The relationship between the evangelical revivals of early nineteenth century America and the emergence of anti-slavery sentiment has long been the subject of considerable debate. The premier evangelist of antebellum America, Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), was one of the first to argue that revivalism directly influenced Northern abolitionist sentiment. In his memoirs, Finney depicted the militant Southern defense of the "peculiar institution" as coming in direct response to the success of Northern revivalists. As Finney observed "...slaveholders were much alarmed and exasperated by the constantly growing opposition to their institution throughout all the regions of the North where revival influences had been felt. They took up arms to defend and perpetuate the abomination, and it was abolished." In the last five decades, Finney's view has received confirmation through the use of diverse methodologies by different sectors of the American academic community. In 1933, economist Gilbert H. Barnes argued that abolitionist sentiment emerged in the wake of Finney's revivals in Western New York. In 1966, historian Anne C. Loveland, employing the methodology of intellectual history, posited the thesis that the rise of the demand for "immediate emancipation" was the result "of a new view of reform, the product of religious developments of the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." The centrality of revivalism in the emergence of abolitionism was recently restated by sociologist John L. Hammond. Hammond employed sophisticated quantitative methodology and argued from the statistical analysis of voting records that the center of revival activity, particularly in Western New York and the Western Reserve areas of Ohio, correspond to the center of abolitionist sentiment. For Hammond, the significance of revivalism lay not in its religious manifestations, but in the ethical content of revivalist rhetoric. This

trans-disciplinary interpretative consensus has placed the theological and exegetical questions at the forefront in any attempt to understand the sources of antebellum abolitionism; thus, the theological presuppositions of the abolitionists take on an importance that has often been overlooked. Because Luther Lee was one of the few significant evangelical abolitionists of the period to formalize a systematic theology, he warrants particular attention in any examination of the religious roots of abolitionism.

Luther Lee was no inconsequential figure in the popularization of abolitionism in America. He served as an agent for the New York Anti-Slavery Society and was among the organizers of the Liberty Party. Later, he was one of the leaders of a group of Methodists whose anti-slavery views conflicted with the sentiments of the Methodist Episcopal Church, causing them to withdraw and form the Wesleyan Connection. His *Elements of Theology* (1856) has been described as the “determinative systematic theology of the Wesleyan Methodists.”

The theology of Luther Lee did not emerge from a vacuum; it reflected the unique social and religious climate of antebellum America. That climate was characterized by buoyant optimism. A variety of reform movements competed for the affections of the people. The dominant religious movement of the period was the Second Great Awakening. This, the second great flowering of evangelical revivalism, represented a distinct shift in both revivalist techniques and theology. It was a theology which found perhaps its most consistent and complete expression in the circles of the fastest growing “and most fervent evangelical denomination of the period” — Methodism. Many of the most popular features of “new school” theology had been standard features of Methodism both in England and in America for several generations. The “individualistic, democratic, and optimistic emphases” of Wesley’s Arminian faith bore a striking resemblance to the new theological currents of the Second Great Awakening. In fact, the confluence of Methodism with

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6See Donald Dayton’s introduction to *Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee* (Chicago: Holrad House, 1975), p. 10.
10Ibid., p. 10.
the New Haven theology of Yale professor Nathaniel William Taylor (1786-1858) and the popular western revivalism associated with Finney was the most distinctive theological development of the period. It was an age not incorrectly identified as the age of Methodism.  

Taylor, in formulating a reasonable revival theology that would prosper in the optimistic and "democratic" spirit of Jacksonian America, subtly abandoned many of the objectionable features of classical Calvinism. He defined man as "...a moral agent; capable of moral character and of moral action — fitted to do the will, to accomplish the designs of God — thus, to live and act in eternal fellowship with God, in doing good." The doctrine of original sin was modified so that "sin was only in the sinning and hence, 'original' only in the sense that it was universal."  

