CARL MICHALSON
AUTHOR, TEACHER, CHURCHMAN

by J. Edward Maddox

In each decade of Methodist history a few men emerge as giants in the church. Carl Donald Michalson, Jr. was one of these men whose life was cut short on November 8, 1965 when his jetliner crashed into a hillside near Greater Cincinnati Airport. He was not only a minister and churchman, but also a teacher, beloved and respected at Drew University, the university he attended and to which he later returned as Professor of Systematic Theology. His career was short, but his contributions were great. There were three children besides Carl born to Carl Donald Michalson and Gertrude Kathryn Leuzenger—Gordon, Edna and Eva. Both Gordon and Carl became ordained ministers and educators. Gordon Michalson is now President of the School of Theology at Claremont, Claremont, California. At the time of his death on November 8, 1965, Carl Donald Michalson, Jr. was Andrew V. Stout Professor of Systematic Theology at the Theological School of Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Edna and Eva are both concert pianists.

Carl Donald Michalson, Jr., the third of the Michalson children, was born in Waverly, Minnesota on June 29, 1915. Shortly after his birth the family moved to Minneapolis. Carl attended the Minneapolis public schools and graduated from high school in the spring of 1932. Carl’s father was an unsuccessful banker who suffered from a heart condition. Consequently Gertrude worked in a department store to help support the family. Carl held a very deep respect for his mother, but he also had quite a warm affection for his father. In Minneapolis the Michalson family joined the Park Avenue Methodist Church. The Park Avenue Church was and is today a “bastion of characteristically conservative Wesleyan theology,” which demands a fervent personal Christian experience. The minister of the Park Avenue Church at the time the Michalsons joined was Dr. George Vallentyne. “The entire family was very active in the church’s life. The children were brought up in the Sunday School and the Epworth League. Music was an important part of their religious life. It was this family devotion to Christ and to the church which formed the context for Carl’s relation to the Church. Parental interest and concern called his attention to the ministry as a vocation.”

1 Janet M. Michalson Clasper, interviewed by J. Edward Maddox (13 Old Glen Road, Convent Station, New Jersey), March 28, 1968.

2 Chester A. Pennington, “Carl Michalson as Churchman,” The Drew Gateway, XXXVI, 3 (Spring-Summer 1966), p. 112.

3 Ibid.
Soon after Carl Michalson’s graduation from high school in 1932 he met Dr. Vallentyne “on the street—or perhaps in the drug store,” and he challenged Carl to enter the ministry. Michalson was uncertain about his future. He had no financial resources for college. It was the time of the depression, and Carl’s older brother, Gordon, was in college at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Vallentyne insisted that the financial problems could be overcome. In the fall of 1932 Carl Michalson enrolled in John Fletcher College in University Park, Iowa. The John Fletcher College community was extremely conservative and dedicated to a “Wesleyanism of a typically fervent, evangelistic quality, a churchmanship of peculiar intensity.” Michalson grasped for all the knowledge available while at John Fletcher. Later he lamented that his liberal arts education did not measure up to his aspirations. While attending John Fletcher, he served student pastorates in Iowa and even managed to send money home. Finally in the spring of 1936 Carl Michalson received his B.A. from John Fletcher.

In the fall he entered the Theological School at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. His entire career was centered at this institution. While at Drew, Michalson came under the influence of Edwin Lewis. Lewis taught for 35 years at Drew University. Michalson wrote of Lewis’ career later. He said:

Classes which began with laughs sometimes ended in tears. When he lectured on sin you felt the misery of it. When he lectured on salvation, you became a grateful penitent. Our hearts were usually as full as our notebooks. On what basis, then, could we pass examinations in theology? Lewis was a theologian who knew that the doctrines of the faith engulf the human heart. He was a teacher who knew you had not learned your lessons well unless your life was touched. He was an examiner who could tell you knew your subject by the way you saw it from within. . . . But what Lewis meant by devotion was indistinguishable from scholarship. He shut the world from his study in defense of his holy vocation to understand and communicate the faith. His study light would burn so late at night that I for one was forced to terminate my secret compact to keep pace with him.

