

## Deviant Old School Calvinism? Robert Lewis Dabney and the Doctrine of God

By Scott Cook

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898) identified with the Old School movement within the American Presbyterian church. The Old School men were thoroughly conservative, both theologically and culturally. As the Edwardsians and New School winds of change blew through Presbyterianism from the Northeast, the Old School men objected to theological novelty. They argued in defense of the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. As such, the Old School Presbyterians believed that ministers should strictly subscribe to the Standards when they take their ordination vow. That is, they believed that a minister should subscribe to the whole system of doctrine expressed in the Westminster Standards. Dabney's identification with the Old School, then, would suggest that he held strictly to all the significant propositions of the Standards. The reality, however, is more complicated. The doctrine of God is one area in Dabney's theology where he rejected, or at best modified, the older Calvinist doctrine of God.

The reasons for Dabney's deviation from the Standards regarding the doctrine of God are complex and complicated. The Westminster Divines were pre-Modern men. Rene Descartes' (1596–1650) seminal work *Meditations on First Philosophy* was not yet three years old when Parliament convened the Divines in Westminster in 1643. It would be over one hundred years after the conclusion of the Assembly that David Hume (1711–1776) would awaken a young Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) from his "dogmatic slumber." The Divines, then, were working with a theological inheritance that was Patristic, Scholastic, Lutheran, and Reformed—all of which belonged to the pre-Modern world. R. L. Dabney, by contrast, came of age in the Modern world and in the New World. There is a great deal of historical, sociological, theological, and philosophical differences between the world in which Dabney was raised

and that of the Westminster Assembly. Dabney, as a man of his time, constructed a doctrine of God that was out of step with the Westminster Standards and the tradition of Classical Theism.

This paper argues that Dabney's doctrine of God stands in opposition to the doctrine of God in the Westminster Standards. Put more specifically, Dabney rejected the Westminster Standards' view of the simplicity, eternity, immutability, and impassability of God, along with the Westminster view of Trinitarian Personhood. One significant reason for Dabney's deviation from Westminster is his particular understanding and use of Scottish Common Sense Realism. Dabney borrowed from the strand of Scottish Common Sense Realism as popularized in America through the writings of Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803). Hamilton's version of Common Sense was a blending of the insights of Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and Immanuel Kant, making consciousness a fundamental principle for epistemology.

This study of Dabney will proceed along the following lines. First, we will set out the doctrine of God in the Westminster Standards. Second, there will be a basic introduction to Scottish Common Sense Realism in general, and William Hamilton's version in particular, along with Dabney's direct comments on the subject. Third, we will walk through Dabney's doctrine of God regarding simplicity, eternity, immutability, impassability, and Trinitarian Personhood, showing his deviation from the Westminster Standards. Finally, the paper will conclude with reflections on how Dabney's subscription

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to the Standards regarding the doctrine of God fits into the overall narrative of Old School Presbyterianism and the subscription controversy.

#### THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

The Westminster Assembly addressed the doctrine of God in the Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Assembly also commended the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed in the larger group of documents associated with the publication of the Standards. While the Divines articulated views unique to the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in many areas of theology (such as covenant theology and church government), the Assembly stands in continuity with the Patristic and Scholastic traditions concerning the attributes of God. Scholars refer to the traditional Christian view of God as “Classical Theism.”

Classical Theism is a specific form of monotheism that was central to Occidental theology for over a millennium and was also present in various Jewish, Muslim, and pagan theologies.<sup>1</sup> Classical Theism is a nexus of theological loci shaped by the absolute independence of God. God exists without relying upon creation.<sup>2</sup> God’s independence guarantees His freedom

from the limitations of finite, contingent existence. Advocates of Christian Classical Theism argue their view of God is philosophically rigorous and biblically sound. Classical Theists borrowed freely from pagan philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, to explain their view of God.<sup>3</sup> However, Classical Theists argue their system of thought does not depend on philosophical speculation alone. Philosophical categories often assist in expressing God’s transcendence, but the relationship between Classical Theism and pagan philosophy is one of co-belligerence, not mere dependence.<sup>4</sup> The Classical Theist argues that his speculative arguments help to explain the God who transcends man’s thought as the sky transcends the earth.

The core conviction of Classical Theism is that the Scriptures assert God’s independence from His creation. Moses describes God in Genesis as the One who exists before the cosmos, time, or space. Moses asks God at the burning bush, “What is your name?” God’s reply is pregnant with far-ranging theological implications. “I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14–15). Most theologians understand the Divine Name to reveal God’s independence or aseity.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, both the Old and New Testaments teach the aseity of God.<sup>6</sup> The Church Fathers were the first to articulate Christian Classical Theism.<sup>7</sup> The Medieval Scholastics codified and systematized it.<sup>8</sup> The Reformers received it and passed it down to their Protestant successors.<sup>9</sup> Classical Theism is, in other words, the traditional position in Christian theology.<sup>10</sup>

The Confession of Faith takes up the doctrine of God after first detailing the nature of Scripture. The Confession emphasizes that the living God is infinite in His essence and actions. The Assembly affirmed,

There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory, most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal most just and terrible in His judgments; hating all sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty.<sup>11</sup>

The Divines were clear in their affirmation of Classical Theism, specifically with regard to the attributes under

1. See Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5; Howard Kreisel, “Maimonides’ God: The God of Abraham or the God of Aristotle?,” in *Judaism as Philosophy*, Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence (Academic Studies Press, 2015), pp. 3–18.

2. Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 5–8.

3. T. M. Forsyth, “Aristotle’s Concept of God as Final Cause,” *Philosophy* 22, no. 82 (1947): 112–23; B. A. G. Fuller, “The Theory of God in Book A of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” *The Philosophical Review* 16, no. 2 (1907): 170–183; George A. Lindbeck, “A Note on Aristotle’s Discussion of God and the World,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948): 99–106.

4. John M. Frame, *Aristotle & Plotinus: Early Christian Thought vs. the Philosophers* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Media, 1976).

5. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 2000), bk. XII.2.

6. Robert M. Grant, *The Early Christian Doctrine of God* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), pp. 3–14.

7. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 57–81.

8. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 82–100.

9. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 101–7; *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Michael Scott Horton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), pp. 189–241.

10. For a fuller definition of Classical Theism, see David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), pp. 15–31; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), vol. II–III.

11. Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1.

consideration in our study. The Confession affirms that God is both simple and impassible as God is “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.” The Divines also affirm the immutability and eternity of God when they write that He is “immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible.” This same language appears in the Shorter Catechism’s well known definition of God. God is, according to the Shorter Catechism, “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”<sup>12</sup> The Larger Catechism uses language similar to the Confession and the Shorter Catechism.<sup>13</sup>

The Westminster Confession further adds that God is absolutely independent of creation and is not in any way dependent upon His creation. “God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made,” the Divines wrote.<sup>14</sup> The Confession takes the strongest possible view of God’s aseity. According to the Confession, creatures do not add to the glory of God when they praise Him, nor do the events of history add to the knowledge of God as those events unfold. God is not standing in “need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them.” Furthermore, God’s knowledge “is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing is to Him contingent or uncertain.”<sup>15</sup>

The Confession also addresses the doctrine of the Persons of the Trinity. For the Divines, the simplicity of the divine nature maintains the unity of the Persons as to their essence while the Persons are distinguished from each other by their relationships of origin. The Assembly affirms the traditional position of the Western church that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.<sup>16</sup> The Divines write, “[i]n the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”<sup>17</sup> The Divines discuss the nature of Trinitarian Personhood in the Larger Catechism, albeit in a passing comment. The Larger Catechism refers to the eternal generation of the Son and the double procession of the Spirit as “personal properties.”<sup>18</sup> The language of “personal properties” developed in the Middle Ages, particularly in the work of Richard

of St. Victor (d. 1173). Victor defined Persons as “an incommunicable existence of the divine nature.”<sup>19</sup>

The Language of the Westminster Standards reflects the Classical Theist tradition. The Confession does not go into great length defending or elaborating on its Classical Theism. The unanimity between all parties within Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, likely explains the Confession’s lucid brevity concerning the doctrine of God. Dabney’s doctrine of God stands in contrast to the Confession’s formulations, particularly with regard to simplicity, immutability, eternity, impassibility, and Trinitarian Personhood.