At the heart of Taylor's theology was his doctrine of "moral government." God was the moral governor of the universe and His government, if unperverted, "would secure the great and true end of such a government, even the highest conceivable well-being of its subjects." Man, as a "moral agent" created in the image of the Creator, possessed a free will, and was capable of the "production of well-being, even the highest well-being." But man was also free "to neglect to act" in the best interest of God and mankind. To be inactive in such a selfish manner reflected man's propensity for evil or, as Taylor defined it, sin. Sin, for Taylor, consisted of the choice of individual well-being over the universal good of humanity. The duty of the revivalist was to make it clear that man, of his own free will, could renounce selfishness and pledge himself to obedience to God and hence universal benevolence. It was a theology that linked evangelism with social reform.  

The theology of Taylor was not exclusively the fare of academicians. It was shared by many of the major revivalists of the early nineteenth century including Lyman Beecher and Charles G. Finney. Finney's theology particularly reflected a sophisticated un-

derstanding of man as a social being.\textsuperscript{15} It was out of the theological context of antebellum evangelical Methodist revivalism that Luther Lee emerged. He was born into an impoverished upstate New York family in 1800. In 1819, Lee reaffirmed the faith of his deceased Methodist parents. Although nearly illiterate at the time of his conversion, over the next decade Lee moved toward the Methodist ministry. At the New York Methodist annual conference in 1831, Lee was given his elder’s orders. His natural leadership ability and vigorous intellect quickly established him as a leader in the New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. His initial notoriety came both from his success as a revivalist and from his able defense of Methodism against Calvinist, Unitarian, and especially Universalist detractors. It was through disputation with these detractors that Lee earned the epithet “Logical Lee.”

Like many converts to abolitionism, Lee experienced a sudden and dramatic conversion. On December 3, 1837, in the wake of the assassination of abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy, Lee in his Sunday evening sermon, announced his conversion to abolitionism.\textsuperscript{16} Over the next six years, Lee increasingly became involved in the growing slavery controversy in both American society at large and particularly within the Methodist Episcopal Church. In his autobiography, Lee identified the direction of his anti-slavery activity as twofold — “to save my country from the disgrace and guilt of slavery, and the church from its pollution and rottenness.” Lee observed, “I started out with love for the church which impelled me to seek her purity by the removal of slavery from her communion.”\textsuperscript{17} Lee’s commitment to a pure church was given expression in 1843 when he joined other Methodist abolitionists in the formation of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.\textsuperscript{18} Lee was given ample opportunity to demonstrate his leadership abilities in the new denomination. He served as president of three of the first six General Conferences and as editor of the Connection’s official publication — the \textit{True Wesleyan} (1843-1852). In 1852, Lee accepted a pastorate in the Wesleyan Church at Syracuse. He remained active in

\textsuperscript{15}In his theology, Finney wrote, “As saints supremely value the highest good of being, they will, and must, take a deep interest in whatever is promotive of that end. Hence, their spirit is necessarily that of the reformer. To the universal reformation of the world they stand committed.” \textit{Finney’s Systematic Theology}, edited by J. H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), p. 248.

\textsuperscript{16}See Lee’s sermon “On the Death of Elijah P. Lovejoy,” in \textit{Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee}, pp. 23-42.


the abolition movement, particularly through involvement with the underground railroad. In 1856, Lee published his Elements of Theology which became the standard theological treatise for the abolitionist denomination. It went through twelve editions before the end of the century. Lee served briefly as professor of theology at financially troubled Leoni College (Michigan) in 1856. In 1864, he accepted the professorship of theology at Adrian College (Michigan).

In 1867, with the conclusion of the Civil War and the issue of slavery resolved in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Lee rejoined that church. He served as a Methodist Episcopal pastor for ten years and, after a period of retirement, died in 1889 at the age of eighty-nine.

In the preface to his Elements of Theology, Lee identified his theological stance as "neither a high Calvinist, nor a Pelagian, nor even what some may call a low Arminian, but he [the author] advocates what he believes to be a true medium ground, where true gospel salvation is found at the point of union between divine and human agency."19 Even a cursory reading of Lee indicates that he stood firmly within the confines of the evangelical revivalism of Taylor and Finney. The doctrine of "moral government," the key to the theologies of Taylor and Finney, was crucial for Lee's theological construction. God was the moral governor of the universe. Man was a "moral being, possessing intelligence, a will, and a conscience."20 At the same time, in consistently Methodist fashion and in direct opposition to Taylor, Lee viewed humankind as inherently corrupt. Man was not merely corrupt in his volition or will; according to Lee, he was in his "fallen state, full of wickedness, estranged from God, possessing unholy affections and passions."21 To Lee, regeneration consisted of a renewal of man's fallen nature "by the power of the Holy Spirit, received through faith in Jesus Christ, whereby the regenerate are delivered from the power of sin which reigns over all unregenerate so that they love God, and through grace serve him with the affections of the heart."22 But in Wesleyan fashion, regeneration remained distinct from the highest possible Christian life, entire sanctification. Sanctification for Lee was the freeing of the Christian from the power of sin; its fruits were "to love God with all our hearts, and to walk in his holy commandments blameless."23