Robert T. Osborn in writing about Michalson notes a similar habit. He says, “I, who sought to model myself after his style, was too often dismayed upon returning from a Saturday night on the town to find one, solitary light shining from what was then Michalson’s top floor office in Seminary Hall.” Important books by Lewis that must have influenced Michalson were A Christian Manifesto, A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation, and The Creator and the

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 113.
6 Clasper, interview.
Adversary. Lewis saw the Christian faith as being an “invasion of an aggressive divine love into the encirclement of human egotism.” After being ordained in the Minnesota Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1938, Michalson graduated from Drew in the spring of 1939. In April of that year he was appointed to the Teabo Methodist Church in New Jersey. While serving this church he continued at Drew, working toward a Master of Arts degree which he received in the spring of 1940. The topic of his Master’s dissertation was Human Responsibility in the Republic of Plato and the Synoptic Gospels. The years from 1940 to 1943 were spent starting the New Hyde Park Methodist Church on Long Island, New York. In September of 1940 Michalson also entered Yale Graduate School for work on his Doctor of Philosophy degree. He went to Yale to study under D. C. Macintosh, but Professor Macintosh was incapacitated by a stroke in the summer of 1942. So he wrote his dissertation under the direction of Professor R. L. Calhoun, Julian N. Hartt, and H. R. Niebuhr. He submitted his dissertation, “The Problem of Revelation and Reason in the Theology of Karl Heim,” in the spring of 1945. The Doctor of Philosophy degree was conferred in June of that year.

While working on his dissertation in the latter part of 1943 he met Janet Aloyce Merrill, a schoolteacher and artist. After six months they were married on May 30, 1944. They lived in a small three-room apartment across from Drew. These apartments were located where the Pine Acres Nursing Home presently stands. Michalson carried his doctoral thesis around in a Saturday Evening Post magazine. He jokingly told Janet if the apartment should catch on fire, she should be sure to get out with the Post magazine. To Janet and Carl Michalson were born two children—Karen and Steven. While still working on his doctorate in 1943, Michalson returned to Drew, this time not as a student but as a teacher. His admired friend and professor Edwin Lewis was very influential in his decision to return to his alma mater. Michalson maintained highest respect from his students. He was very serious about the lectures he presented to his classes. They were “masterpieces of clarity and order that began on time and concluded on time. They were well structured and articulate, yet delivered naturally and without notes.” Perhaps this manner of spontaneous lecturing is something Michalson learned from Dr. Calhoun at Yale. Calhoun was known for his brilliant but noteless lectures. John D. Godsey, a student of Michalson and his successor at Drew, has said, “his
lectures were noted for being communicative masterpieces, skillfully constructed to present profound philosophical and theological truth in a scintillating fashion that would engage the student and at the same time challenge him to decision." Osborn says, "He did not do teaching; rather, he was a teacher. Teaching was the style of his being." For Michalson teaching did not end with the classroom lectures; he was often seen in the campus snack bar or bookstore engaged with students. He was an active participant in campus activities. Not only was he respected by his students but his colleagues and superiors also have praise for his ministry. Bernard W. Anderson, Professor of Biblical Theology at Drew and at one time Michalson's Dean, has said:

Moreover, his teaching ministry was not confined to his own university. In a sense the whole university world was his parish where he carried out a campus evangelism of the highest order as he helped students to understand how the Christian Gospel engages the questions of human existence.

Though Michalson was a dynamic lecturer and an admired professor on campus, he was also a noted theologian. His theology can best be understood by an exploration of his writings. For him theology and the Christian faith are history. According to his student and successor, John D. Godsey, his two primary theological interests were the existential philosophy and the theology of the Word of God. Faith was fully historical or meaningful for man. God's action in Jesus Christ is the hinge which holds history together. Michalson's theology is primarily a Word of God theology, but he willingly includes "any philosophy which aids in the understanding of man's historicity." Consequently, he was influenced by Bultmann, Barth, Brunner, Heim, Kierkegaard, Kitamori, Gogarten, Ebeling, Richard Niebuhr, and the existential philosophers. In 1952 and 1953 Michalson spent his Sabbatical leave studying at the University of Tubingen, Germany, and the University of Basel, Switzerland, where he met Karl Heim and Karl Barth.

Then in 1956 Michalson edited his first book, *Christianity and the Existentialists*. This book is a series of articles which were first presented in the form of public lectures in Craig Chapel, Drew University in 1953 and 1954. They were the fifteenth series of Tipple Lectures on Christian Biography. These articles attempt to

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15 Osborn, op. cit., p. 104.
16 Ibid., p. 107.
18 Godsey, op. cit., pp. 80-83.
20 Clasper, interview.
relate Christianity to existential thought. Michalson wrote the first article in the book entitled “What is Existentialism?” He shows how the sense of need and the void experienced by the existentialists can lead to an acceptance of Christ. He says,

Anyone who understands the poignant sense of human need in existentialism could concede that existentialism is at least a road to Bethlehem, or better, to Calvary. Candid self-understanding leads one to hopes that lie beyond oneself. But at the end of that road one may as easily find only a manger of straw as find the Messiah. . . . Existentialism nurses an aching void, keeps the wounds of man open until an authentically healing agent can be applied. Existentialism sponsors what the poet Holderlin called “a holy emptiness” which turns its atheism into a wistful stretching out for reality, a noumenal hunger, a movement of the spirit which keeps a sensitive openness upward toward the God who must reveal Himself if He is to be known.