#### R. L. DABNEY, OLD SCHOOL PRESBYTERIANISM, AND SCOTTISH COMMON SENSE REALISM

##### *Dabney and Old School Presbyterianism*

Dabney’s fertile mind brought together a number of influences as he dialogued with the doctrine of God found in the Westminster Standards. Sean Michael Lucas paints an accurate portrait of Dabney’s intellectual life by noting the confluences of Old School Presbyterianism and Scottish Common Sense Realism. Lucas writes, “Dabney’s intellectual world was dominated by patterns that hailed from a synthesis of intellectual values that characterized American theology in the antebellum: the rationality of the Scottish moral philosophy, the evangelical Calvinism of Old School Presbyterianism, in the classical republicanism of the early American Republic.”<sup>20</sup>

Old School Presbyterianism was a nineteenth-century theological movement among Presbyterians who reacted to two significant issues in theology and polity.<sup>21</sup> In 1801, the Presbyterian Church adopted a Plan of Union that allowed for cooperation with Congregationalist churches. The Plan allowed for Congregationalist churches to join Presbyteries and Synods without subscribing to the Westminster Standards. The Plan worked

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12. Westminster Shorter Catechism Q 4.

13. See Westminster Larger Catechism Q 7.

14. Westminster Confession of Faith 2.2.

15. Westminster Confession of Faith 2.2.

16. Westminster Larger Catechism Q 9.

17. Westminster Confession of Faith 2.3.

18. *Ibid.*, Q 9–10.

19. Richard St. Victor, *On the Trinity*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 164.

20. Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2005), p. 219.

21. D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2007), pp. 121–27.

for a time until concern grew among the Presbyterians about the presence of Edwardsian or New Theology in the Presbyterian Church through the influence of the New England Congregationalists.<sup>22</sup> Those Presbyterians who were concerned that bringing in the Congregationalists compromised the constitutional integrity of the Church and that of the Calvinistic theological commitments of the denomination came to be called the “Old School.” Those who embraced the presence of Congregationalist churches and argued for a broader or more lenient doctrinal attitude were known as the “New School.”

The Old School advanced the older Orthodox form of Calvinism both in theology and in polity. They viewed Presbyterian polity as an expression of the divine ordinances of God. Hence, Presbyterian government is not a mere social convention or a pragmatic option. Presbyterianism is the divinely instituted method of church government. The Confession of Faith was the standard for the Church. Ministers and elders, the Old School argued, should subscribe to the theology of the standards in its entirety, while the New School preferred a loose system of subscription.<sup>23</sup> James McGoldrick explains

“[w]hen it became clear that the Congregational ministers serving Union churches were espousing a New Divinity, that is, an adulteration of historic Calvinism, some orthodox Presbyterians complained. Because they insisted on adherence to the Westminster Standards, they became known thereafter as *Old School* Presbyterians in contrast to the innovators in doctrine labeled *New School* Presbyterians. Old School exponents, in addition to seeking confessional subscription, wanted stricter church control over missionary endeavors. John Witherspoon was a vigorous spokesman for old school

concerns, and Princeton was the intellectual center of that movement.”<sup>24</sup>

One might presume that Dabney would hold to the Westminster Standard’s position on the doctrine of God, given that Dabney belonged to the Old School Party. However, this paper will show the exact opposite. Dabney criticizes the Classical View of God and favors one that conforms more to Modern theological and philosophical systems.

#### *Dabney and Scottish Common Sense Realism*

There is no question among Dabney’s interpreters that he was committed to Scottish Common Sense Realism (SCSR). Dabney was no slave to any particular teacher of SCSR; instead, his use of SCSR evidenced his eclectic and independent style as a thinker. Lucas captures the importance of SCSR in Dabney’s theology, calling SCSR “the glue that held much of [Dabney’s] thought together.”<sup>25</sup> Dabney devoted a chapter of his systematic theology to “the sources of our thinking,” wherein he lays out an SCSR approach to human knowledge. When Dabney took up his pen to write against the materialist philosophy that came about through the influence of Locke’s empiricism, Dabney turned to SCSR for the key weapons for his criticisms. Dabney continued to use SCSR in his defense of Scripture, substitutionary atonement, natural theology, and the laws of causation.<sup>26</sup> While the secondary literature has noted the importance and prevalence of SCSR in some areas of Dabney’s theology, there are no studies that show how SCSR influenced Dabney’s doctrine of God.<sup>27</sup> Hence, this study seeks to make further original contributions by showing how SCSR influenced Dabney’s theology proper, creating an anti-Scholastic impulse.

As previously stated, Dabney devotes a section of his systematic theology to the sources of our thinking. Some might ask why a systematic theology should devote this much attention to the source of our knowledge when other fields of study proceed directly to their subject matter without elaboration on the first principles of inquiry. Dabney gives a twofold answer to this question. First, systematic theology is more comprehensive than other fields of study, and hence it is fitting to reflect on important epistemological questions. In addition to its comprehensive nature, theology is much more closely tied to psychology than most other areas of thought. Mathematicians and scientists might have widely different philosophies of science, but they work with the same physical set of data. The theologian, however, works not with physical objects but with “abstract ideas and

22. Nathan P. Feldmeth et al., *Reformed and Evangelical Across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2022), pp. 145–48.

23. See Morton H. Smith, “The Case for Full Subscription,” in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. David Hall (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 185–205.

24. James Edward McGoldrick, *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 213.

25. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 21.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21; see also David Kinney Garth, “The Influence of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy on the Theology of James Henry Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney” (thesis, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1979; UMI reprint, 1982).

27. See Ligon Duncan, “Common Sense and American Presbyterianism: An Evaluation of the Impact of Scottish Realism on Princeton and the South” (thesis, St. Louis, MO, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1987).

judgements.”<sup>28</sup> This, therefore, is why Dabney chooses to devote a chapter to “mental science,” which studies “those fundamental facts and laws of spirit, upon which theological questions most turn.”<sup>29</sup>

Dabney begins his reflection by raising the question of whether man is born with innate ideas. Dabney answers very clearly: no. The mind is, however, constituted with certain *innate powers* that generate *a priori laws* that determine how we interact with the information given by our senses. While Dabney appreciates John Locke’s arguments against innate ideas, he argues that Locke has gone too far in making man a *tabula rasa*. Locke’s radical empiricist impulses have created a sensualist psychology—Dabney’s preferred term for what we would call *materialistic* psychology—that confuses the occasional cause (sense experiences) for the efficient cause (abstract ideas produced by reason itself).<sup>30</sup>

Locke’s sensualistic epistemology cannot be correct, given the very nature of our thought. We intuitively compare different sense experiences with one another, and this reflexive impulse is not taught or learned from sense experience itself. The mind, Dabney argues, is active in the knowing process.<sup>31</sup> The mind has “permanent *essentia*” and attributes, and the presence of these attributes implies that the mind is an active agent furnished with innate powers.<sup>32</sup> Locke has further misunderstood the fundamental nature of these “primary intuitions” of the mind. While the sensualist treats all knowledge as being derived from our senses, the very notion of “derived” implies that it is based on something even more fundamental. Treating our “primitive judgments” as derived in no way answers how we gain the most fundamental portion of our knowledge structure. This move merely pushes the question back one more level without giving any actual answer. At this point, Dabney begins to move in a SCSR direction by arguing that our primary judgments and intuitions are beyond justification. “Unless then, some things are seen to be true intuitively,” Dabney writes, “there can be no reasoning. And these unproved truths are the foundations of all that we prove.”<sup>33</sup>

After giving a brief summary and refutation of Hume’s and Montague’s skepticism,<sup>34</sup> Dabney turns to a constructive account of primary judgments. It is at this point that we can see a strong debt to SCSR. Primary truth is established by three different tests. First, intuitive truths are primary. That is, they are not derived in any way from some antecedent truth. They are “seen to be true without any dependence upon a premise.”<sup>35</sup> Second, intuitive truths are necessary. The mind must accept this truth because rejecting it leads to a direct

contradiction. Third, intuitive truths are universal in at least two senses. Primary truths are believed by the mind in all possible situations and also by all “sane” people.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, this is a thoroughly SCSR approach to fundamental epistemological principles.

