“The Right Use of the Appropriate Means” - The Debate Over Strategy and Goals Among Nineteenth Century Evangel Reformers

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According to the eighteenth century Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, the spiritual awakening he witnessed in New England was completely unexpected, a "surprising" work of God unaided by human instrumentality. In the distinctly different theological climate of the nineteenth century, Arminian Charles G. Finney was convinced that a revival was "not a miracle," but simply a natural result of Christians availing themselves of the resources placed at their disposal by God. To produce a successful revival, Finney believed, all that his fellow preachers had to do was to engage in the "right use of the appropriate means."

The so-called "appropriate means" to which Finney was referring were the controversial "new measures" of evangelistic technique which he and other revivalists were at that time employing. Finney’s new measures included the public participation of women, the overt display of religious emotion, and the promotion of revival meetings that would last for several days. Most importantly (for our purposes), Finney also insisted that revivals could flourish only when Christians had a proper attitude "in regard to any question involving human rights"—by which he was indicating issues such as temperance and slavery. Unlike most evangelists (then and now), Finney was convinced that a preacher’s engagement with the pressing social concerns of the day was an important accessory to the work of converting sinners. Nonetheless, Finney always viewed his commitment to social concerns as an "appendage" to revivals; it was never to take away from the primary task of personal evangelism.

Finney fully expected other revival preachers to understand and agree with the pragmatic parameters of his maxim to pursue the "right use of the appropriate means." Many of those who were inspired by Finney’s revivalism, however, went beyond his rather cautious involvement with social reform and his opportunistic

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standard for achieving successful results. These other reformers debated what specific "means" were appropriate and what, in fact, constituted the "right use" of those means. The outcome of this debate was a conflict among nineteenth century evangelicals regarding social reform strategy, a conflict that was derived from their differing goals and theological presuppositions.¹

Through their involvement in this struggle over strategy and goals, evangelical reformers were attempting to resolve the ethical tension that exists between means and ends, a seemingly relentless quandary confronting those Christians of every era who are committed to seeking a more just society. Thus, a study of antislavery advocates (abolitionists) and other nineteenth century evangelical reformers provides us with an example of some of the challenges and pitfalls facing all of us as we try to live out our Christian vocation with integrity.²

Specifically, nineteenth century reformers disagreed with one another over three related questions. First, to what extent can Christians use power in order to achieve their desired outcome? That is, how should Christians relate to the "principalities and powers" of this age, given the strategy of "nonpower" that seems inherent in the gospel? What is the correct stance, they asked, that one should take toward existing political and ecclesiastical institutions? Does one accept these institutions as legitimate; does one try to reorganize and purify them; or does one stand over against them as a prophetic witness? At issue was the problem of who does the empowering in the reign of God—God himself, human beings, or some cooperative combination of them both?

Closely related to this first question was a second: what is the appropriateness of using coercion to obtain desired results? This apparently straightforward query was complicated by the existence of various tactical options used by abolitionists—personal persuasion, political action, civil disobedience, rebellion, and even the threat of war—all of which could be defined as coercive strategies to a greater or lesser degree. Hence, the reformers questioned further, what amount of coercion is acceptable or unacceptable? Is any violence permissible? Where is the line between violence and nonviolence? Such topics became especially critical among antislavery reformers in the 1840s and 1850s with the escalation of anti-abolitionist vigilantism and the rise of sectional jingoism preceding the Civil War.

A final question concerned the dilemma that reformers faced between their commitment to religious principle and their utilitarian dependance on expedient methods. Simply put, evangelicals asked themselves which tactical model was to take priority: a reliance on pragmatic means (emphasizing the achievement of success), or an adherence to ethical principles (insisting on sanctified behavior, without the expectation of success)?