Although Lee went much further than Taylor or Finney in his

20 Ibid., p. 8.
21 Ibid., p. 121.
22 Ibid., p. 194.
23 Ibid., p. 211.
view of the nature and extent of human depravity, he stood squarely within the evangelical revivalist consensus with regard to man’s accountability before God. As he wrote,

The Scriptures teach that man is a subject of God’s moral government, by affirming of him, that he possesses all these elements which are essential to moral obligation and accountability. There are certain mental and moral attributes without which no being can be subject of moral government. These are seen in three divisions of the mental phenomena, intelligence, sensibility, and free will.\(^{24}\)

For Lee, the elements essential for moral obligation were: a knowledge of the human capacity to know, conscience or moral sense, knowledge of human states or conditions, memory, and, finally, free will. The most controversial ingredient, and the most significant in terms of social teaching, for Lee’s theological understanding of man’s accountability before God, was his doctrine of free will. At the heart of Lee’s extended defense of free will was his belief that if man were powerless or controlled by the strongest motive, then he could not be accountable for his actions. In such a case sin would be precluded for man would not be responsible for his own actions. As Lee observed,

. . . Sin is the transgression of the law, but to convict a man of a violation of a moral law, it must be made to appear that he has power to keep the law. The will of God must be the highest law in the universe to which man can stand related, hence, there can be no sin without a violation of this supreme law, as understood by the mind. It is clear that man’s will must be free, or it must be governed by a law of necessity, in some way derived from the Creator. If the latter be true, man’s actions sustain the same relation to the infinite mind as do the rush of waters or the flight of clouds, and man is not and cannot be a sinner.\(^{25}\)

It was out of the juxtaposition of Lee’s theology of moral government with its emphasis on the choice between right and wrong and human “free will” that his critique of slavery emerged. “When we contemplate man as a moral being,” wrote Lee, “we conceive of him as possessed of volition or freedom of will, intelligence to guide it, a conscience which renders him susceptible to impressions of right and wrong; we conceive of him as an accountable being, a subject of moral law, and of a just retribution, and consequently a subject of hope and fears, connected with the relation which the present life sustains to future destiny.”\(^{26}\) For Lee, the moral law of God imposed specific obligations on man. To stand in the way of these obligations, even in obedience to secular law, was sin. It was in this observation that Lee’s theology of the “higher law” took root. This doctrine was most clearly expressed in a sermon Lee preached on the

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 336.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., pp. 337-38.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 58. See also Donald Dayton, “The Sermons of Luther Lee: A Study in the Social Impact of Perfectionist Revivalism,” a paper read by the author at the American Academy of Religion Convention, October 30, 1976, p. 8.
death of Charles Turner Torrey. Torrey was a pioneer in the work of the underground railroad who had died in a Baltimore prison after being convicted and sentenced to six years at hard labor for helping a slave family escape. Preaching on Acts 23:29, "Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds," Lee declared, "The law of Christ is to be obeyed whatever human laws may exist to the contrary, and whatever consequences may attend obedience." Lee noted that the experiences of the prophets (Daniel) and the apostles (Peter) verified this position. But Lee further argued that Torrey was condemned and punished for carrying out acts specified in the Scriptures: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in strangers, visiting those imprisoned (Matt. 25:34-45). To punish Torrey was a simple act of human law setting aside the eternal demands of God's moral law and therefore a violation, in Lee's view, of God's law. For Lee, God's law was not calculated to assure social stability but obedience to a divine mandate that placed human institutions and laws under the scrutiny of transcendent moral precepts which in effect threatened the social structures of much of American society.