Having laid out the three key attributes of primary judgment, Dabney moves to establish the primary judgments that are fundamental to our knowledge. These include axioms, man’s immaterial nature and identity, and the law of cause and effect. In proving that each of these constitutes a primary or intuitive judgment, Dabney follows the same general pattern of argument exemplified in his discussion of axioms: the sensualists argue that axioms are derived from our sense experience. But, Dabney counters, there is a group of axioms that cannot be derived from sense experience. The axiom “divergent straight lines will never meet if produced to infinity”<sup>37</sup> cannot be based on our sense experience. No eye has ever seen an infinite line. Moreover, axioms of universal truth cannot be established on the basis of scientific observation because a universal truth cannot be drawn from a limited case study.<sup>38</sup> Dabney further shows that axioms are primary judgments because they are necessary judgments. Axiomatic truths are necessary in a very specific sense. It is not that their negation cannot be conceived; Dabney argues that there are many modern scientific breakthroughs that primitive man could not have conceived. Rather, necessary truths are necessary because their denial entails an inevitable contradiction.<sup>39</sup> In SCSR fashion, Dabney makes an appeal to the consciousness of man: The opposite of the axiom “the whole is greater than its parts” is not logically possible, as the consciousness of man will tell us. Therefore, axioms are not only primary; they are necessary. Dabney completes his argument for axioms being intuitive judgments by showing that they are universal judgments. The sensualists will argue that axioms are not universal because there is so much disagreement over their truthfulness. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* was once universally accepted

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28. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 79.

29. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 79.

30. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 79–80.

31. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 80–81.

32. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 81.

33. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 81.

34. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 81–82.

35. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 83.

36. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 83.

37. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 83.

38. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 84.

39. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 85.

but now is in much dispute. To this objection, Dabney replies that this does not prove that there are no universal axioms; it only proves that the human mind is an “imperfect instrument.”<sup>40</sup> Dabney counters that if this same standard is applied to our knowledge across the board, we will find that no part of our knowledge is safe from the thinking of uninformed men. In Dabney’s mind, the qualification for universality does not rest upon raw statistics. Only qualified men—or what Dabney would refer to as “sane men”—are able to be consulted to determine if an axiom is universal. Taking this into account, Dabney argues that axioms are accepted by sane men everywhere, and this settles the question.<sup>41</sup>

The material in Dabney’s systematic shows that he adhered to SCSR. Yet Dabney never held to any particular teacher in the SCSR tradition with slavish devotion. C. R. Vaughn rightly notes, “[p]hilosophical speculations, no matter how acute or profound, were to him nothing worth if they brought out conclusions at war with common sense. He was a truer disciple of the great Scottish school than Sir William Hamilton himself. An enthusiastic believer in the possibility and the value of a real philosophy, he repudiated every theory which discounted its conformity with the primitive intuitions of the human understanding.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it would be out of character for Dabney to hold to any philosopher, even the great William Hamilton, without criticism. Dabney distinguished himself by his ability to criticize the thought of ally and foe alike. Thomas Cary Johnson explains, “[e]ven Dr. Dabney’s adversaries admitted the searching, trenchant, and powerful character of his criticism. This great work is much more than a criticism of the false systems passed under review. It is an exposition and defence [*sic*] of the true philosophy as well; and its author is absolutely independent. If Hamilton, or any

other giant, has taught somewhat amiss, Dabney takes issue. He swears in the words of no master.”<sup>43</sup> Johnson notes that Dabney differed from Thornwell in that he was not beholden to William Hamilton in the same manner as Thornwell was.<sup>44</sup> In summarizing Dabney’s relationship with William Hamilton, Johnson strikes a note of balance and carefulness when he writes

“If it be undertaken to set forth Dr. Dabney’s affinities with reference to the more distinguished representatives of the Scotch School, it must be said that he admired Reid more than Hamilton, as a thinker; that he usually found himself on the side of Reid in cases wherein Hamilton differs; that he regarded many of Hamilton’s innovations as foreign to the very genius of the Common-sense system. Particularly, he did not agree with Hamilton in his doctrine of consciousness as the generic, universal or inclusive faculty. He made it, with Reid, a particular faculty. He would not say, ‘I am conscious of a tree;’ but, with Reid, ‘I am conscious of the perception of a tree.’ His theory of perception was also more like Reid’s, but much more fully wrought out and clarified of errors. He deplored in Hamilton his speculations concerning the relative validity of human cognitions, and his doctrine of ‘the unconditioned;’ and he shows that the extravagances of Hamilton, where they are not the results of verbal ambiguities, are the fruits of a sensualistic heresy foisted into the bosom of a rational system.”<sup>45</sup>

Johnson is right to note that Dabney’s appropriation of SCSR was critical and selective. Moreover, he is right to note that Dabney often criticized Hamilton and sided with Reid. In the tenth chapter of his *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century, Considered*, Dabney gives an extended criticism of Hamilton regarding the validity of *a-priori* notions.<sup>46</sup> For instance, he gives extended criticism of Hamilton’s view of consciousness and its relationship to the absolute, unconditioned reality.<sup>47</sup>

However, one area where there is significant agreement between Dabney and Hamilton is the importance of consciousness in epistemology. Dabney makes continual reference to the dictates of consciousness as he discusses the doctrine of God. In doing so, he treats consciousness as having the same regulative position in epistemology as it does in William Hamilton. Hamilton made consciousness the fundamental principle for all epistemological inquiries.<sup>48</sup> “Hamilton says that consciousness “constitutes the fundamental form of every act of knowledge” and that consciousness is

40. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 85.

41. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 85.

42. Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Discussions by Robert Lewis Dabney, Volume 1: Theological and Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughn (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), pp. xii–xiii.

43. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), p. 370.

44. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 557.

45. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 560.

46. See Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century, Considered* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T CLARK, 1876), pp. 208–79.

47. Dabney, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century, Considered*, 208–23.

48. John Veitch, *Hamilton* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1882), pp. 36–49.

“the source from whence we must derive every fact of the Philosophy of Mind.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Dabney follows Hamilton in the three tests that he gives for intuitive truths of consciousness: that the truths of consciousness are intuitive when they are primary, self-evident, and incomprehensible.<sup>50</sup>

By way of summary, Dabney was an Old School Presbyterian who held to SCSR. Dabney was a slave to no theologian or philosopher. However, he was influenced by Thomas Reid and William Hamilton. With Hamilton, in particular, Dabney holds consciousness as a key to epistemology. The decision to give consciousness regulatory status in matters of epistemology will have seismic implications in Dabney’s doctrine of God. As we shall see in the next section, Dabney’s emphasis on consciousness causes Dabney to reject or modify the Classical Theist doctrine of God.