Thus, in their desire to live out the implications of the kingdom of God within American society, abolitionists and other reformers had to contend with (at least) three fundamental tensions—power versus nonpower, violence versus nonviolence, and success versus nonsuccess. These three concerns certainly were not unique to nineteenth century reformers; indeed, Christians in every time period must deal with them. Nonetheless, such strategic questions take on different forms in different contexts—and the particular context within which nineteenth century evangelicals deliberated was the emerging democracy of the young American republic.
The early nineteenth century in the United States is often referred to as the "era of the common man," a period when the demand for greater democratization was felt throughout all institutions of American society, including the Church. It is not surprising, then, that the theological notion of the “kingdom of God” came to be known in America by a democratic euphemism—the so-called “moral government of God”—a term that referred to the extent of God’s jurisdiction over human activities. The moral law of God’s government, according to nineteenth century thought, had an approximate equivalent in the civil law, if the civil law was democratically administered.

By using this theological concept, evangelical preaching provided a religious vocabulary that coincided with the prevailing political discourse of the early American republic. Those nurtured under such preaching, particularly revivalistic reformers, appropriated the moral government language to frame their deliberations concerning the civil government. Among Northern social reformers (such as the abolitionists), the imminent “government of God” was identified with the government of the United States—but only after the latter had been democratically reformed and freed from the sin of slavery.

It was believed that sufficient human means were at the disposal of revivalists and reformers to help establish the divine government. With the assistance of these available means, each moral agent was free to choose to obey God. When practiced by regenerated individuals throughout the whole society, such obedience would eventually effect (or at least closely approximate) the harmonious millennial government of God.

This social optimism was made possible by the general spirit of millennial expectation that existed among the religious segment of the population. Millennialism is a theological concept regarding the prophesied reign of God on earth. The most prevalent antebellum expression of this concept was postmillennialism. Postmillennialism asserts that Christ’s second coming will occur after an idyllic thousand-year period. According to this belief, human beings are presently in the penultimate time prior to the millennium. It is the responsibility of humanity to assist in ushering in the impending millennium by approximating God’s government as much as possible. On a personal level, the postmillennial goal assumes that individuals can become holy. By extension, the collated holiness of many individuals will eventually result in the millennial society.

The United States was viewed as the most suitable arena for God’s unfolding millennial drama. Abolitionist Jonathan Blanchard was convinced that “the world is on its return to God,” with America leading the way. Blanchard foresaw that reforms would sweep the land. Though there was a great amount of work to be done, there was an exuberance and a certainty that it would be accomplished, since it was God’s work. Already, as revivalistic reformers pointed out, the temperance reformation had produced widespread results. Such success encouraged the reformers toward ever more ambitious endeavors in preparation for the millennium. For abolitionists, this meant the creation of a society free from slavery.

**Power versus Nonpower: The Problem of Institutionalization**

In the early years of the abolitionist movement (before 1840), Northern evangelical reformers were in general agreement that their principal task was simply to persuade others that slavery must be ended immediately. Within a few years, though, more definitive
strategic matters were broached. As one reformer reflected some years later regarding this important tactical juncture: “When a large body of the people were convinced of the truths abolitionists had taught them, the question arose, How shall they best be led to put their principles in practice?” Their predominant tack had been simply “moral persuasion”—a term that referred to the voluntary convincing of others by the use of the press, the pulpit, various forms of education, and legislative petitions. Up to that point, abolitionists had eschewed overt political activity or any trappings of institutional power.13

By 1840, however, the effectiveness of moral persuasion was being questioned by many abolitionists. It seemed that more efforts were required just to produce the same results. For example, one of their original goals—the persuasion of slaveholders to emancipate their own slaves—was a dismal failure. In some ways, the South was more unyielding in its commitment to slavery than it had been prior to the rise of abolitionism. And the North was equally intolerant of antislavery agitation, as evidenced by unremitting mob violence directed against abolitionists. Abolitionists realized that their attempts to change the political and ecclesiastical structures by moral persuasion had failed.14

