

R. L. Dabney: Master of Education

By Zachary Garris

Robert Lewis Dabney was a Renaissance man. Yet as diverse as his skill set was, Dabney was at his core a Christian educator. This is demonstrated by his persistent commitment to teaching others from the pulpit and in the classroom, as well as his writings devoted to educating readers on a wide range of topics, including education itself.

I. Dabney the Educator

PASTOR AND TEACHER

As a student at Hampden-Sydney College, Dabney left early in 1837 to spend the next two years helping his widowed mother on the plantation. During that time, he also taught at a local school, similar to the country day school he attended as a youth. He finished his Master of Arts at the University of Virginia in 1842. He then graduated from Union Theological Seminary in 1846, serving briefly as a missionary in his hometown in Louisa County from June 1846 to June 1847. Dabney then pastored Tinkling Spring Church from 1847 to 1853 while also serving as a headmaster at a classical academy. After being awarded an honorary doctorate from Hampden-Sydney in 1853, Dabney accepted a call as a professor at Union Theological Seminary. Dabney taught at Union from 1853 to 1883, first as professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity and later in 1859 as Professor of Systematic Theology until his departure in 1883 (holding the title of adjunct in 1859 until Samuel B. Wilson's death in 1869).¹ While teaching at the seminary, Dabney co-pastored Hampden-Sydney College Church from 1858 to 1874 with his brother-in-law Benjamin Mosby Smith (1811–1893), who held the chair of Oriental and Biblical Literature at Union Seminary from 1854 to 1889.² Dabney also helped teach courses at Hampden-Sydney College during this period.

Dabney left Virginia in 1883 to become the Professor

of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the newly established University of Texas, where he served until his retirement in 1894. Along with R. K. Smoot, he founded the Austin School of Theology in 1884 (which in 1902 became Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary). Even after he was completely blind in 1890 and was asked to resign by the University of Texas in 1894, Dabney continued to lecture occasionally until his death in 1898. In the year prior to his death, he produced one of his best books, *The Practical Philosophy*, and lectured at Davidson College and Columbia Seminary on “The Penal Character of the Atonement of Christ Discussed in the Light of Recent Popular Heresies,” which was published as *Christ Our Penal Substitute*.

AUTHOR

In addition to the classroom, Dabney also educated through his pen. He produced a large corpus of writings on a variety of topics, chiefly on the subject of theology. Dabney's systematic theology notes were published as a book in 1871, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology* (2nd ed. published as *Systematic Theology* in 1878). This was, as Morton Smith said, “the nearest thing to a complete text of Systematic Theology ever produced by a Southern Presbyterian

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1. T. C. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (1903; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 195.

2. Dabney was married to the sister of Smith's wife, both daughters of Rev. James Morrison. Along with A. R. Fausset, Smith wrote *The Poetical Books of the Holy Scriptures: With a Critical and Explanatory Commentary* (1859, 1867), where Smith wrote the sections on the Psalms and Proverbs.

theologian.”³ Dabney covered an assortment of theological topics in journals, later collected in his *Discussions*, and wrote a booklet on *The Five Points of Calvinism* that was published in 1895. While possessing a first-rate intellect, Dabney exercised theological humility in refusing to speculate on questions he did not think Scripture addressed adequately, including the order of the decrees (infralapsarianism vs. supralapsarianism), the origin of the soul (creationism vs. traducianism), and how Adam’s guilt was imputed to his descendants (mediate vs. immediate imputation).⁴

In 1855, Dabney wrote a biography of his mentor at Union Seminary, Francis Sampson, who had died the prior year before reaching the age of 40. The book was titled *A Memorial of the Christian Life and Character of Francis S. Sampson, D. D.*⁵ Dabney then edited Sampson’s work, *A Critical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, which was published in 1856. Dabney reflected later in life, “Let me say that if I ever had any special intellectual growth and vigor, I owed it to three things, first, to the Master of Arts course in the University of Virginia, second, to Dr. Sampson, and third, to my subsequent mastery of Turretin.”⁶ Dabney was also a skilled philosopher. He wrote *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered* (1875; 2nd ed. 1887), in which he made use of Scottish Common Sense Realism to criticize the Enlightenment philosophy that relied merely on the senses (hence “sensualistic” philosophy). Dabney’s last written book, *The Practical*

Philosophy (1897), surveys human personality and then sets out ethics for the Christian personality.