#### DABNEY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

##### *Divine Simplicity*

Dabney takes up the concept of God’s simplicity under the heading of natural theology. Beginning with a substratum theory of metaphysics, Dabney argues that properties reveal the true substance, the *subjectum* or *substratum*, to us. There are two types of substances: immaterial spiritual substances and material substances. Spiritual substances are immaterial and manifest the properties of consciousness, thinking, feeling, and willing. Material substances are the opposite of spiritual substances, being inert, unconscious, lifeless, and thoughtless.<sup>51</sup> Reason requires that we assign the First Cause to the category of spiritual substances. The First Cause produced man, the *Homo sapiens*, who thinks and reasons. Therefore, since an effect cannot be greater than its cause, the First Cause is a thinking being. Moreover, the choice to create implies the use of will. Additionally, the producer of life must have life itself, and the producer of motion cannot be material because “matter shows us, in no form, any power to originate motion.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, the first cause is a spiritual being who is conscious, thinks, wills, and feels.

Dabney then considers whether God is a mixed being like man, both spirit and material. He answers that God is not a compound being like man. He recognizes that it is the habit of divines to say that “the divine substance [is] an absolute simplicity.”<sup>53</sup> Dabney agrees with this statement if it is taken to mean that God is uncompounded, homogeneous, and not composite like an atom. God is the First Cause and, hence, must be spiritual, eternal, and independent. A composite being

can have none of these attributes. God as the Creator has neither beginning nor end; he is not subject to the disintegrating power of death. Therefore, God cannot be a compound being.<sup>54</sup>

However, Dabney’s commitment to the homogeneity of God’s nature must not be taken as support for the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS). Dabney explicitly raises the core issue of DDS, the identity of God’s attributes with one another, and is initially agnostic on the issue. He describes his understanding of DDS as “that as God is immutably what He is, without succession, His essence does not like ours pass from mode to mode of being, and from act to act, but is always in all modes, and exerting all acts; hence His modes and His acts are Himself. God’s thought is God. He is not active, but activity.”<sup>55</sup> As far as it goes, Dabney seems to grasp the theology of DDS quite clearly. It is, therefore, quite telling when Dabney begins to argue against DDS. If DDS, argues Dabney, entails a view of simplicity that is stronger than the type of simplicity ascribed to the soul of man, then it is not an acceptable doctrine. The thought of a man is nothing external to man; his thought does not exist beyond his mind. The thought of man is but the soul thinking.<sup>56</sup> To accept a stronger version of simplicity would necessarily entail a form of pantheism where God’s being is comprised of the sum series of his consciousnesses and actions; moreover, this sort of thought leads not only to identifying God’s being and actions but also identifying God with all the effects of his actions. Hence, the works of God become part of the being of God.<sup>57</sup>

Dabney’s rejection of DDS continues as he deals with the question of whether God’s attributes are identical with his essence. Dabney defines the attributes of God as “those permanent, or essential, qualities of his nature, which he has made known to us in his word.”<sup>58</sup> These attributes are not to be thought of in terms of being part of the essence. Dabney refers to any notion that would view the attributes as divisible portions of

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49. William Hamilton, *The Metaphysics of Sir William Hamilton: Collected, Arranged, and Abridged, for the Use of Colleges and Private Students*, ed. Francis Bowen (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1865), p. 175.

50. Hamilton, *The Metaphysics of Sir William Hamilton*, pp. 175–80.

51. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 42.

52. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 43.

53. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 43.

54. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 43.

55. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 43.

56. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 43.

57. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 44.

58. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 147.

his being as a “gross idea.”<sup>59</sup> Dabney refers to the divine nature as a “monad” and explains that the attributes of God, such as omniscience, are not separable attributes from his essence. Rather, the attributes are “a power or quality” of the infinite substance.

At this point, Dabney references the classical notion that as a result of God’s absolute simplicity, each of his attributes is metaphysically identical to every other attribute. Dabney questions the viability of such an understanding of simplicity. Referring back to his discussion of this question under the heading of natural theology, he concludes again that this formulation of divine simplicity is nothing more than pantheism. He argues that “literally” identifying the attributes with one another does not leave room even for virtual distinctions between the attributes. The only difference between them in the classical system of simplicity is “nominal” at best.<sup>60</sup> Dabney again asserts his objections to such thinking: if God’s will and intellect are identical, then he must create all possibilities; if God must create all possibilities, then there is no distinction between the *scientia simplex* and the *scientia visionis*,<sup>61</sup> if God must create all possibilities, then he has no freedom, and the works of God are made infinite.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to indicting the classical view of divine simplicity for having a tendency toward pantheism, Dabney levels a second charge that demonstrates his commitment to SCSR. Identifying God’s mind and will, Dabney argues, violates “our rational consciousness.”<sup>63</sup> Every man understands that there is unity in his spirit, and every man also understands that to think, to will, and to sense are three different faculties of the spirit. Because God is also a spirit, we are fundamentally bound to believe the same is true of God, even though he is infinite in spirit while we are finite. To reject that God’s will and intellect

are distinct, as our faculties of mind and will are, would be a violation of the fundamental law of reason, Dabney says. The classical model of simplicity requires the elimination of the distinction between substance and attributes. Such a model, according to Dabney, is incapable of being understood by the human mind. This line of reasoning appears to be heavily influenced by William Hamilton’s understanding of SCSR, in that Dabney is arguing from the inviolability of consciousness.

Dabney next considers the incomprehensibility of God and his attributes. He appears to anticipate the objection that he is destroying God’s incomprehensibility by making God’s essence conformable to the human mind. Dabney acknowledges that God is infinite, and hence God and every one of his attributes will be, on some level, incomprehensible. We cannot comprehend the truth of God’s attributes, but we can apprehend them. Dabney bases his formulation of the knowledge of God on two key arguments: First, we can apprehend God in the way Dabney lays out because we are made in the image of God. Both man’s rational and moral qualities are finite reproductions, if you will, of God’s infinite “essential qualities.” Second, God’s rational and moral faculties must work similarly to ours because God uses human words to describe himself. God reveals himself as being wise and intelligent, and the Bible, as Dabney puts it, “does not use words dishonestly.”<sup>64</sup>

The implications of Dabney’s view appear to be twofold. First, Dabney clearly does not accept the classical formulation of divine simplicity that, as we have seen, has been the hallmark of both Catholic and Reformed Scholastic Christianity. Second, Dabney’s formulation of divine simplicity implies some form of composition in the divine being. Dabney might not wish to use the word “composition,” but Dabney’s view entails some form of composition or complexity within the divine essence since God’s intellect and will are distinct faculties.

This reading of Dabney is further solidified by his discussion of the complexity of divine motives in his article, *God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy*. Dabney takes up the issue of how Scripture can make seemingly universal statements about the scope of God’s mercy while we know all along that God has only elected some to salvation. Dabney’s answer to this is that God can and does have feelings of sympathy for all mankind, even those whom he purposes to damn. The fact that God has mercy for all, Dabney writes, is not inconsistent with his desire to damn some of those for whom he feels sympathy. Rather, God may have desires towards the wicked that he chooses not to act upon. As an illustration of how this works, Dabney points to the historical figure

59. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 147.

60. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 148.

61. Dabney is working with distinctions that come from Reformed Orthodox theologians. *Scientia Simplex* is the necessary knowledge that God has of himself and all possibilities that he might bring about. This knowledge is a result of God’s complete, exhaustive, simple knowledge of his own nature. *Scientia Visionis* is the knowledge that God has of everything that he will bring to pass according to his divine will. Like most scholastic distinctions relating to theology proper, there is a slightly different set of terms used by the Scottish tradition, that gives a voluntaristic flair to the same context, such as *scientia libera sive voluntaria* for *scientia visionis*. For further information, see Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academics, 2003), vol. III, pp. 407–408.

62. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 148.

63. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 148.

64. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 149.

of George Washington. When Washington issued the death penalty, in accordance with the law, to one Major Andre, Washington did so reluctantly. He fervently expressed his regret and did not want to have Andre executed. However, Washington was duty-bound and so ordered his execution, all the while having the power to pardon him if he wished.<sup>65</sup>

Dabney uses this as an example of how he believes the motives of God toward the non-elect to be complex. Hence, God could express his desire for mercy toward some whom he will ultimately damn for some greater reason. Dabney, in fact, clearly makes the case that this analogy between human psychology and divine psychology holds up in this discussion, even when taking the differences between finite and infinite existence into account.<sup>66</sup> As Dabney takes up the task of refuting potential objections to his scheme, the first potential objection he turns to is the doctrine of divine simplicity. Dabney's scheme of reasoning from the human to the divine is not commonly found in Calvinist thought because of the doctrine of the "absolute simplicity" of God.<sup>67</sup> This doctrine teaches that God is far simpler than even the human soul. There are absolutely no categories of composition—not even substance and attributes—that the traditional view of simplicity will allow in the divine being.

As Dabney argues against the classic view of simplicity, he rehearses many of the arguments mentioned in his systematic theology. He continues to use SCSR argumentation in order to establish the validity of reasoning from our psychology to God's. DDS is beyond the possibility of proof because it is outside the possibility of man's reason.<sup>68</sup> Hence, it is perfectly reasonable, Dabney argues, to think that God's "conative propensions" are not identical with the final product of volition.<sup>69</sup>

Dabney's doctrine of divine simplicity, as he expounded it in his *Systematic Theology*, explains some of his direct comments upon the Westminster Confession of Faith. He seems to believe that the Westminster Confession of Faith avoids some of the scholastic speculations of the Medieval tradition regarding simplicity. In Dabney's lecture, *The Content of the Confession*, his contribution to the memorial volume on the Confession, he praises the Confession for its biblical emphasis and its moderation.<sup>70</sup> The Divines showed their commitment to Scripture by refusing to use philosophers and philosophical systems in the Confession. According to Dabney, the Divines knew the arguments of the realists and nominalists, of the Thomists and the Scotists. The Westminster Assembly, however, refused to appeal to the authority of respected theologians or philosophers

and simply used Biblical language to address theological issues.<sup>71</sup>

As an example of the moderation of the Westminster Divines, Dabney cites the Confession's handling of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Confession stays close to Scripture and the early ecumenical creeds, Dabney argues. "It teaches that while God is one infinite, single, spiritual substance, there have been from eternity three modes of subsistence, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, whose distinctions are real, permanent and personal."<sup>72</sup> The term "real" is potentially problematic. If Dabney intends real as the opposite of "false," then there is no tension with divine simplicity. If Dabney intends real as the opposite of "nominal," then Dabney rejects simplicity in favor of a real distinction between the Persons.

The moderation of the Divines caused them, according to Dabney, to break with the Patristic, Scholastic, and Reformational idea of the Trinity that God is *actus purus*. The Divines reject the psychological model of the Trinity, as is found in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>73</sup> The Thomistic view leads more readily to an abstract notion of the Persons that has more in common with the idealistic philosophies of Heraclitus or Hegel. As Dabney argues against the Scholastic notion of *actus purus*, he raises a question that implies a distinction between substance and faculties in God. "Now, does this metaphysic give us objects which satisfy the meaning of Scripture, where it testifies to us that the three subsistencies [sic], while each divine, are distinct and personal? Or does it give us mere abstractions in the place of Persons? Does this theory, or does it not, destroy the fundamental distinction of the reason between substance and its powers?"<sup>74</sup> Clearly, Dabney sees a great gulf between the doctrine of God in the Westminster Confession and the Scholastic tradition. He fails to realize that the language of the Confession and Catechism reflect the Scholastic tradition that Dabney finds so problematic.

65. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. I (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), pp. 284–88.

66. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.287–88.

67. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.289.

68. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.190.

69. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.291.

70. Robert Lewis Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession—Its Fundamental and Regulative Ideas and the Necessity and Value of Creeds," in *Memorial Volume of the Westminster Assembly, 1647–1897* (Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1897), p. 93.

71. Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession," pp. 93–95.

72. Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession," pp. 95–96.

73. Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession," pp. 96.

74. Dabney, "The Doctrinal Contents of the Confession," p. 96.

We may now see, in conclusion, that Dabney clearly does not hold to the doctrine of divine simplicity as classically formulated. Dabney is similar to Charles Hodge in that he allows for there to be real distinctions between the divine attributes themselves. Dabney goes further than Hodge in allowing for the reason and will of God to be separate, with God's motives in his decree being complex. This complexity comes from the existence of different and conflicting motives, or active powers, that are not identical with the divine essence nor with the volitional end-products of God's will.

#### *Immutability*

Dabney's comments on immutability under the heading of natural theology are brief relative to his material on the other attributes. It is also worth noting that his notion of immutability appears to be very close to that of the classical tradition. Dabney says that immutability is the property whereby God is incapable of change. This extends to every aspect of God's being and existence: his attributes, nature, and purposes are all incapable of any change.<sup>75</sup> Dabney appeals to God's unchanging purpose in order to demonstrate how God maintains his immutability even while he acts as creator and sustainer of the world. The act of creation implies no change in God because he had eternally purposed to create the world. Since Dabney is explaining immutability from the standpoint of natural theology, he does not defend immutability from Scripture. Rather, he appeals to the attributes already established by reason that require God's immutability. God is a necessary being, and hence he cannot be anything other than what he has always been. God is self-existent, and hence there is no being that can change him. God is a simple being, and hence God is incapable of change because he has no parts or composition which are necessary for any change. Finally, Dabney appeals to the perfection of God. God is absolutely perfect, and hence any change would imply changing for the better (which is impossible) or changing for the worse (which would deny his absolute perfection). Dabney concludes that of all the attributes of God, it is his immutability that reason grasps most clearly of all.<sup>76</sup>

As Dabney turns from natural theology to revealed theology, Dabney's thoughts on immutability continue to be brief and concise. After summarizing the implications of natural theology for the immutability of God,

Dabney continues to argue that there is no change in God whatsoever. God's nature is unchanging as are his mental and volitional states. For God to be immutable in nature, he must also be unchanging in his knowledge. God is infinite in knowledge, and therefore he cannot have any new information presented to him. Since his nature and knowledge are ever the same, there cannot be any changes in his will since there can be no new information nor any new disposition of his nature to necessitate a change in will.<sup>77</sup>

Dabney appeals to a number of Scriptures (Numbers 23:19, Psalm 52:26, and Hebrews 6:17) in order to show that the Scriptures proclaim that God is without any change in his being. Dabney concludes his section on God's immutability by defending the doctrine against some of the most common objections to it. Some object to immutability by appealing to the incarnation: Christ taking human nature to himself surely constitutes a change in God. But this is not the case, replies Dabney, because of the nature of the hypostatic union. The Second Person of the Trinity assumed a real human nature to himself, but he did so without any substantial change in the divine nature. The natures were not comingled into a new third nature, and the incarnation did not produce any change in the will of God since the incarnation was planned from all eternity. Moreover, some appeal to the act of creation as proof that God is not eternal. Echoing his earlier comments under the heading of natural theology, Dabney argues that the act of creation was according to the eternal plan of God. He actually goes so far as to argue that if God failed to create, then he could be said to change because this would constitute a real change in the divine plan. Finally, some object to divine immutability on the ground that God forgives sinners, constituting a real change in God's attitude towards sinners. In response, Dabney appeals to a traditional argument that the change in the relationship between God and the sinner happens exclusively on the part of the sinner. No change, Dabney argues, happens from God's side. The different way that the repentant sinner is treated is required by the immutable nature of God.<sup>78</sup>

This is one case in which we can see no substantial variation from Classical Theism. Indeed, we even see Dabney channeling many of the arguments of the tradition in defense of God's immutability while interacting with a changing world and in the incarnation. Why does Dabney not deviate on this point? Perhaps it is because he sees this attribute as being clearly required in Scripture and that immutability does not, at least on the surface, violate the principle deliverances of consciousness.

75. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 45.

76. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 45.

77. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 152–53.

78. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 153–54.

Dabney never appeals to consciousness, one way or another, when considering the doctrine of divine immutability. That in itself is a significant fact. In the case of this one attribute, we see Dabney not working from the nature of human consciousness as the regulative principle for understanding this doctrine. And that makes this one doctrine where Dabney stands in continuity with the classical tradition and in conflict with Hodge.

#### *Eternality*

Dabney uses the eternity of God at the beginning of his reflection on the attributes of God revealed in natural theology. He starts with eternity because it is “the most obvious” of all the attributes in the eyes of natural reason. Dabney defines eternity as the attribute of God’s nature whereby he is without beginning and without end. He notes that the “divines” add a third aspect to eternity, that God exists without succession in his being. Together these three elements (without beginning, without end, and without succession) are the key aspects of how the church has defined God’s eternal nature.<sup>79</sup>

Reason proves that God must be without a beginning because he is the first cause. As the first cause, there could not be a time when he did not exist. Either he would not be the first cause, or the world could not exist because nothing would exist that could bring the first cause into existence. Hence, reason proves that God must be eternal since he is the first cause of all the created universe. Reason also necessitates that God must be without an end. Pagan religions and philosophers alike demonstrate that our reason proves God to be eternal by virtue of the fact that they uniformly ascribe immortality to their god(s).<sup>80</sup> This universal expression of the immortality of the divine is rationally established from God’s independence, self-existence, and necessary existence. Since reason establishes that God has all of these attributes, the only logical conclusion that reason can draw is that God must also be without end. Dabney notes that there is one possible exception to this line of reasoning: If one argues that God is powerful enough to annihilate himself and that he could will such an end, then it would be possible for God to have no beginning but to have an end. However, Dabney objects that this hypothesis of divine suicide is completely impossible because God is simple, whereas the only known form of destruction is disintegration, which implies composition. Moreover, God would not be a necessary being if he were able to be brought to an end. Therefore, God does not have the power to destroy himself. So Dabney concludes that reason clearly testifies that God is without beginning and without an end.<sup>81</sup>

When it comes to the third aspect of the classic definition of God’s eternity—that God exists without any succession in his divine being—Dabney is suspicious. Dabney takes Turretin and Dick as his primary foils in his argument against successionless existence. “God is immense,” writes Turretin, “but if his existence were measured by parts of duration, it would not be incommensurable.” Dabney takes exception to this line of reasoning, going as far as saying it is completely illogical. Dabney argues that the Schoolmen themselves make a distinction between *essentia* and *esse*. The end toward which Dabney moves with this distinction is that we can measure God’s existence without measuring his essence. Dabney likewise takes exception with arguments for God’s successionless existence based on his simplicity and immutability. Turretin writes, “[B]ecause [God is] simple and immutable, He cannot exist in succession, for the flux of being from past to present and present to future would be change, and even change of composition.” Dabney undercuts Turretin by arguing for a distinction between subsistence and essence. God can exist in succession in his subsistence without introducing any composition or change into his essence. Dabney also argues that a subsistence in succession does not imply composition of the essence and the “*momenta*” of time. He appeals, most curiously, to Immanuel Kant for proof of his assertion.<sup>82</sup>

Dabney next turns to the argument of Scottish theologian John Dick, who holds that God must exist in a successionless eternity because the idea of an infinite succession in the past is logically impossible. Dabney argues that because Dick concedes that there is an infinite succession of moments in the future, an infinite succession of past moments is also possible. Dabney grants that the human mind cannot conceive of an infinite succession of moments in either the past or the present. The issue for Dabney with the classical view of eternity is not that God does not experience succession in his nature or essence. The problem for Dabney comes when succession is denied in the operation of God’s consciousness. The idea of successionless consciousness comes, Dabney argues, from an analysis of the divine consciousness in light of man’s consciousness. The argument is that since God’s thoughts are eternally present in his consciousness, God’s consciousness must not experience succession like man’s consciousness does. However, Dabney is not convinced that for

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79. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 38.

80. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 39.

81. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 39.

82. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 39.

man's consciousness to be unsuccessful necessitates that God's consciousness must be the same.<sup>83</sup>

Despite his arguments against the idea of successionless eternity, Dabney appears to conclude on an ambiguous note. He argues that God is unsuccessful in his subjective consciousness; however, God's knowledge encompasses the world of successive change. Therefore, Dabney argues that it is impossible for God to have "no relationship" to successive change in his consciousness because he truly knows the world. Dabney says that debating these matters will only lead to "antinomies" that cannot be solved.<sup>84</sup>

Dabney further confuses the issue when he takes the matter up again under the heading of revealed theology. He rehearses his reservations with the idea of successionless eternity. However, Dabney gives his approval of God's eternity being a *punctum stans*, the standing point or eternal now. "[T]he past and the future," writes Dabney, "are as distinctly and immutably present in the divine mind, as the present." He appeals to the "striking" phrase of Isaiah 57:15—"For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity"—and to the Divine Name of Exodus 3:15. What is so striking about this is that Dabney appears to contradict himself, or else he does not understand the true nature of the *punctum stans*. Boethius lays out the idea of an eternal present in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. He clearly sees the eternal now of God's eternity as an explanation for God's successionless eternity. In fact, Scholastic theologians use the idea of the eternal present as an illustration for successionless eternity. So either Dabney doesn't understand the *punctum stans* or else he is contradicting himself.<sup>85</sup> One cannot hold to the *punctum stans* with regard to God's essence and deny the logic consequent, i.e. successionless existence, to God's consciousness.

With regard to God's eternity, we see that Dabney again deviates from Classical Theism. Dabney's Kantian approach where God's subsistence can experience succession without introducing change into his essence combines with Dabney's SCSR appeal to human consciousness as the regulative principle of theological discourse. The result is that Dabney rejects the classical view of eternity, though his acceptance of the *punctum stans* is, to say the least, anomalous and unexpected.

83. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 39–40.

84. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 40.

85. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 152.

86. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 153.

87. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 153.

88. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 153.

### Impassibility

Dabney takes up the subject of divine impassibility both in his *Systematic Theology* and also in his *Discussions on Theology*. As we examine Dabney on this subject, we will discover that Dabney's understanding of impassibility is similar to his understanding of eternity: he is critical of the Scholastic position but in a slightly confused and inconsistent manner. Dabney's writing on impassibility in his *Systematic Theology* is much closer to the historic Reformed position. Dabney does not consider impassibility under its own independent heading. Rather, he considers impassibility within the context of divine immutability. In doing so, he is certainly within the bounds of the classical tradition at this point. He points to the language of the Westminster Confession, which teaches that God has "neither parts nor passions" to begin his discussion. Dabney appears to take exception to the Westminster view when he writes, "That he has something analogous to what are called in man active principles, is manifest, for He wills and acts; therefore, He must feel."<sup>86</sup> Notice that Dabney is arguing from human psychology to divine psychology—a common tool of argumentation in the SCSR tool chest. This causes him to invert the classical categories of analogical predication: man becomes the primary analog in his relationship to God. However, Dabney balances this affirmation of divine feelings by arguing that these "active principles" must not "be conceived of as emotions, in the sense of ebbing and flowing accesses of feeling."<sup>87</sup> These divine principles exist without the "agitation and rush" common in human passions. Dabney says that these divine feelings are "ineffable, fixed, peaceful, unchangeable, calm, although springs of volition."<sup>88</sup>