Many abolitionists believed that they were bogged down by the ineffective tactics of moral persuasion. Since “the motto of abolitionists should be ‘onward,’” wrote a contributor to an antislavery paper, then “greater force should be immediately brought into the field.” One contemporary perceptively observed that, for such reformers, “moral persuasion” was no longer “potent enough, for their cause. Hence they are hurried onward, like mad men, to grasp the civil arm to aid in accomplishing their purpose.” Some abolitionists were now willing to embrace the tactics of power politics, tactics that had long been used by their opponents. Other abolitionists, however, were unwilling to sacrifice their high standards in order to play the political game.15

Such disagreements among reformers were due to differing views about whether Christians should rely upon the power of human institutions to reach their goals and, consequently, the degree to which human governments were to participate in the establishment of God’s government. Polemics among abolitionists consisted of deliberations about the role of organized structures in the emerging millennial order. Thus an understanding of the divisions that existed among abolitionists can be gained by analyzing the ways in which they understood and talked about God’s government, human government, and the interaction between the two. Various formulations of abolitionism represented various degrees of support for or denial of the power of institutions.

There was a spectrum of views regarding the amount of institutionalization considered appropriate within the society. Differences among abolitionists were articulated in the language of their theological discussions concerning the appropriate structures for a democratic society. These differences can be sorted into distinct groups that existed along an “institutionalization continuum”—specifically, those who were supporters of traditional institutions, those who were members of new abolitionist political parties and denominations, and those anti-institutionalist abolitionists who rejected all forms of human empowerment.16

At one end of the spectrum of antislavery views regarding institutionalization were evangelicals who supported traditional structures. These were the abolitionists who endorsed existing churches and traditional politics. They decided to remain within the
established denominations and parties in order to reach their goal of the immediate end to slavery.

Abolitionists who were institution-supporting felt that slavery was merely an evil blemish that needed to be removed from a generally healthy society. They thought that by advocating antislavery from a position of power they could raise the religious consciousness of the people within their churches and political parties. Many of them were concerned about achieving realistic, practical results which, they hoped, could be obtained more readily by working within established structures than by staying aloof from power structures in an attitude of self-righteous purity.17

Institution-supporting abolitionists were convinced that human principalities and powers were ordained by God. People need to be controlled by coercive governments until the millennial government of God puts an end to inherent human sinfulness. Furthermore, following the dictates of Romans 13, citizens must submit to their civil leaders as instruments of God’s law on earth, for the external human law is equivalent to the law of God.18 Since institution-supporting abolitionists thought that God ordained the existing political organizations, they were dedicated to working through these extant structures, hoping that they could change the laws to conform to abolitionist goals.19 Evangelical leaders in the major denominations and political parties believed that human structures were a pragmatic means to a desirable end. Since such structures would never be perfected, significant social change would occur only when religious people were willing to compromise their utopian principles. As a Whig partisan explained: “Politics is a game of expediency.”20

Other abolitionists took a middle stance between institutionalism and anti-institutionalism.21 They formed new abolitionist denominations, such as the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.22 They also formed an avowedly evangelical political pressure group called the Liberty Party, the first political party to be unequivocally committed to the elimination of slavery. Liberty Party leaders believed that democratic governments in church and state were divinely-established institutions, a part of God’s moral government. God’s influence, they asserted, is exerted “through the instrumentality of human governments.” Yet, while they affirmed the divine intention for human government in general, they also condemned the existing governments as immoral. Liberty leaders contended that the established systems of power needed to be reorganized to conform to the standards of God’s government. Their opponents were accurate when they asserted that the Liberty Party “invoked Divine authority to justify a use of political power in...reforming the state.” These political abolitionists were resorting to means that relied on a form of power (the legislative compulsion of other people) while at the same time challenging the existing power structures.23

Contrary to those who maintained traditional institutions, Liberty leaders felt that political parties and churches must be rigorously altered so that the organizational power of human structures was carefully limited. But contrary to the anti-institutionalists, Liberty leaders felt that there was a need for Christians to exert some power within social structures so that society could function in an orderly manner. Their tactic was to come out from existing “despotic” institutions and to literally “re-form” them along sanctified lines. They described their strategy as “secession and re-organization.” In their view, it was pos-
sible to exert a limited degree of democratically-elected power while still maintaining their distance from those who used power in an arbitrary or capricious manner.24