It was precisely at the point where human law usurped the obligations clearly mandated in the Bible for all Christians that Lee initiated his theological attack on slavery. Lee argued that it was "the duty of all intelligent beings to use all means within their reach to acquire a knowledge of God and his will." This principle, upon which the Bible societies of the nineteenth century flourished, implied a knowledge of Scripture. (Luke 16:29; John 5:39; Acts 17:11). But slaves were denied the right to acquire property and money, to learn to read, and to acquire Scriptures. Furthermore, the Bible required Christians to assemble to worship God (Heb. 10:75), but slavery denied the free assembly of Christian slaves. In effect, Lee argued that to allow slaves "the simple right of obeying the gospel" and giving them "the Scriptures to read according to their own consciences," and allowing them to select their own ministers "would come so near to the abolition of slavery as to leave

28Ibid., pp. 50-52.
30It is hard to overemphasize the importance of this argument for nineteenth century evangelicals. To deny people the truth of God's Holy Word seemed preposterous. In fact, the Methodist Episcopal Church had a statement in its book of discipline which called for the instruction of slaves so they could read the Scriptures. This was in direct opposition to the laws of many slave states. See True Wesleyan, Jan. 21, 1843.
but little to be done."  

Even more fundamental, to Lee, than slavery's denial of specific Biblical mandates was its abrogation of man's relationship with God and the obligation inherent in that relationship. Lee contrasted the absolute claim of God, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and with all thy strength" with the absolute claim of the master over slave as expressed in southern civil law. Lee's doctrine of free will was clearly evident as he argued,

To be under obligation to obey God, there must exist the right and power of devoting our lives to God, for there can be no obligation where there is not both right and power to respond to that obligation. But the slave, who is the property of man, has not and cannot have the power of devoting his life to God, because his life is not at his own disposal, according to the dictates of his own understanding of right: he cannot do what God requires but must do what men require, and wicked men too, who fear not God and regard not his law.

Lee's critique of slavery was also dependent upon his anthropology. For him, following Genesis 1:27, man was created in the image of God. By this Lee meant that man was created in "a moral likeness to God consisting in righteousness and true holiness." But slavery attempted to blot the divine image of God from man's soul. This was done by denying slaves an education and making them "beasts of burden or instruments of menial toil." At the same time, Lee charged slavery with degradation of humanity by denying man his rightful dominion over creation which, in fact, placed humans among the brutes. "All the rights and authority which God gave the first man," Lee charged, "belong equally to all men." In fact, Lee argued,

God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth'; and it was when the blood of all men — white, red, and black — flowed undistinguished in the veins of a common father, and rushed through its arterial course at the pulsations of the one individual heart that God crowned man with the right to possess and rule the world; and hence the right of possession and control belongs to all men, without distinction of color or nationality.

The relationship between abolitionists and American blacks remains one of the most contested aspects of antebellum historiography. Abolitionists have often been depicted as self-serving ego-maniacs committed to self-aggrandizement without regard for the benefits of the slaves or the American nation as a whole. And given the pervasiveness of racism in American history, it would be hard to imagine that evangelical abolitionists would not be tinged with some racial animosity. Never-

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31 Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 11.
32 Ibid., p. 5.
33 Lee, Elements of Theology, p. 58.
34 Lee, Autobiography, p. 204.
35 Ibid., p. 211.
theless, it is clear that Lee’s insistence upon a common origin for all the human family argued powerfully against making race a point of distinction for early Wesleyan Methodists. L. C. Matlack, an early Wesleyan, expressed the views of many when he wrote, “The contemptible meanness that characterizes our slaveholding country, in prejudice against color which generally prevails and which is making us a byword among the nations of the earth, exciting on their part an ill-concealed disgust for everything American. . . .”37 For them and other evangelicals committed to global evangelism, color was less a mark of distinction than whether one was an obedient disciple of Jesus Christ.