So far this is a mixed presentation of the issue of divine impassibility. Dabney is, on the one hand, rejecting the classic language about divine impassibility by suggesting that God has feelings. On the other hand, however, Dabney is rejecting any notion of change or agitation in divine psychology. He argues that while the human mind finds these principles of action "incomprehensible," they illustrate why those Christians who are most sanctified exhibit the least amount of passion and agitation. The sanctified Christian does experience holy motivation to action from moral indignation, but this is not the same as generic human wrath. Such agitation that comes with human passion is, says Dabney, incompatible with God's blessedness. Moreover, Dabney argues that the objects of divine feelings are ever present in the mind of God so that there is no change in him. Dabney concludes by addressing the issue of divine wrath and repentance. Dabney stands with the

tradition in that he describes divine wrath and repentance as “anthropopathism.” Dabney explains that this means “that the outward manifestations of his active principles were as though these feelings arose.”<sup>89</sup>

So far, Dabney has been only mildly critical of the classical doctrine of impassibility. In fact, one could argue that Dabney’s view differs from the tradition only on the level of semantics. His position, one might argue, is substantially that of the Scholastic and Reformed Divines. While there is much merit to such an argument, there is one significant deviation from the tradition that becomes more evident in Dabney’s other writings on impassibility. Notice that Dabney treats these divine principles of action in a separate category from God’s intellect and will. These principles of action are “springs of volition,” and hence, they are not divine volitions themselves. The tradition has been fairly uniform in interpreting divine emotional language as an anthropopathic description of divine volitions themselves, not the *causes* of divine volition. This creates a breach between Dabney and the Reformed tradition, which will demonstrate itself in other areas of Dabney’s writing.

This deviation from the classical tradition is more pronounced as Dabney discusses divine impassibility in his discussion of *The Indiscriminate Proposals of God’s Mercy*. Dabney begins by giving his assent to several main features of divine impassibility: that God cannot have any passive principles in him that would imply mutability, that God is the source of all effects, and that he is not acted upon by the world.<sup>90</sup> However, Dabney then argues that any formulation of divine impassibility must not violate two key principles. First, while God does not have fluctuating emotions, he does have active principles. These active principles are “affections of his will” that are distinct from the cognitive functions of the divine nature. While we must affirm that there is some anthropopathism in Scripture, Dabney argues that we must not let the anthropopathic nullify Scripture’s attribution of “active affections in some mode suitable to [God’s] nature.”<sup>91</sup> Second, impassibility must not be formulated so as to deny that the actions of creatures are the real, objective occasions of the “action both of the divine affections and will.”<sup>92</sup> There are some theologians—we are not sure who Dabney has in mind because he never names them—who seem to give the impression that God is angry with himself, lest in admitting that God is angry with someone outside himself they deny his aseity and immutability. When we say that God is angry with sinners, Dabney argues, we must be comfortable saying that God is actually angry with them, and not angry with himself.<sup>93</sup>

We can see in this passage that Dabney begins to distance himself from the traditional understanding of divine impassibility even more. Here, Dabney actually ascribes “affections” to God’s divine life. We must grant that Dabney is being very careful not to undercut divine immutability and independence, but the key issue here is that Dabney is creating a space for these divine affections outside the bounds of God’s intellect and will. And it is at this point that we can see some confusion in Dabney. In his systematic theology, Dabney wrote that God’s active principles were “springs” of divine volition, but up to this point in *God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy*, Dabney appears to make the distinction between divine volitions and divine affections less clear. He speaks of the active principles being “of the will” of God. Are these active principles distinct from the divine will, or are they identical? There is some ambiguity here, but this will become clear as we move forward in the text.

Dabney defends that real conditions in the world are the occasions for his active principles on the basis of human reason. “Now, our rational nature,” writes Dabney, “compels us to think these active principles relevant only when they act towards their proper objectives.”<sup>94</sup> This conforms with his SCSR impulses, and his general appeal to human consciousness and psychology in explaining divine psychology. This is no threat, Dabney says, to God’s immutability or sovereignty because the external events to which he is genuinely acting towards exist according to his sovereign plan, and the external circumstances are eternally present in God’s mind and will.<sup>95</sup>

As Dabney begins to pull the threads together, he clarifies that these active principles are distinct from God’s intellectual and volitional powers. These active principles, Dabney writes, are eternally directed towards an object, “which combine all the activity of rational affections with the passionless stability of his rational judgments, and which, while not emotions...are yet related to his volitions in a way analogous to that which obtains between the holy creature’s optative powers and his volitions.”<sup>96</sup> Dabney is quick to acknowledge that we cannot comprehend this picture of divine psychology.

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89. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 153.

90. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.291.

91. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.291.

92. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.291.

93. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.291–92.

94. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.292.

95. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.292–93.

96. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.293.

However, Dabney says that this way of framing divine impassability must be true, because it is the only blueprint which is allowed by Scripture that does not “both transcend and violate man’s reason.”<sup>97</sup> As Dabney moves on to further discuss divine active principles, he continues to argue, in SCSR fashion, from human psychology to divine psychology, and makes it abundantly clear that God’s active principles are distinct from his will. Active principles are the operative source of volitions. Put another way, Dabney is saying that these divine affections are the motives that produce divine volitions.<sup>98</sup> Whatever one may think about this model’s effectiveness in explaining the anthropopathic language of Scripture, it is clear that Dabney deviates from the Scholastic tradition on any number of levels. With Dabney’s deviation from divine simplicity (as discussed earlier in this article) also comes a logically inevitable deviation from divine impassability. This is exactly what we see occurring in Dabney. The chief operating principle behind the rejection of divine impassability is, again, the anthropocentric logic found at the very heart of SCSR.

Another discussion of impassability is found in Dabney’s reflection on the emotions of Christ. Dabney argues that God “actually feels, according to his infinite benevolence”<sup>99</sup> pity towards those whom he will not save. A key example that Dabney points to is Jesus in Luke 12:41–42. This is the famous passage where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. Dabney implies that some of the more stringent Calvinists would argue that Jesus weeping over Jerusalem only speaks to the affections of his human will and does not speak to his divine will. Hence, Jesus could weep over all of Jerusalem according to both

natures because in his divine will he only allowed for mercy to be extended to the elect in the city. Dabney replies that this approach is wrongheaded for a number of reasons. First, it would give the impression that Jesus’ human nature was more compassionate than his divine nature.<sup>100</sup> Second, Dabney argues that we must also be hearing some of the divine nature when Jesus speaks of how, in the past, he has wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem to himself but they would not come and how, in the future, he would come in judgment.<sup>101</sup> And third, Dabney believes that such interpretations violate the traditional understanding of the two natures of Christ. It is not faithful to Scripture to say that “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” does not apply when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. Moreover, such an interpretation would put the two natures of Christ in opposition to one another. “[W]hile we are none of us Monothelites,”<sup>102</sup> Dabney writes, “we cannot admit to any defect of concert and symphony between the will of the perfect humanity and that of the divine.”<sup>103</sup>

The discussion of Christ’s emotions is markedly different from the more general discussion of God’s active powers. Dabney is more Scripture-focused, appealing to the text rather than to human psychology. But the anti-scholastic impulse is still present, and we can see this beginning to affect his view of the hypostatic union.

In summary, Dabney deviates from classical theism regarding God’s (lack of) passions in significant ways. He leans on his SCSR method of reasoning from human consciousness and psychology to argue that God must have something analogous to human emotions in his divine being. We have emotions that act as “springs of volition,” causing us to make decisions and to act. God, in Dabney’s thinking, must have the same sort of active principles in his volitional mechanisms, the classic arguments for simplicity notwithstanding.