Liberty Party leaders began with the premise that human cooperation with God was essential for the successful establishment of the divine government on earth. One Liberty man asserted the importance of human initiative in the form of a rhetorical question: “Are not Christians themselves a part of those means which God makes use of to carry forward his moral government?25” On the societal level, this synergistic theological concept led to the view that some human institutions were divinely-ordered, but that such institutions needed to be democratically reorganized and carefully circumscribed. The Liberty Party agreed with anti-institutionalists that existing human governments (both civil and religious) were corrupt. At the same time, they agreed with the supporters of institutions that some power structures should not be destroyed, but maintained. They believed that human governments should be reordered to correspond with God’s democratic moral government. When that occurred the millennium would commence, for God’s government would be coterminous with human government: a “perfect state of society” would exist.25 In both ecclesiastical and political matters, the members of the Liberty Party were trying to hold a delicate balance between their desire to renounce institutional tyranny and their perception of the need for some structure. They thought that it was important for abolitionists to find a “middle ground.”

At the other end of the abolitionist spectrum of views regarding the use of institutional power were the followers of the prominent antislavery advocate, William Lloyd Garrison. The Garrisonian abolitionists asserted that the only legitimate strategic measure for religious reformers was moral suasion. These nonresistants, as they were called, believed that coercive actions of any kind were sinful. Since human governments are based on the premise that legalized compulsion could be used to back up their legislative actions, nonresistants defined such structures as inherently sinful. “Political action, by voting, even for the abolition of slavery, under a civil government based on physical force,” was regarded as sinful by the Garrisonians. Their religious consciences were to have no involvement with partisan politics.26

According to the Garrisonians, it was fruitless to attempt to legislate change, because human institutions (both civil and ecclesiastical) would never be purified. God’s moral government would be actuated in God’s time, and only through the agency of individual moral influence. According to Garrison, “political reformation is to be effected solely by a change in the moral vision of the people, not by attempting to prove that it is the duty of every voter to be an abolitionist.”27

The Garrisonians shared a common assumption: the radical sovereignty of God’s rule over human behavior and institutions made external human law superfluous. Human institutions such as religious denominations, political parties, and even the government of the United States, all of which mediated between God and humanity, were unnecessary if Christians would completely obey God’s law. Since the Garrisonians believed that God’s law could be perceived directly and comprehended adequately by any unrestrained individual, no other person or human institution could or should attempt to define that law. In fact, divine law was intended to supersede and replace all mortal laws, rules and institutions. The interposition of any human element whatsoever between an individual and
God was considered an unwarranted assumption of divine authority. Human authorities were considered wrong because they were coercive. External human law required restraint in order to force compliance, and thus denied an individual complete freedom of conscience. Slavery was the prime example of a coercive institution. Once slavery was viewed in this paradigmatic way, it was not difficult for Garrisonian abolitionists to believe that tyrannical institutions of any kind, and especially those connected with slaveholding, were the source of society’s imperfections. They understood the “the disorder, confusion and misery, which every where prevail” in society as caused by worldly power exercised by unnatural, artificial, sinful institutions.26 Church polities, in particular, were problematic, because “the present organized church associations and organizations, as they are, are not only in the way of humanity...but in the way of Christianity itself.”27

All of the abolitionists believed that human society could and should approximate the millennium—the eventual and inevitable rule of the government of God on earth. This millennial rule would be established by the incremental perfection of individuals until the entire society was perfected. But according to the Garrisonians, human structures stood in the way of the establishment of the divine order; therefore, those structures should be abolished in preparation for the millennium. Continued adherence to human institutions among Christians impeded the consummation of God’s millennial rule, and, according to Garrison, “whatever the gospel is designed to destroy at any period of the world, being contrary to it, ought now to be abandoned.”28 The only appropriate response for a Christian was to “come out from among them, and be ye separate.” For Garrisonians that meant severing all connections with human structures, including support for political activities or local Christian congregations, since they imposed unnatural restraints upon individuals.29