SOUTHERN EDUCATOR

Dabney is known as a Southern partisan, and this was no less true in his dedication to training ministers. In 1860, prior to the War Between the States (1861–1865), Dabney declined two offers to minister in the North. The first was to pastor Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City after James W. Alexander died the prior year. The second offer was by Charles Hodge to serve as a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Writing on March 31, 1860, Hodge highly praised Dabney—“You are not only the first, but the only choice of the friends of the Seminary.... There has not been a dissenting voice among all those to whom we have had access.”⁷ However, Dabney declined Hodge’s offer, opting to remain at the less prestigious Union Seminary so that he could continue training Presbyterian ministers in the South. In this way, Dabney followed John Holt Rice (1777–1831), who earlier in 1823 had accepted the Hanover Presbytery’s offered professorship (which led to the formation of Union Seminary) over the offered presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton). As Rice wrote to Archibald Alexander on March 5, 1823, “I am convinced that a Theological Seminary in the South is necessary.... The majority of students in the South will not go to the North.”⁸

Dabney served as chaplain for the Confederacy in 1861 and then the following year as chief of staff under his fellow Virginian, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson (1824–1863).⁹ After the war, Dabney made it one of his chief tasks to defend the South both politically and morally through his writings. He memorialized one of the greatest men produced by the Old South in his 1866 biography of Jackson, entitled *Life and Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson*.¹⁰ Dabney also sought to defend the South’s practice of slavery against the criticisms of the Northern abolitionists, publishing his response in 1867, *A Defence of Virginia (and Through Her, of the South)*. Dabney spent the rest of his days fending off the wave of progressivism that he thought invaded the South after the Union army. He wrote a variety of essays for journals after the war, many of which are critical of industrial capitalism, public education, and egalitarianism. Dabney was a prophetic and fiery writer, and his flame was in full force in these writings on the social issues of his day. These essays were collected and published at the end of his life in the four-volume *Discussions*, edited by his friend C. R. Vaughan. Dabney’s dedication to training Southern

3. Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987), p. 216. The original quote erroneously says “thng.”

4. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 556; R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), pp. 233, 317, 320, 340–341; R. L. Dabney, *Discussions*, 5 Vols. (1890–1897; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982–1999), 1.165–166. The original *Discussions* were four volumes, while volume 5 was a later addition of essays published by Sprinkle Publications.

5. A shorter essay on Sampson is found in Dabney, “Memoirs of Francis S. Sampson, D. D.,” in *Discussions*, 4.392–434.

6. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 83.

7. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 201.

8. John Holt Rice, Letter to Archibald Alexander, dated Richmond March 5, 1823, in William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice, D. D.* (1835; repr., Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 2016), pp. 232–233.

9. See Jonathan W. Peters, ed., *Our Comfort in Dying: Civil War Sermons by R. L. Dabney, Stonewall Jackson’s Chief-of-Staff* (DeStin, FL: Sola Fide Publications, 2021).

10. Two shorter works on General Jackson can be found in Dabney’s *Discussions*: “Stonewall Jackson, Lecture,” 4.149–175; “True Courage, a Memorial Sermon on the Death of General T. J. Jackson, June, 1863,” 4.435–452.

ministers and defending the South's traditions made him one of the most significant influences in the Southern Presbyterian church. As his biographer T. C. Johnson said of Dabney, "He did more than any other man of his generation to impress the peculiar type of theology characteristic of the Southern Presbyterian Church between the years of 1865 and 1895 upon that church."¹¹

II. Dabney on Education

ON PREACHING

Dabney's lectures on preaching were published in 1870 as *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (later republished as *Evangelical Eloquence*).¹² Unlike most modern preaching professors, Dabney was well-acquainted with classical rhetoric, which he combined with biblical insight as he approached the subject of preaching. Dabney urged preachers to practice the "expository method" that "explains extended passages of Scripture in course," as it is "the only natural and efficient way to do that which is the sole legitimate end of preaching, convey the whole message of God to the people."¹³ The application of such exposition should focus on salvation, not "politics," as "the preacher's business is the redemption of the soul, and his instrument is the Bible truth." Here we see Dabney's adherence to the spirituality of the church. While he did not deny the place of applying biblical principles to the "social evils of the day," he said this should only be done "as God so applies them in the Bible" and "no farther." As Dabney said, "Let the preacher take the application of the principles, as well as the principles applied, from the word of God; let him take, not only his starting position but his whole topics, from God's word, and he will be in no danger of incurring that sarcasm" aimed at those who "take their texts from the Bible, and their sermons from the newspaper."¹⁴