Under many influences, especially Jasper’s and Brunner’s, Carl Michalson wrote a series of articles in 1952 in The Pastor which were to become the germ of a series of lectures at Southwestern University in 1957 and a book entitled Faith for Personal Crises in 1958. He wrote the following series of articles in The Pastor: “Theology for Crucial Situations,” “The Crisis of Anxiety,” “The Crisis of Suffering and Death,” “The Crisis of Vocation,” “The Crisis of Marriage,” and “The Crisis of Doubt.” Then in 1957 President William C. Finch of Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas, invited Dr. Michalson to give the Willson Lectures. In accepting this challenge and opportunity, Michalson decided to pursue the theme of “Faith for Personal Crises,” considering such topics as anxiety, doubt, suffering and death. The Willson lectures matured and composed five of the eight chapters of Faith for Personal Crises. Portions of this book also appeared in The Christian Scholar, Pastoral Psychology, The Journal of Pastoral Care, and Religion in Life between the winter of 1957 and the summer of 1958. Faith for Personal Crises reveals one of the major themes of his theology—the theme of polemical theology, that is “a theology for shepherding the sheep . . . in the conviction that a rapport exists between the Christian Gospel and the ‘crucial situations’ of man’s life: guilt, doubt, vocation, marriage, suffering, death.” A pastoral concern was always central in Michalson’s theology, but his interest in existentialism can also be seen in this book. Godsey points out that “Michalson’s interest in existentialism led him to a fundamental study of Karl Jaspers, whose elicitation of man’s

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21 Carl Michalson, editor, Christianity and the Existentialists (New York, 1956), pp. 122-136. This article was a complete bibliography of the published writings of Carl Michalson.
22 Lawrence O. Kline, compiler, “The Writings of Carl Michalson,” The Drew Gateway, XXXVI, 3 (Spring-Summer 1966), pp. 122-136. This article was a complete bibliography of the published writings of Carl Michalson.
A "crucial situation" is a highly specialized kind of situation profoundly suited to theological concern. To do justice to its meaning, three levels of definition are needed. First of all, a crucial situation is an inescapable situation, requiring decisiveness. . . . The second factor that makes these situations crucial is that they are situations in which it is being determined whether one will live or die. . . . The third factor which makes a situation crucial is that there is in it a dimension of ultimate significance.

W. Gordon Ross in his review of this book says that Michalson provides an affirmative answer to the questions of whether or not theology gives a better understanding of the "existential situation" and the data of clinical psychology.

Also in 1952 another book began to take shape in the mind of Carl Michalson which resulted seven years later in the publication of The Hinge of History. As in Faith for Personal Crises, portions of this book came into being in the form of magazine articles between the fall of 1952 and 1959. The Journal of Religion, Religion in Life, Theology Today, Motive, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Journal of Theology and The International Review of Missions were the magazines which served as Michalson's first forum for many of the ideas expressed in The Hinge of History: An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith. Also he contributed articles to two books which helped to enhance the method of thinking about the Christian faith which is delineated in this volume. These books were Faith and Ethics, edited by Paul Ramsey, and a book written in Japanese in honor of the theologian Ken Ishiwara.

The Hinge of History, published in 1959, was not as well received by the reviewers as his previous efforts. Michalson states that his purpose is to say, "what it means that Christianity is historical." For him existential history was an exposition of what was meaningless in world history. In the second part of the book he conceives eschatological history as being not related to chronological time but "rather an event having to do with one's personal life, and the life of the eschatological community, the church." He sees history as being either outer history or inner history. Inner history is con-
cerned with the meaning of the events, while outer history is concerned with the occurrence of the event. Michalson says,

> The very mode of apprehension of an event decides what kind of event it shall be. The attitude of the spectator makes the outer event possible (Historie); the attitude of the participant makes the inner event possible (Geschichte). One cannot move back and forth between the two attitudes without a radical sense of break in the nature of the event itself.\(^3\)

This lack of relationship between inner and outer history has been a problem for the reviewers. Sydney Mead commented,