Lee’s strong beliefs concerning God’s moral government were apparent in his contention that slavery subverted human social relations and institutions. In particular, Lee attacked slavery for undermining human social relations and institutions. It was impossible, Lee charged, for a slave to belong to his or her mate and, at the same time, be the property of a third party. Lee noted how the right of property caused a strain in relations between slave couples for the simple reason that constant uncertainty weakened long-term commitments. In effect, Lee charged that slavery took “away the power of the wife to preserve her own purity, and this is true of married and unmarried females. The female that is made an article of property, cannot call her purity her own; it may be taken from her at the pleasure of her owner.”38 On precisely the same principle, Lee argued that slavery destroyed the social relationship between children and parents.39 In both cases, slavery was wrong because it made human beings, with all the virtues and responsibilities of individuals with free will, into property. This aspect of Lee’s abolitionist theology is evident in his definition of American slavery as “the system which reduces man to a chattel, and buys and sells him, and subjects him to the liabilities of other property, claiming the same right of property in the offspring by virtue of the right previously asserted to the parent.”40

The theology of Luther Lee was a Biblical theology. Even more than Finney or Taylor, who proceeded to build their theologies on the doctrine of moral government, Lee began with the Bible. Book One of his Elements of Theology was an extended discussion of the inspiration of the Scriptures. In the preface of his book, Slavery Examined in the Light of the Bible, Lee affirmed his absolute faith in the Bible. “With all honest believers in the Christian religion, the Scriptures are the ‘higher law,’ the only authoritative standard of right and wrong, and with them a successful appeal to the Bible is conclusive, the end of all controversy.”41 For

37True Wesleyan, Feb. 18, 1843.
38Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 17.
40Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 3.
41Ibid., p. 1.
Lee, the Bible condemned slavery on several counts. It condemned American slavery as "man stealing." "He that stealeth a man and selleth him or if he be found, in his hand, shall surely be put to death." (Ex. 21:16). It was clear to Lee that "as there was no title at first, they being stolen, it follows that there can be no title now, that they are stolen persons still, unless it can be shown when, under what circumstances, and upon what principles the title originated, and began to exist." 42

The Bible also condemned slavery by condemning trafficking in human beings. (Deut. 14:7, "If a man be found stealing any of his brethren ... maketh merchandise of him ... then that thief shall die.") Lee further argued that the Bible prohibited slavery under the title of involuntary servitude. (Deut. 23:15-16, "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master, the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee....") The Scriptures also precluded slavery by condemning the practice of requiring work without wages. (Jer. 22:13-15, "Woe unto him ... that uses his neighbors service without wages...") 43

At the core of the Biblical critique of slavery, for Lee, was the Bible’s condemnation of all oppression. In rhetoric which sounds surprisingly contemporary, Lee boldly proclaimed that the activities of God in history as liberator, such as in the Exodus, applied to nineteenth century American society. In fact, Lee warned his readers that God "condemns oppression and oppressors; he commands his people to relieve the oppressed, he threatens oppressors with terrible punishment, and has already expended more of his thunder, and more phials of wrath on the heads of oppressors than all other sinners." 44 Lee’s Biblical understanding of activity on behalf of the oppressed was not limited to public condemnation of Southerners. For him, the Bible called for active participation on behalf of the oppressed through the providing of assistance to escaped slaves. The Biblical basis for such support was found in Deut. 33:15-16.

 Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

Nor was the activity on behalf of the oppressed limited to non-violence. Lee believed that, in most cases, violence was unjustified.

All wars, instituted for conquest and plunder, are systems of wholesale murders. If one man has not a right to kill his neighbor, because he hates him, or for the selfish purpose of obtaining his money, or taking possession of his house and right of associating with himself, a thousand or ten thousand, and killing as many for the same or no better ends. No war can be justified on any principle which would not

42Ibid., p. 27.
44Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 41.
justify an individual in taking the life of a neighbor on the ground of the right of self-defense. 45

However, when abolitionist John Brown was captured and executed at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia for attempting to arm slaves and lead them north to freedom, Lee jumped to his defense. “He [Brown] believed not only that slavery is a great wrong, but in common with mankind, that it is right to oppose oppression, and defend human liberty, \textit{vi et armies} — by force and arms.’’ 46

In antebellum America, evangelical religion was more than a mere personal creed. It served as one of the pillars of American society. In such a climate the Bible became a weapon to be wielded by both sides in any dispute. Lee was keenly aware that any successful crusade against slavery would first have to defuse the Biblical defense used to justify the “peculiar institution.” In fact, Lee concluded, “it is only necessary then to drive slavery from the Bible, expel it from the pulpit and chase it from the altars of religion and it will find but little quarter in the world.” 47

Lee’s extended critique of the Biblical and exegetical defense of slavery was one of his greatest contributions to the movement. In it Lee dealt, in great detail, with both the Old and New Testament defenses for slavery. It was an impressive accomplishment for a man without formal education. It indicated not only an intimate familiarity with Biblical language, but considerable reading in contemporary historical sources.