Dabney thought preaching should be didactic, but it should come from the heart—"Let the preacher's own soul be fully penetrated and aroused by sacred emotion. The heavenly flame must be kindled first in your own bosom, that by this law of sympathy it may radiate thence into the souls of your hearers."¹⁵ The preacher should reason with his hearers, for "he who does not reason is no preacher: he establishes no conviction."¹⁶ Yet in order for the preacher to "be capable of any power of persuasion," he must be a man "of faith and genuine religious affections."¹⁷ Dabney considered extemporaneous preaching to be "the true method of speaking."¹⁸ Yet recognizing the challenges of this method, he encouraged preachers to prepare by writing out the sermon and then mastering its content.¹⁹ But regardless

of the method, excellent preaching requires "strenuous effort," as he "who labours most on each sermon is usually the best preacher."²⁰ As for Dabney's own preaching, Morton Smith said, "His preaching was always didactic. His method of delivery varied with the occasion. He often wrote out everything, and then memorized it. On other occasions he preached from his manuscript. At still other times, he simply used an outline."²¹ Smith added, "He is said to have given enough material in a single sermon for the average minister to develop anywhere from two to six sermons. This speaks of the rich wealth of material that he had available and brought to bear on a text as he proclaimed the Word. This very feature, however, is just what would make him more difficult for the average person to follow."²²

ON THE EDUCATION OF PASTORS

Dabney thought seminaries should focus on training ministers in the Bible. In an 1883 letter to G. B. Strickler, his later successor as Professor of Church History at Union, Dabney said, "The plan of our Seminary, as a biblical seminary, makes the Bible itself a text-book for every professor. The Old Testament was my text-book for the history of the church of the old dispensation; my human helps, Prideaux's *Connexions* and Alexander's *History of the Israelitish Nation*. The Book of Acts was my text-book for the apostolic age of the new dispensation, with old Mosheim for the rest (with Murdock's notes)."²³ Thus, Dabney thought that even church history should begin with biblical history. In an earlier 1856 article in the *Central Presbyterian*, Dabney said of Union Seminary, "This institution was intended by its great founder, Dr. John H. Rice, to be a school of *Biblical Theology*." He added that the Bible "is the text-book of the theologian, and the grand concern of his training is to fit him for understanding its contents." Biblical studies "are the most likely to be least cultivated in subsequent life," and thus they "should be most perfected in

11. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 553.

12. R. L. Dabney, *Evangelical Eloquence: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

13. *Evangelical Eloquence*, pp. 78–89.

14. Dabney, "The Gospel Idea of Preaching," in *Discussions*, 1:596–597.

15. *Evangelical Eloquence*, pp. 247–248.

16. *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 196.

17. *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 250.

18. *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 332.

19. *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 338.

20. *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 344.

21. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, p. 187.

22. *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, p. 188.

23. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 141.

the Seminary”—“lay the foundation here thoroughly, and a respectable theological progress in after life is ensured.”²⁴ Accordingly, Dabney thought each professor at Union should “be required to expound some portion of the original Scriptures” so that “he may be brought into immediate contact with the Word of God in his studies.” Dabney thought all seminary professors should primarily be scholars of the Bible—“Exegetical study is the great means for cultivating a right literary spirit in the theologian.” This was the case even for the professor of theology, as “the man who cannot expound Scripture respectably can certainly never be qualified to teach Christian theology.”²⁵

As for Dabney’s method as a teacher of systematic theology, he held two class periods on each theological topic. At the end of the second class, Dabney provided students with a syllabus on the chalkboard, which included questions and assigned leading authors on the next subject. The assigned readings were from various theologians, especially Francis Turretin’s *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* in Latin and John Dick’s *Lectures on Theology* in English. In the first class period, Dabney covered 10 to 12 pages of Turretin in Latin. Each student was required to write his own thesis on the topic, which Dabney corrected at home.²⁶ Dabney lectured on the topic in the second class period, where he “taught by means of dialogue.”²⁷

As for the seminary student, Dabney argued he should begin “with the great fact that the Word of God (in the originals) is the grand repository of all the data of the science of divinity.” Thus, the ministerial student should begin with “preparatory studies” that “facilitate his study of the Bible itself,” which includes “mastering of the Hebrew language” that brings the student

to “the open door of the temple of divine truth.” The second step is to study the Bible’s “contents,” which is “hermeneutics and exposition.” After this, the ministerial student should proceed to systematic and pastoral theology, learning “the mutual relations of the Scripture facts and doctrines, that they may assume in his mind the strength of a system,” but also applying this system “for the redemption of men,” which is pastoral theology.²⁸ Morton Smith commented, “This all reflects the balanced view of theological education that Dabney maintained. It must be first Biblical, then systematic; pastoral, and finally historical.”²⁹

