

OUR METHODIST HINGE OF HISTORY

By T. Otto Nall

The history-wise tell us that history, running pell-mell in one direction, can make a sharp turn and start off in another. Men and movements round a corner, and sometimes it is a blind one. Even a depth study of trends and tendencies below the surface of history fails to reveal why. We have simply come on one of the "hinges of history."

American Methodism confronts such a hinge today, not because we are two centuries old, but because a variety of historical factors combine to set us going in a new direction. Some of these are political, some cultural, some religious, some scientific, some artistic, some almost undefinable.

For example, here are the political trends. A patriotic people who have grown up with the country ecclesiastically, we have some special responsibilities for being conscientiously critical of our national image. If governmental policies do not conform with what we think that image, or stance, or posture ought to be, we are duty-bound to speak our minds. Of course, if our criticisms are to be taken seriously, we had better be critical of ourselves too. We ought to face church-state problems frankly and fearlessly, and we ought to turn our backs on the temptation to become a national church.

In the midst of a secular culture, we Methodists have a new function. We are not, for good or ill, the Puritans we once were, eschewing dancing and card-playing, theater-going and even attending circuses. Some of our people, by-passing the clear advices of their church, do some social drinking, and more than a few are smoking. We can set our people right on social sinning, big and little, re-thinking and re-examining the current loose talk about freedom. In avoiding "religiosity" we ought not to sacrifice religion, too.

In religion, we Methodists dare not become mere chameleons. When Liberalism was the fashion, we were the most socially conscious, conscientious and concerned. Now that Existentialism is in the ascendancy, we are tempted to identify ourselves completely. The secularization and urbanization of America enthrall us. Among liturgists we have some of the highest; and when it comes to ecumenics, we have a few "ecumaniacs."

Our real problem is to be ourselves—our hard-working, rough-thinking, strong-believing, warm-loving selves. We are convinced that every person must have his own experience of God; ours is an experimental and experiential faith. And, as Hegel put it, "every man must learn in the short space of his own life the whole long journey of mankind."

For us, the real hinge of history is the Christ event. History is contemporary because it is an inner estimate, an attitude toward events, and not the events themselves. And the Christ event that is history's main hinge is the Cross at the heart of the world. How we—and all the world—need this truth, in the present existential situation.