> Carl Michalson, swinging freely on (or in) The Hinge of History, expounds a conception of "inner history" and "outer history" that appears not only to undermine "modern realism" and the discipline of history but also to make highly dubious his protestation that his view is not "a threat to the embodiment affirmed in Christian realities." For he holds that "inner history simply brackets out the question of the empirical outer-historical existence of christological and ecclesiological realities."\(^33\)

Claude Welch of Yale University finds similar criticism. He says, "The author seems to me to pass unhesitatingly from the recognition of the distinction between inner and outer to the assertion of their final discontinuity and even opposition, such that inner history has no interest at all in the judgments of outer history."\(^34\) Welch also claims that Michalson uses the term world history in an ambiguous manner. He insists that there is "a lack of precision in the development of a consistent pattern" and that Michalson's negations often do not seem to follow from his affirmations.\(^35\) In spite of these criticisms Michalson does make a definite contribution to the understanding of the self awareness made possible by the existentialist posture, and the value this self awareness can have for Christianity. Welch also finds chapters of Michalson’s book worthy of praise. He comments that chapters four and five are "a singularly powerful statement of the significance of existential philosophy for theology."\(^36\) In the year 1959 Michalson also completed and published a translation of The Reality of Faith by Frederick Gogarten. In 1960 he edited a paperback called The Witness of Kierkegaard. Both Kierkegaard and Gogarten were influential in the forming of his idea of a historical faith that must be relevant to the problems of the day.\(^37\)

In the spring of 1958, Michalson accepted an invitation as Visiting Professor in Theology at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary and

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 27.


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 115.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 117.

\(^7\) Godsey, op. cit., p. 80.
Aoyama Gakuin University in Japan. In the preface of *Japanese Contributions to Christian Theology*, he describes his efforts to fulfill the responsibilities of this post. He says:

I pursued what seemed the normal pedagogical path. I simply attempted to determine how much my students already knew about theology, who their regular theological professors were, and what theological sources and opinions were most influential in their thinking. As a consequence, there began a dialogue with my students and colleagues in which some very exciting theological positions were described, points of view attributed now, not to Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann, but to exotic names I had never heard and could scarcely even pronounce, names such as Uchimura, Watanabe, Kumano, Kitamori, and Hatano. Pedagogical concern gradually turned to genuine wonder at the theological insight I received, and there followed for me a disciplined process of research into the leading sources of contemporary theology in Japan.38

Michalson’s wife now amusingly tells the story that when he accepted this assignment they had hoped that this Japanese excursion could be somewhat of a vacation, too, where there would be time and money for some relaxation. As it turned out all the spare time was spent studying and most of the money for books and readers.39 Since he could not read Japanese he hired readers to translate for him. *Japanese Contributions to Christian Theology* was well received by the critics. Michalson, though he did not know the Japanese language, was able to transcend this barrier with the help of his interpreter Professor Yoshiako Noro. Important parts of this book are discussions of the non-church group of theologians associated with Uchimura, and the theology of Kazoh Kitamori. Kitamori’s theology of the “pain of God” held a very strong interest for Michalson.40

In 1963 Charles Scribner’s Sons published what has been generally considered Carl Michalson’s most provocative contribution to contemporary theology. This book was the outgrowth of an invitation extended to Dr. Michalson to give the James W. Richard lectures in the Christian Religion at the University of Virginia in the fall of 1961. The same lectures were used for the Kearns lectures in the Graduate School at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Only one portion of this book appeared within another publication, and that was the article “Language, History and Meaning” in *Theology Today* in April of 1962, which may be found scattered through parts of chapters two and three. In order to prepare the three lectures (or three chapters) found in *The Rationality of Faith: An Historical Critique of the Theological Reason*, Michalson received a Faculty Fellowship from the American Association of

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39 Clasper, interview.
Theological Schools and a sabbatical leave from Drew University which made possible a year of study at the University of Strasbourg, France, in 1960 and 1961, where the contents of this book were written for the James W. Richard lectures.41

In *Rationality of Faith* Michelson attempts to make a distinction between “the logic of nature” and “the logic of history.” In *Hinge of History* he had a problem distinguishing clearly between inner and outer history. He has a similar problem in *Rationality of Faith* with history and nature. The reviewers were kinder to this lack of clarity than they had been earlier, but A. N. Road, Theodore Runyan, and Schubert Ogden all point to this problem of meaning. In an interview on WOR radio early in 1964, Michelson commented on the distinction between nature and history. He says that “nature and history are two structures of reality. They are not just two ways of knowing. They are two structures of reality, therefore they are two ways of being.” He argues that faith and reason complement each other when historical reason is properly understood. He comments, “When the Christian faith in particular is interpreted within the structure of history, the implications for its rationality are utterly decisive.” Again he says,

The supposed irrationality of faith can be traced to confusion in methods of appropriation and not to the faith itself. By the canons of nature, history is irrational because its structure is filled with human ambiguities which elude exact measurement. By the canons of history, nature is irrational because it does not address itself to the paramount concern of human rationality which is concern for meaning.43

He subjects science, time, memory, language, and power to an analysis in terms of nature and history. The book has been called very evocative and worthwhile in spite of the semantic difficulties.