According to the Garrisonians, any attempt at reforming or restructuring human organizations was not only wrongheaded, it was wicked. A somewhat improved situation brought on by reforms would only delay the eventual necessary destruction of all human devices, and thus delay the harmonized society of the millennium. The type of government that they proposed was to be “immediately exercised by God” rather than organized by humans, since such a human structure would inevitably be based on coercive restraint. The harmony of this divine government would result in a new society in which individual self-mastery held sway and in which the moral law was obeyed on a purely voluntary basis.30 Eventually, the Garrisonians withdrew from human institutions. They developed a strong antipathy toward all those who continued to support the established structures. Since “government is upheld by physical strength, and its laws are enforced at the point of the bayonet,” the nonresistants repudiated “all human politics.” Churches, which were shams of true religion, were also to be discarded. Organized religion was to be replaced by each individual’s own religion of the heart, unmediated by any creed or clergyman.31

**Violence versus Nonviolence: The Problem of Coercion**

Coincident with the problem of institutional power was the problem of coercion. Initially, the majority of abolitionists were pacifists; they viewed all war as unjustified
aggression—similar in its barbarism to the enslavement forced upon African Americans. The abolitionists’ pacifist position became most forcefully articulated in the mid-1840s during the Mexican War. The Mexican War was a baldly expansionistic enterprise that soon became a divisive domestic policy issue within American society. In response to the War’s proponents, who hoped to extend slave territory by confiscating Mexican land, the abolitionist Liberty party took a firm stand against the conflict.  

Likewise, abolitionists within the evangelical denominations used the widely-perceived immorality of the Mexican War as a springboard for their declarations of disgust toward all wars. The Rochester Annual Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection (an abolitionist denomination), declared in 1847 that “the gospel of Christ is eminently the gospel of peace,...whereas war in its spirit and practice is antagonistic to the gospel.” In this vein, they resolved “to maintain [a] high and uncompromising opposition to war as an inhuman and anti-Christian practice and as one of the sins in the sisterhood of evil now rife throughout our common country and desolating our poor fallen world.” Even more strongly worded was their statement of 1852, in which they resolved that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is opposed to all forms of war, that every war is the crime of the nation or people that wage it, that every battle is a bloodstained blot, that every victory is a loss, and that we will do all in our power to oppose war, and to promote the principles of peace, until the time shall come in which we have good hope, when men shall beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks, and learn war no more.

As late as 1860, they reiterated their ever avowed principles upon the inhuman system of war. We regard it to be in direct conflict with the first principles of Revealed Religion—as having its origin in selfishness, lustful, and revengful [sic] passions—a relic of a barbarous age, and the stronghold of despotism and slavery.

It was during this same time period, however, that abolitionists (including the Wesleyan Methodists) were becoming increasingly involved in the Liberty Party, which was an attempt to use political power to extirpate slavery. As these abolitionists became more and more comfortable with the idea that the exercise of political power was justified during the (supposedly) limited interim before the millennial government of God was established, it became easy to slide down the slippery slope of coercion towards other forms of empowerment, such as civil disobedience, the armed insurrection of slaves and, eventually, the necessity of war in order to crush the rebellious slavocracy of the South. Consequently, over the years that led up to and beyond the Civil War, evangelical abolitionists significantly altered their former posture of unconditional pacifism.

By 1863, for instance, at the height of the Civil War, the Wesleyan Methodist’s Rochester Conference declared that they were “for God and our country, and this without evasion, condition or exception.” The Conference resolved, in an abrupt about-face from their earlier explicit opposition to all war, that “while regretting, the necessity of an
appeal to arms...yet we justify such appeal, and offer...our prayer for the further success of our arms. Similarly, in 1864, the Wesleyans stated:

We stood for coercion when Sumpter [sic] was fired upon, and the history of this [sic] ‘War for the Union’ has taught us that Subjugation needs to take the place of coercion....While [we] regard...War as in itself undesirable, and even an evil—yet as a part of a great National Police System, we hold it legitimate; and in defense of imperiled rights fully justifiable. Our present War being provoked for the Support of Constitutional Freedom, and the rights of man, has our unqualified approbation, and our Prayers for its success in supressing [sic] Rebellion.59

At the end of the war, the Wesleyans reveled in the presumed divine implications of the Union victory. They declared that they were “doubling [their] diligence” for social reform work now that the imminent day was close at hand when “God shall break every chain and let the oppressed go free that we may sing literally, ‘The year of Jubilee has come.’” As historian James Moorhead has stated, Yankee Protestants such as the Wesleyans were convinced that the Civil War was the final apocalyptic shedding of blood needed to atone for America’s original sin of slavery—a necessary evil in order to bring about the conditions requisite to inaugurate God’s millennial government.60

As the century wore on, the Wesleyan Methodists moved even farther away from their previous pacifism. During the Spanish-American War—America’s imperialistic foray into Cuba (and elsewhere)—the Rochester Conference resolved that, although they were opposed to war for aggression or conquest, and deprecating a necessity of a resort to arms, yet seeing in the present crisis, or issue, our beloved land reaching out the hand of help to the suffering Cubans, illustrating the great principle of human brotherhood, we hereby, place ourselves on record as endorsing the statesmanlike, patriotic and above all Christian attitude of our Chief Magistrate, and pledge our loyal support, and earnest prayer, in his, and our Nation’s behalf of larger conception of human relationship, and Christian civilization.

In this resolution, the Wesleyans were affirming the right of the United States to conduct a war in order to extend the so-called ‘white man’s burden’ of Christian civilization. They even went so far as to “pledge [their] unswerving loyalty to our government” during war, certainly a far cry from their earlier statement that they were “opposed to all forms of war, that every war is the crime of the nation or people that wage it.”41

SUCCESS VERSUS NONSUCCESS: THE PROBLEM OF MOTIVES

A final problem facing evangelical reformers in the nineteenth century was the tension that existed between achieving success for their cause and maintaining the purity of their principles. This tension was felt most acutely by the Liberty Party. The party was composed of politically inexperienced Christians who wanted to explore the potential use of electoral power in order to obtain a righteous objective. In the end, however, many of them were uncomfortable with their involvement in the exercise of that power. How could they succeed politically, they asked themselves, and yet remain pure, without becoming immersed in the muddy waters of partisan campaigning?
On the one hand, those Liberty men with a practical bent were convinced that in order to assure eventual victory it would be politically shrewd for the Liberty Party to compromise its radical views and soften its strident moralism. After several years of relatively poor performances at the polls, the dilemma within the Liberty Party became clear: in order to reach their goal of establishing a government that was pure, it seemed necessary for Liberty men to make concessions regarding their own purity. Evangelical abolitionists stressed holy motives and each individual’s uncompromising attitude toward all sin. Yet they also emphasized practical moral action and the tangible achievement of social justice. Eventually the stress on sanctified means seemed to preclude the achievement of the party’s ends, since political victory required compromise with those of dubious religious credentials and impure political motives. The choice for Liberty leaders became the practical achievement of a reduced goal using impure means, or the continued espousal of uncompromising means with only the vague hope of an eventual divine consummation (especially with the continued disappointment of the Party at the polls). How does one persevere in the arduous work of establishing a millennial society, they asked themselves, when the promised inevitable outcome does not seem to materialize?

On the other hand, there were some antislavery reformers (a minority of the Liberty Party) who cared less about political success than they did about the prophetic challenge that abolitionism attempted to deliver to the structures of society.

