

Logical Luther Lee and the Methodist war against slavery

It is worthy to note that this book is readable from many distinct viewpoints. One is as a look into the life of an early Methodist pastor and life in early America prior to the Civil War; another is the use of the church and denominations in backing political action to resolve social issues. The roots of the equal rights movement in America and even glimpses of prohibition are also notable threads woven into the fabric of this work. Taking note of elections, changing tides in the economy and even heretical movements of that time add to the understanding of history from a personal level that supplies a richness and reality to Lee's life.

Through this paper I will provide a brief sketch regarding the life of Luther Lee as provided in this book along with some of the personal reflections made while following the author and Lee on the valuable journey of this man's life. To close I will summarize some general conclusions made upon completion of this fine work.

Notable to Lee's upbringing was the strong influence which his mother had in his early life. As Lee remembered having an emotional response to his mother's reading to him of the life of Freeborn Garrettson, a prominent Methodist in America, the steadfast and lifelong commitment to the Methodist church is forecasted to the observant reader. Lee's early struggles with education and rejection show the confidence that Lee himself as well as those around him must have had in his rudimentary intelligence. One should note that a lack of education does not make one dumb, Lee's life shows this to be true.

The moral standards to which Lee held himself too are a testament to his upbringing as well as a testimony to his personal integrity.

The evangelical reform style of debate that Lee adopted and worked to perfect in his debates with Universalists, is another defining moment in his life. Through the practice of being faithful to God in his study and true to the integrity of scripture this ‘uneducated’ man was able to rebuff theological heresy while ministering to the people at hand. His time as a circuit rider also shows Lee’s heart for ministry as he did not just seek to fulfill the basics of the task at hand, but through careful planning and collaboration developed a solid plan of evangelism and encouraged other men in ministry to do the same.

As Lee confronted the “heresy of slavery” again his moral obligations to work to right this wrong in the country and in the church establishment were clear. He worked within the organization of the church to create change. It is notable that Lee at no point endeavored to be a boat rocker or trouble maker. His work always appeared to be for appropriate reasons and those he confronted and debated never saw him as anything other than a man who was acting honestly in a positive way to correct what he saw were true wrongdoings. The kind article submitted by Samuel J. May to the newspaper in Syracuse as Lee resigned his post there is just one piece of evidence that supports this view of Lee.

One thing is certain, Lee did not wish to leave the Methodist Episcopal church. He was left no choice given the type of man he was, and the call to planting and supporting the Wesleyan Methodist church was one that he took on wholeheartedly with the love of a parent for his child. His ability to mediate disagreements and keep proceedings moving forward were undoubtedly crucial to the start of this new

denomination. It was fitting and suitable that when the crisis of the slavery issue had been resolved that Luther Lee returned home to the Methodist Episcopal church.

There were several misconceptions held by this reader as I began reviewing this text. Thankfully my misconceptions were answered through the text and many worthwhile issues were brought to mind. First I wondered if becoming an abolitionist could possibly be a side-track for a minister who could have been saving souls for Christ rather than building support for social and political issues.

Two things in the reading convinced me of the importance of what Lee was called to stand for regarding abolitionism. First was a quote found on page 107 “antislavery men did not forget their call to evangelize sinners,” this understanding was important to begin to shift my focus and to alert me that working to resolve one problem in the church does not necessarily preclude other works that do continue. Also crucial turning points that changed my attitude to the cause of Luther Lee were the many cases that Lee referred to in his sermons or read and reacted to in other ways. Some were legal cases involving slaves, while others directly displayed the corrupt nature of some of the bishops in the Methodist Episcopal Church. There were notable similarities in some cases to the misuse of power of the catholic church in Europe which led to the reformation.

This work caused me to begin asking myself, what do I stand for as a minister of the gospel? What beliefs of mine are non-negotiable? What would cause me to leave my denomination? How do I handle debate, and how do I handle conflict and how important are the rights of others around me as I seek to serve God.

Another noticeable personal application for me was Lee’s ability to teach students and to encourage them in the importance of education, when he was largely responsible

for his own education. Rather than being bitter from his personal background he chose the route to viewing the positives of education and the greater possibilities that might await his students. I am not convinced that this man Luther Lee liked a good fight, I came away from reading this man's life feeling as though he was a man that loved a challenge. The challenge of finding his way to fulfill a dream that his mother had planted in his heart early on. The challenge of educating yourself and raising the bar of ministry by being at your best. The challenge of humbling yourself before your wife and allowing women to teach you. The challenge of facing those that oppose appropriate theology, and those that support the abuse of other human beings in a sinful institution. Eventually forging the way back home, without bitterness or anger.

Luther Lee was a brave man who served God from the strength of his convictions and in the humility of his heart. I believe I will be a better man and stronger servant of God if I learn from the lessons displayed in this work. It was a privilege to observe the life of this man and it gave me great cause to wonder what the course of my life in ministry will hold.