Between 1960 and 1965 another book by Dr. Michelson was conceived entitled *Worldly Theology: The Hermeneutical Focus of an Historical Faith*. Like *Faith for Personal Crises* and *The Hinge of History* this book was very dependent upon his previous writings. At least portions of this book first appeared in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, *The Chaplain*, *Workers With Youth*, *The Centennial Review*, *The Christian Advocate*, *The Christian Century*, *The Christian Scholar*, *Religion in Life*, and *Encounter*. Additional portions of this book had also appeared in other books to which Michelson

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42 Quoted from a recording of “What Do You Mean?” presented by WOR radio in cooperation with the Protestant Council of Churches of the City of New York and the New Jersey Council of Churches in 1964.


44 Ibid., p. 108.
had contributed articles. They were *The Later Heidegger and Theology* edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* edited by Bernard W. Anderson, *The Heritage of Christian Thought* edited by Robert E. Cushman and Egil Grislis, and *A Handbook of Christian Theologians* edited by Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty. By early November of 1965, Michalson had completed the manuscript of *Worldly Theology*; it was ready to be typed as he prepared to leave for the National Methodist Conference on Christian Education in Cincinnati where he was to deliver a key address entitled “Life and Its Setting: The Meaning and Experience of Existence.” On the day of his departure, November 8, 1965, the weather was miserable; it was one of those rainy days when Carl Michalson “would have liked nothing better than remain inside the new house he had built atop a ridge near Morristown....” But he “was a Methodist circuit-rider of the modern age, substituting the jet for horseback but carrying with the same sense of urgency the message of the gospel to a needy world.” The weather of the day raised doubts about his flight so he called the Morristown Airport which confirmed that his “small air taxi would take him to La Guardia and that, although there might be some delay, the jetliner was still scheduled to streak non-stop to Ohio.” He boarded that plane but he did not live to deliver his address or see the publication of *Worldly Theology*. The jetliner suddenly plowed into a hillside as it approached Greater Cincinnati Airport and Carl Donald Michalson, Jr. along with 57 other passengers died. His career was short, only 22 years. He had been made Andrew V. Stout Professor of Systematic Theology only six years before his death. At the age of 50 he “enjoyed an international recognition and esteem as a Christian writer, lecturer, and teacher.”

Though his final address has been lost forever, the manuscript of *Worldly Theology* was typed and published in 1967. This book has been called the crown of Michalson’s work. It is somewhat like volume three in the development of his systematic theology which required an historical understanding. As *The Rationality of Faith* was a continuation of the Hinge of History so *Worldly Theology* is a continuation of *The Rationality of Faith*, because it lucidly and persuasively advances and expands Michalson’s efforts at doing theology within the realm of history. He begins with a discussion of the last 50 years of theology in which he points to history as the “only knowable reality.” He goes on to assert that doing theology as history involves making no statement about reality which does

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46 Godsey, *op. cit.*, p. 76.  
47 Godsey, “Thinking the Faith,” p. 76.  
48 Godsey, foreword to *Worldly Theology*, p. vii.  
49 Ibid., p. viii.
not involve the meaning of man's existence. He asserts that to understand the Bible as history only the criteria which is supplied by the Bible itself should be used. The first eight chapters are experiments in worldly theology while the last four chapters focus on the terms in which a worldly theology may find expression. Though criticism is always present this book has been received with a sense of loss by its reviewers. Richard P. McBrien acclaims *Worldly Theology* to be "a competent and intellectually engaging report by a competent and intellectually gifted theologian on the contemporary state of Christian theology. The entire theological community is the poorer for his loss, but the richer for his legacy." 50

To see Carl Donald Michelson, Jr. in the midst of his proper context he must be seen as teacher, theologian and churchman. He was a minister of the highest order for he conceived of preaching the Word as not simply being limited to a pulpit, but transcending to his classroom, his writings and his life. He was ever ready to answer the call of his church as is revealed by his writing and speaking to Methodist groups. He was truly a twentieth century circuit-rider.

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