In 1869, Dabney submitted to the Committee on Seminaries at the General Assembly his “Memorial on Theological Education,” in which he recommended reorganizing the seminary curriculum with additional theology classes. Dabney’s proposal was rejected partly because of B. M. Smith’s argument that these proposals would give the biblical languages a less prominent role.³⁰ As part of his proposed reorganization, Dabney also argued for a “standard of proficiency” for earning a seminary degree to replace the set number of years required, which would allow students to go at their own pace—“The course, indeed, should be made so rich that no mortal, whatever his preparation or talent, could complete it in less than two years . . . let the student’s own capacity alone decide for him whether he shall expend two or four, or five years in the course.”³¹

Dabney thought the seminary should teach the Bible in the original languages and that pastors should be classically trained in Greek and Latin as he himself was.³² In response to attempts to lower the educational standards for ministers, Dabney argued in 1883 that pastors should be highly educated. Having such high standards was not the church excluding the less educated from the pastorate, for, “The man who is fit for a minister will not refuse the additional labor for Christ, when he learns that it is requisite for his more efficient service of Christ.”³³ The other professions, such as law and medicine, were “advancing largely” in training requirements, and the pastor’s “professional tasks are infinitely more responsible”—“it is no time for ours to go back.”³⁴ In 1891, Dabney wrote a response to an overture that would lower the standard of ordination for ministers by, in Dabney’s words, not requiring “them to exhibit any classical scholarship whatever, nor any knowledge of philosophy, nor of either of the languages of inspiration.”³⁵ Dabney objected that “the door into our ministry is already made too wide.”³⁶ Appealing to 2 Timothy 4:2 and Titus 1:9, Dabney argued the pastor is required to not only instruct his flock in redemption

24. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 152.

25. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 153.

26. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 196.

27. Douglas Floyd Kelly, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), pp. 215–216.

28. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pp. 151–152.

29. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, p. 189.

30. William B. Sweetser, Jr., *A Copious Fountain: A History of Union Presbyterian Seminary, 1812–2012* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), pp. 161, 475.

31. Dabney, “Memorial on Theological Education,” in *Discussions*, 2.57–58.

32. Dabney, “A Thoroughly Educated Ministry,” in *Discussions*, 2.656–667.

33. “A Thoroughly Educated Ministry,” in *Discussions*, 2.667.

34. “A Thoroughly Educated Ministry,” in *Discussions*, 2.672.

35. Dabney, “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions*, 3.551.

36. “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions*, 3.553.

but also “defend their faith by refuting and convincing all assailants.” Thus, “this Bible principle must require of pastors continually widening qualifications instead of contracted ones, as the expansion of secular knowledge furnishes the enemies of the cross with new and varied weapons.”³⁷ Pastors must not be ignorant of other sciences outside the “supreme science” of theology.³⁸ A less educated ministry, as seen in other denominations outside Presbyterianism, led to “spurious revivalism,” and “the only guarantee of doctrinal unity and orthodoxy, next to the inworking of God’s Spirit, is a thoroughly educated ministry.”³⁹

ON PARENTING AND EDUCATION

Dabney’s conviction that parents are the primary influence on children is best captured in “Parental Responsibilities,” a sermon he delivered to the Synod of Virginia in October 1879. Dabney highlighted the special responsibility parents have in raising their children, a responsibility grounded in “the unique and extensive character of their authority over their offspring.” Dabney expounded on the magnitude of the parents’ influence on their children, as it is parents who determine their children’s wealth, reputation, character, and opportunities—“Let the extent of the parent’s legitimate or unavoidable power over his children be pondered. As he is industrious and discreet, or indolent and prodigal, he decides for his children whether they shall begin their adult existence with a competency or as paupers. As he is virtuous or vicious, he decides for them whether they shall bear an honored name, or be branded with the mark of infamy at their outset in society.” Dabney continued, “His neglect of their early mental culture determines whether they shall reach adult life stupid boors or educated and intelligent men. Yea, more than this, character itself, at the outset of manhood, is mainly determined by the parents, and that chiefly by their example; so that they have the power of deciding with probable effect whether their children shall begin their careers with base or with virtuous principles and habits.”⁴⁰