The Old Testament basis for slavery was built around three key arguments. First, advocates of slavery applied the curse of Canaan in Genesis 9:25-26 to the colored races of Africa. Secondly, the example of Abraham and the patriarchs was used to legitimize slavery. And thirdly, the regulations regarding servitude in the Mosaic law were seen as a divine sanction for slavery. 48

Drawing from contemporary historical scholarship, Lee charged that the Biblical Canaan did not refer to the colored races, but, in fact, to Canaanites who were the founders of Phoenicia, and subsequently much of the civilizations of the ancient Near East. Even more importantly, Lee noted that the present slaveholders were not descendants of Shem (the one in the Biblical narrative granted the services of Canaan); and thus, even if it could be shown that America’s colored people were descendants of Canaan, they could not be held by their present masters. 49 Even further, Lee concluded that the curse against Canaan did not apply because, as he wrote, “it is not American slavery nor anything like it that the posterity of

45 Lee, Elements of Theology, p. 433.
46 Lee, Five Sermons and a Tract, p. 107.
47 Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 49.
48 Ibid., pp. 47-105.
49 Ibid., pp. 52-59.
Canaan was subjected to by the curse pronounced upon a hapless father. The curse was political subjection, political servitude, and not chattel slavery” (Jos. 9:3-27; II Samuel 16:1-6).50

Likewise, Lee dismissed the contention that the practice of patriarchal slaveholding could be applied to legitimize American slaveholding. He argued that the word “slave” was used with reference to all classes of laborers and not exclusively with chattel property. In a weaker argument, Lee contended that the great responsibility given by Abraham to his servants indicated that they could not have not been held against their will and hence could not have been chattel property (Gen. 24:1-5; 14:10, 53). Finally, Lee argued that if patriarchal behavior was to be normative, and used as justification for American slaveholding, it must also be normative in all other areas of human behavior. But, Lee observed, Abraham had used duplicity (Gen. 12:13; 20:12) and had had concubines, hardly an acceptable behavior for emulation for Victorian minded evangelicals.51

Lastly, Lee dealt with the arguments which based slavery on the Mosaic precedent. Here Lee effectively argued that slavery could not be justified because the Law of Moses included provisions defining its character and limitations. Slavery, Lee believed, was not new at the time of Moses and Moses wished not to sanction an existing evil but to provide for its restraint and modification. “It [the Mosaic law] appears,” Lee observed, “to have been introduced for the exclusive protection and benefit of the servile classes, and not for the benefit of the masters. American slavery will have to be greatly modified before even as much as this can be said in its favor.”52

Lee’s critique of the New Testament justification for slavery was built primarily around an analysis of the Greek words translated as “slave” in the English Bible and his interpretation of the Pauline teachings concerning individual obedience in one’s calling. Lee identified three Greek words that could be translated “slave.” The first, “andrappodon,” came from the words “aneer” (man) and “pous” (foot) and was exclusively used to signify a slave and nothing else. The second, “arguronetos,” was derived from “arguros” (silver) and “oneomai” (buy) and identified someone purchased with silver. It obviously applied only to chattel slavery. But since neither of these terms were found in the New Testament, Lee was quick to point out that any mention of slaves in the New Testament should not lead one to automatically assume that chattel slavery was meant by the designation. The Greek word translated “slave” in the English Bible was “doulos.” “Doulos” appeared, Lee noted, over

50Ibid., p. 58.
51Ibid., pp. 59-68.
52Ibid., p. 69.
one hundred twenty times in the New Testament. It could be used to mean either a chattel slave or a free person serving under another individual. Lee contended that “doulos” was used in a variety of ways. It referred to Christians who were servants of God (Acts 2:13), apostles and preachers who proclaimed the word of God and, in particular, servants of God or Jesus (Romans 1:1). Further, Lee argued that it was of great importance that “andrapodistees,” generally translated “slaveholder,” did not appear in the Scriptures.53