#### *Trinitarian Definition of Personhood*

Dabney begins discussing Trinitarian Personhood by referencing classical Scholastic terms that are used in explaining the Trinity. Some of the Scholastics, Dabney argues, confuse words for concepts so that they think they have explained a concept when in reality they have only explained a few words. Dabney points to the differences between the Greek and Latin-speaking theologians in regards to the word “essence.”<sup>104</sup> The Greek Fathers have only one word for essence (*ousia*), while Latin theologians use three different terms: the nature of a thing (*essentia*), the state of existence of a thing (*esse*), and the subject to which the essence belongs (*substantia*).<sup>105</sup>

97. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.293.

98. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.293–94.

99. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.305.

100. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.308.

101. Dabney, *Discussions*, 1.308.

102. For further information on the Monothelite controversy, see: *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff ([S.L.]: Wm B Eerdmans Pub Co), vol. XIV, pp. 328–342; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1930), vol. IV, pp. 489–511; Walter A Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 732.

103. Dabney’s argument that the divine and human wills must be in perfect concert with one another needs further clarification; his construction of the two wills of Christ is not as obviously correct as Dabney would lead us to believe. Pope Agatho, a strong proponent of dyothelite Christology, argues that Christ saying “not My will, but Thine,” demonstrates that there are two wills in the one Person of Christ. Can Dabney explain how Christ could make such a sentence, if there is absolute identification, as he seems to be arguing, between the human and divine wills in Christ?

104. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 174.

105. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 174.

In turning to the word for Personhood, Dabney notes the difference between *person* or *subsistence* and *substance* or *essence*. Subsistence is distinct from substance in that subsistence is, according to Dabney, the mode by which a substance exists.<sup>106</sup> Dabney points to matter and spirit as examples of this distinction. Both matter and spirit have substance. Yet matter and spirit subsist in radically different ways. Moreover, God's infinite spirit exists as a simple, infinite substance, but God's spirit subsists in three Persons, or three modes of existence. While this distinction is helpful, Dabney is quick to add the caveat that these terms do not explain away the mystery of the Trinity. Dabney says that the student who reflects honestly on these terms will come to the conclusion that he has "no clearer affirmative conception of the personal distinction" of the three members of the Godhead than before he learned the meaning of essence or subsistence.<sup>107</sup> Dabney adds the term "person" to the conversation regarding subsistence. Noting the Greek (*prosopon*) and Latin (*persona*) words for person, he argues that the Greek word carries more freight than the Latin term. *Persona* only implies the "role sustained for the time being." However, both the Greek and Latin terms fail to convey the sense of individual existence that the modern use of the word "person" implies.<sup>108</sup>

Dabney then takes up the issue of the ancient heresies of Patripassianism, Sabellianism, and Arianism.<sup>109</sup> After refuting each of these heresies, Dabney gives a definition of the orthodox understanding of the Trinity, which involves defining a Trinitarian Person as "the subsistence of a threefold personal distinction, marked by a part of the properties of separate personalities, (in some inscrutable manner, entirely compatible with true unity) as intelligence, active principles, volition, action."<sup>110</sup> Dabney speaks further about these personal properties: "The distinction of the three Persons, each by its property, incommunicable from one person to another, and the existence consequently of eternal relations between them."<sup>111</sup>

Notice that, on the one hand, Dabney is fairly traditional in his understanding of personal properties. He speaks of the personal properties being incomprehensible to us, which is a common motif in the tradition of Classical Theism. He also speaks of the incommunicable properties with the eternal relationships between the Persons of the Godhead. On the other hand, take note that Dabney gives a rather radical definition of Trinitarian Personhood. The classical tradition has tended to keep the categories of knowledge and will separate from the category of Personhood. Knowledge and will are part of the divine nature, shared in simplicity

among the three Persons. But Dabney does not follow this pattern. Dabney deviates from the tradition by using intellect, emotions (or as Dabney calls them "active principles"), will, and action as principles which differentiate the Persons from one another. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Dabney's conception of Personhood is the mention of action as a distinguishing marker of Personhood. The tradition up to this point has uniformly confessed that *operata trinitatis ad extra indivisua sunt*. It is possible that Dabney does not reject this maxim—he could be thinking of the intra-trinitarian operations of begetting, filiation, and spiration. However, Dabney offers no elaboration on this point, and so it is hard to understand his precise meaning. Regardless, no Classical Theist uses "action" as part of the definition of personal properties.

There is no direct evidence that SCSR has informed Dabney's thinking with regard to Trinitarian personal properties. There is no explicit appeal to human consciousness, human psychology, or the deliverances of man's reason. The categories of intellect, volition, active principles, and actions are not presented by way of argument but by bare assertion. It is impossible for us to know with certainty what Dabney's reasons for using these categories were. But while Dabney's reasons may be omitted, it is clear that he does not hold to the Classic Theist construction of Trinitarian Personhood.

#### CONCLUSION: DABNEY, THE DOCTRINE OF GOD, AND THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

As is often the case, Robert Lewis Dabney does not fit into pre-established categories or patterns. Dabney identified with the Old School Presbyterian movement, yet, as we have seen, he rejected significant elements of the traditional Calvinist doctrine of God. He clearly rejected divine simplicity along with the notions of eternity, impassibility, and Trinitarian Personhood. Most curiously, Dabney does not explicitly object to the Classical Theist view of immutability. The lack of objection is odd given that one cannot reject the Westminster view of simplicity and eternity and also embrace the traditional view of immutability because of the inter-relatedness of these doctrines. What big-picture conclusions should one take from this study? We suggest

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106. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 174.

107. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 174–75.

108. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 175.

109. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 175–77.

110. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 177.

111. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 177.

that there are a number of areas in Dabney's thought where further work is needed.

*Dabney and Old School Theology.* One way that this article suggests further work is needed concerns Dabney's relationship to Old School Presbyterianism. Old School men were known as traditional Calvinists who held strictly to the theology of the Westminster Standards. One would assume that Dabney held to the Classical Theist doctrine of God as found in the Westminster Standards. However, we have shown that such an assumption is not well founded. Dabney explicitly criticized the Scholastic doctrine of God while being seemingly unaware of the Scholastic formulation of the doctrine of God in the Westminster Standards. Are there other areas in Dabney's thought where he is more critical towards the Westminster Standards?

*Dabney and SCSR.* Another area where more scholarly work is needed regards Dabney's relationship to SCSR. Dabney was a realist who owed a great debt to the Scottish tradition, no doubt. However, there is little in the scholarly literature on the differences between Dabney and prominent representatives of SCSR in the

American Context. Dabney's particular form of SCSR was influenced by Hamilton but idiosyncratic to Dabney. What are the exact contours of his epistemology and its relationship to the tradition of SCSR?

*Dabney and the doctrine of God.* Perhaps most obviously, this article raises larger questions about Dabney's doctrine of God. Our work focused on five essential components of the doctrine of God. There are, however, more areas that need to be explored. Moreover, Dabney's doctrine of God also raises questions about how human thought and language relate to God. Dabney's appeal to consciousness gives an anthropocentric character to his epistemology. God's transcendence must conform to the dictates of human consciousness, or, as Dabney argues, our theology would violate the consciousness of man. Man's consciousness, however, is inviolable. The traditional view of analogical predication is that God is the primary analog regarding human thought and predication. Can the same be said of Dabney's epistemology, where human consciousness plays such an important role in theology?■



The College Church at Hampden-Sydney College was designed by Robert L. Dabney circa 1860. Dabney was co-pastor of the church with his brother-in-law B. M. Smith (1858 to 1874). He also taught at the college in various capacities when there would be a vacancy in the teaching staff. Photograph copyright © MorrisS, and used here under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>. The picture was originally in color and has been lightened and slightly cropped. Dabney opposed the use of the pipe organ. One was installed later in about 1890 (Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, volume 2 (1973), p. 430.