The influence of parents on a child is so significant that “there is no power allowed to any creature under heaven over another responsible creature so wide as this providential power of the parent.”⁴¹ Part of this power involves the passing on of the parents’ religious beliefs. Some parents seek to be “unbiased” or “neutral” in this regard, but Dabney considered this impossible—“It is made both his privilege and his duty to impose the principles and the creed which he has sincerely adopted as the truth for himself upon the spirit of his child. Some men, it is known, vainly prate of a supposed obligation

to leave the minds of their children independent and ‘unbiased’ until they are mature enough to judge for themselves. But a moment’s thought shows that this is as unlawful as impossible. No man can avoid impressing his own practical principles on his child. If he refrains from words, he does it inevitably by his example.”⁴² Dabney added, “He must ‘bring up the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.’ Which is that nurture? Popery? Presbyterianism, Rationalism, or Infidelity? At the time the training is to begin, the child is wholly unqualified to judge; the parent must judge for him.”⁴³ Dabney concluded, “These considerations prepare us to expect that the parent’s influence will be more effectual for good and evil than any or all others that surround the young soul. . . . The parent has the first and all-important opportunity.”⁴⁴

This led to Dabney’s masterful description of the significance of parental education: “The education of children for God is the most important business done on earth. It is the only business for which the earth exists. To it all politics, all war, all literature, all money-making, ought to be subordinated; and every parent especially ought to feel, every hour of the day, that, next to making his own calling and election sure, this is the end for which he is kept alive by God—this is his task on earth. On the right training of the generation now arising, turns not only the individual salvation of each member in it, not only the religious hope of the age which is approaching, but the fate of all future generations in a large degree. Train up him who is now a boy for Christ, and you not only sanctify that soul, but you set on foot the best earthly agencies to redeem the whole broadening stream of human beings who shall proceed from him, down to the time when men cease to marry and give in marriage. Until then, the work of education is never ending.” Dabney went on to say, “The supreme end of the family institution is as distinctly religious and spiritual as that of the church itself.”⁴⁵ And again, “The instrumentalities of the family are chosen and ordained of God as the most efficient of all means of grace—more truly and efficaciously means of saving grace than all other ordinances of the church.”⁴⁶ Thus,

37. “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions*, 3.559.

38. “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions*, 3.560.

39. “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions*, 3.564, 566.

40. Dabney, “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.682–683.

41. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.683.

42. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.684.

43. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.685, citing Eph. 6:4.

44. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.687.

45. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.691–692.

46. “Parental Responsibilities,” in *Discussions*, 1.693.

Dabney viewed parenting as a covenantal task, where God works through faithful Christian parents to save and shape His children. As far as we can tell, Dabney lived out his commitment to the education of children. Of his three sons who survived to adulthood, Charles went on to serve as president of the University of Tennessee and the University of Cincinnati, and Samuel and Lewis became lawyers in Texas.

III. Dabney's Opposition to Public Education

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN VIRGINIA

Dabney wrote several essays staunchly opposing “public” schools, or what were known as “common” schools at the time. However, the context of these essays should not be ignored. After the War Between the States, progressive policies swept through the South, including in Dabney’s home state of Virginia. Dabney’s writings attacked such progressivism, with the primary targets being feminism, industrial capitalism, and public education. Thus, Dabney did not merely propound a philosophy of education but was responding to the introduction of a statewide educational system in Virginia. Tax-funded public schools were foreign to the early American South, which explains why Dabney referred to them as the “Yankee theory” of schooling.⁴⁷ Public schools had existed in New England since the days of the Puritans, but the *statewide* school system was a 19th-century novelty in America, first implemented in Massachusetts in 1837 under the leadership of Horace Mann. In the South, Thomas Jefferson had pushed for public schools, but the aristocracy opposed them, following the English tradition that focused education on the privileged class.⁴⁸ Churches in the South attempted to provide mass education through Sunday schools, with Presbyterians establishing one of the first of such in Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1816, but these failed for a variety of reasons.⁴⁹ Virginia allowed some funds for “pauper schools” in 1810, and the legislature in 1829 created some free government schools, though few counties

took advantage of them.⁵⁰ By 1855, public schools “were in operation in six eastern and four western counties and three Tidewater towns,” but the War destroyed any beginnings of a public school system.⁵¹

