them that “perfect freedom” found in faithful service to God, but resulted in reforms which made the liberty of England her greatest boast for one hundred years after the death of Wesley. Of Voltaire, it was said, “He made men free.” But Wesley made them free indeed.

Wesley, though a Tory, was more a revolutionary than a conservative. And can we exalt today this “revolutionary spirit” within our great communion? Dare we pose it as a criterion for union and merger with other denominations? Garth Lean in his little book, John Wesley, Anglican, speaking of the reunion of Methodists with Anglicans, asks a disturbing question: “Would we Anglicans, in fact, be as eager to accept reunion with the Methodists, if Methodism today were the scalding, effective, original force that it was in Wesley’s lifetime? Has Methodism, perhaps, lost the quality to ‘sting’ the Establishment which made Bishop Gibson wish to expel it from the Church’s breast?” He concludes: “Above all there is a deeper question: will reunion of itself renew the nation, as Wesley renewed it in his own day?”

Could this great historical event become the evidence of and highlight the renewal that is taking place in the life of the Church? Can it once again manifest the spirit of Wesley? It is good for us to lift up the great doctrines of our faith, but men do not live by doc-

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trines alone. Creeds, however fine, must be re-examined in the light of the faith of modern man. Faith must not mean resistance to change; rather faith is acceptance of change as a condition of God's further revelation of Himself in history. We stand in an interval of destiny when faith is being tested and tried; some ancient doctrines and practices are being discarded by good men, for these doctrines and practices no longer possess vitality. Indeed, it is possible that a denomination in its devotion to outworn creeds and practices could become frozen in a framework of futility that is little more than denominational self maintenance.

Peter Cartwright believed and so wrote that had the Methodist churches been true to the faith of John Wesley, the United States might have been saved from the tragedy of a Civil War.

Bishop Oxnam once pointed out what he described as one of the strangest facts in religious history, viz., that the Apostles Creed, recited in most of our churches, does not contain the word "love." The love which Jesus made central in his life and in his teachings is not mentioned in the theological formulation of our faith. Christianity climaxes in a triumphant assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Intelligent and dedicated men today write of a fourth American faith, because they feel the existent faiths have failed to answer the questions that modern man is asking. Can we give the lie to this assumption in 1966? Can we dramatize the merger of the Washington and Delaware Conferences with the Baltimore and Peninsula Conferences by July 1, 1965? This is the faith men need to see demonstrated.

Churchmen today demand a denominational integrity that goes deeper than loyalty to boards and agencies of a particular denomination. The issues that concern churchmen today, and that would have concerned John Wesley, have to do with abolishing war, creating a greater humanity by the acceptance of the fact of culturalism, pluralism, and the strengthening of civil rights for all our citizens, calling all men to a disciplined and distinctive style of life, controlling the exploding population, humanizing every part of society, dealing with the problems of poverty. Can we produce during our celebration signs of renewal in these areas?

What is the outlook for greatness in our denomination? We will not find it in individuals. It must come in the recognition that the institution itself must evidence signs of greatness, dynamism, tolerance, reason, equality, moral greatness. We are reminded that the will of history reads for everybody or for nobody. All humanity is its beneficiary. What are the evidences that our church believes this and is ready to act upon it?

Some startling facts are revealed in the report on poverty in the Washington area. In the Washington area, at least 250,000 people
(about one fourth) live in poverty. These persons are neither exclusively Negro nor residents of the District of Columbia. Forty per cent of all poverty families are suburbanites. Fifty-one per cent of these families are Negro. From 1950 to 1960, a forty-six per cent increase in poverty families took place in the suburbs. Older families with heads over 65 years of age are more pressed by poverty than the Negro population. The casual ground of poverty is not the individual but the very composition of society itself. There is a pattern of poverty families.

I hope that we can show the outlook for greatness in our church not by its past history alone, but by its glad assumption of present responsibilities.