Lee was particularly concerned with the use slaveholders made of certain Pauline passages which they interpreted as sanction of the institution of slavery (I Cor. 7:20; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25; I Tim. 6:1-2; Philemon). Lee’s critiques followed the same course with each passage. First, he observed that the use of the word “doulos” could not prove that Paul had chattel slavery in mind since it was applied in the Scriptures to all the followers of Jesus and hired laborers as well. Secondly, Lee argued that Paul specifically mentioned in I Cor. 7:20-22, “if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman; likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant.” For Lee, whose entire critique of slavery was based upon his doctrine of free will, this clearly indicated that even if a form of slavery similar to the American variety were meant in the passage, it was the duty of the slave to claim his/her liberty whenever the opportunity presented itself. “This makes the apostle assert,” Lee declared, “that a converted slave is a slave of man, and God’s free man at the same time. This is impossible, for, if the obligations of slavery are mortally binding on the slave, he cannot be free to serve God.”54 Thirdly, Lee maintained that Paul’s specific mandate in Gal. 3:28, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free . . . ,” implied a partnership that would set aside any law that could possibly make one Christian the slave of another. This general principle of Pauline teaching received an incarnate expression in the book of Philemon when Onesimus was placed on equal terms with his owner who Lee saw as his employer. This was based heavily on Lee’s translation of “koinonos” (“partners” in the Authorized Version) which indicated that slavery disrupted the equality of believers in Christ. As Lee wrote, “in every case in which the word is used, it implies equality in a sense which renders it impossible to conceive of a slaveholder and his chattel slave as partners, yet this is the relationship which Paul marked out for Philemon and Onesimus.”55 For Lee, Paul not only did not justify slavery but gave clear evidence that chattel slavery violated the equal fellowship of believers.

54Ibid., p. 125.
55Ibid., p. 176.
In the final analysis, Lee's view of Christianity as a force in human liberation came from his understanding of the new birth as calling people to both an active obedience to God and an active confrontation of sin. The Christian was to take part not exclusively in religious endeavors, but in all manner of social reform, among them abolition, temperance, and women's rights. The explicit Biblical mandates to proclaim liberty of the captives was as integral a part of the evangelical abolitionists' faith as midweek prayer. For them, Jesus was not merely their savior—a fact they attested to at every opportunity—but a viable ethical norm. As Lee wrote,

It is a strange position which affirms that He who came to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison-doors to them that are bound, and who gave himself a ransom for all, made provision in his system of government for leaving one portion of his people the absolute property and slaves of others, from the dark hour of life's opening sorrows, until they find a refuge in the arms of death and in the darker sleep of the grave.57

The extent to which Luther Lee's abolitionist views were dependent upon popular appeals to secular authorities is difficult to determine, particularly since the majority of American Protestants of the antebellum period were unlikely to draw fine distinctions between their religious and political allegiances. However, Lee was, in a fundamental sense, classically Methodist. His entire social critique, which was heavily dependent upon the perfectionist theological current of antebellum America, rested upon the assumption that a pre-existent God had revealed himself through the Scriptures to people who were, in turn, called upon to act in the light of these revelations, immediately abandoning sin and choosing righteousness.

To the modern reader, conditioned by the social theories of a less optimistic age, Lee's view that there is always an obvious choice between right and wrong which can be acted upon, may appear incredibly naive; and his insistence that political freedom is a precondition to the carrying out of the mandates of the gospel open to question. Nevertheless, Lee's theology is appealing in its limitation, for it reveals a God whose activity in human history is not dependent upon the accuracy of one's theology, but upon the truth of his course of action. The figure of Jehovah as human liberator which emerges in stark contrast to the god of passive obedience to the status quo gives Lee's theology a vitality which calls forth emulation today as it did in the nineteenth century.

56 For Lee's views on prohibition and women's rights, see his sermons, "Prohibitory Laws," pp. 59-76 and "Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel," pp. 77-100 in Lee, Five Sermons and a Tract.
57 Lee, Slavery Examined, p. 107.