That this [Liberty] Party will be popular, we do not claim. That corrupt men—men, who are more for numbers than principles—for ballot-box victories than for truth—will approve of it, we do not expect....That God will be on its side is our firm belief:—and, humbly and fervently, do we pray, that He will condescend to make it a means of hastening the time, when oppression and war shall be unknown,...when “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

These principled activists of the party would not support candidates of questionable moral qualifications or issues of popular interest merely for the sake of expediency. They were not willing to risk the use of unsanctified means even if those means might result in the possible fulfillment of sanctified ends. Gerrit Smith, for example, a prominent Liberty Party congressman, was alarmed by the “immodest self-advancement” represented by some of the pragmatists at a Liberty Party convention. He declared that true Liberty men were those who

profess to be conformed to what is right. With them, expediency is not the rule of right—but right the rule of expediency. The organization of the Liberty Party was a novel and bold experiment. To form a political party on the basis of an honest, uncalculating, adherence to the right and the true, was an undertaking so foreign to custom—so utterly unprecedented—that there is no wonder it was stared at as impracticable and fanatical. The experiment was well worth making, even if it had been made in the face of all probability of success.
For Smith and other abolitionists like him, faithfulness to righteous principles was infinitely more important than political success.

Similar to other Christians throughout the Church’s history, there were a few nineteenth century evangelical reformers who tried to be consistent in their application of the principles of nonpower, nonviolence, and nonsuccess. They refused to use unworthy means, even for what seemed to be worthy ends. These reformers existed as a type of “loyal opposition” to the American political and religious establishment, presenting a challenge to the “principalities and powers” of the era while simultaneously working to create new structures for a just society. In this way, they fulfilled the dual Christian responsibility to provide both (what John Howard Yoder has described as) “conscientious objection” and “conscientious participation” in the world. Such a twofold commitment was due to their belief that, by following in the radical way of Jesus, they were called to be a constructive—but dissenting—voice within American society.

NOTES


University Press, 1987).


11. See, especially, Lyman Beecher’s A Plea for the West (Cincinnati, OH: Truman & Smith, 1835).


13. The Friend of Man 3 (17 October 1838): 278. This is not to say that individual abolitionists had not been active in politics, but in their capacity as officers of abolition societies, they had not been political.


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17. See Perry, Radical Abolitionism.
22. Other “comeouter” antislavery church groups included the Union churches, the Free Congregational churches, the Franciscan Evangelic Lutheran Synod, the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends, the Free Baptists, and others. See Douglas M. Strong, Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

24. Christian Investigator 1 (December 1843): 87; The Union Herald 6 (9 September 1841): 76.
27. Goodell, Slavery and Anti-Slavery, pp. 458, 521; Birney, A Letter on the Political Obligations of Abolitionists, pp. 23, 30, 32. See also Perry, Radical Abolitionism, p. 131.
31. In direct contrast to the view of the institutionalists, Garrison felt that the Bible’s silence regarding the proper form of human government indicated “that the kingdom which Christ has established on earth is ultimately to swallow up or radically to subvert all other kingdoms.” Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children (New York, NY: The Century Co., 1885), p. 150.
35. These excerpts and those that follow are taken from the records of the Rochester Annual Conference, as transcribed in Stanley W. Wright, et al., One Hundred Years of Service for Christ in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1844-1944 (n.p.: n. d. [1944?]), p. 18. The original records are located in the Wesleyan Church Archives, Indianapolis, IN.
37. An example of the abolitionist progression in accepting ever-increasing degrees of coercion can be seen in the career of Wesleyan Methodist leader Luther Lee. See Donald Dayton, ed., Five Sermons and a Tract by Luther Lee (Chicago, IL: Holrad House, 1975), pp. 11-14.
38. Demos, pp. 518, 522-26. The abolitionist alteration of views regarding the appropriateness of coercion was due to such events as the increasing mob violence against abolitionists, the armed defense of the abolitionist martyr Elijah P. Lovejoy, the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law against those who harbored runaway slaves, and armed insurrections such as “bleeding Kansas” and John Brown’s raid.


41. Wright, et al., pp. 18-19.

42. Liberty Party, Proceedings of the National Liberty Convention, Held at Buffalo, N.Y., June 14th and 15th, 1848 (Utica, NY: S.W. Green, 1848), p. 32.

43. The Liberty Press 3 (29 December 29 1844): 30; ibid. (1 March 1845): 65.