It was not until Reconstruction that Virginia created a statewide public school system. Congress required the Southern states to write new constitutions, and in July 1869, the Radical Republicans helped Virginia ratify a constitution that required a statewide public education system by 1876. Though anti-Reconstruction politicians won political office in 1870, the Virginia General Assembly followed the constitutional mandate by electing William Henry Ruffner (1824–1908), a Presbyterian pastor from Lexington, Virginia, as the first superintendent of public instruction on March 2, 1870. Ruffner created a centralized system with a state board of education and county superintendents funded by property taxes. The schools were segregated but provided free education for both blacks and whites from age five to 21. The governor signed this legislation into law on July 11, 1870, and schools opened on November 1, 1870. Ruffner served as Virginia’s superintendent of public instruction for 12 years, and his influence led many to describe him as the “Horace Mann of the South.”⁵²

Dabney understood this statewide school system as a Northern infiltration designed to reconstruct Southerners—a “false system imposed on us by our conquerors.”⁵³ Dabney, along with C. R. Vaughn (1827–1911), a professor at Union Seminary after Dabney moved to Texas, adhered to the “Virginia theory” that education was primarily a responsibility that belonged to parents and not the state, though allowing for public schools for the poor. The church may aid parents in this task of education, seen in that Presbyterians established Washington College and Hampden-Sydney College but left them in the hands of trustees.⁵⁴ As for the poor, Dabney argued the statewide school system would in fact “obstruct parental and philanthropic effort.”⁵⁵ In a letter to the *Texas Presbyterian* in 1879, Dabney clarified his position, stating that while “the state should not usurp the right and function of educating youth, as though it were primary in the matter ... it does not thence follow that the State can have nothing to do with education.” “The old system of Virginia was the wise, the true, the consistent system,” where the state “created no primary schools, but encouraged parents to create them.” Rather than the state being “guilty of the fatal communistic error of making the education of the children a commonwealth function to be paid out of taxes,” the old Virginia system was built on charity—“helping only the unfortunate and the poor, by paying the tuition of

47. Dabney, “The Negro and the Common School,” in *Discussions*, 4:176.

48. E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume One: 1607–1861* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 236.

49. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume One*, p. 237.

50. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume One*, p. 239.

51. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume One*, p. 473.

52. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume One*, p. 346.

53. “The Negro and the Common School,” in *Discussions*, 4:176.

54. E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Two: 1861–1890* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 352.

55. Dabney, “Secularized Education,” in *Discussions*, 4:241.

their children in such schools in the vicinage as parents chose to create and the parents aided chose to select.”⁵⁶

Yet in opposing public schools, Dabney was swimming against the tide. Other Southern leaders supported public schools, including James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) and Robert J. Breckinridge (1800–1871), with the latter even serving as superintendent of the Kentucky schools from 1847 to 1853. These men held that education belongs to the state and not to the church, as the church’s mission is spiritual. However, they wanted public schools that were religious and taught the Bible, though not sectarian or denominational.⁵⁷ A third view, closer to Dabney’s, was that of Thomas Smyth (1808–1873) of South Carolina, who argued that education belongs to the church. Smyth held that education is religious and “if the distinctive principles of Christianity are to be excluded from the schools of the State, these schools must be abandoned.”⁵⁸ Thus, Dabney was not only up against the likes of Thornwell and Breckinridge but also Presbyterians in Virginia such as Ruffner and his own brother-in-law B. M. Smith. Dabney did not always get along with Smith, his co-pastor and colleague at Union, partly because of their disagreement over public education. For his entire life, Smith had been devoted to establishing such schools for all children in Virginia. In 1838, he wrote to the governor of Virginia, David Campbell, to propose organizing public schools based on the Prussian model, and in 1869 he called for the state to educate all children with schools supported through taxation.⁵⁹ Smith was thus an ally of Ruffner, even presenting a paper in 1870 to the Educational Association of Virginia that criticized Dabney’s views on public schools. He also served as superintendent of public instruction for Prince Edward County from 1870 to 1881.⁶⁰

DABNEY’S DEBATE WITH WILLIAM HENRY RUFFNER
A debate ensued between R. L. Dabney and W. H. Ruffner, Virginia’s first superintendent of public instruction, when Dabney voiced his opposition to the Virginia system with an article published in April 1876 in the *Southern Planter and Farmer*.⁶¹ Ruffner responded by defending the Virginia system with four articles in the *Richmond Enquirer* and *Dispatch* (April 5, 8, 12, 13),⁶² along with a more personal letter to Dabney published in the *Central Presbyterian* (April 5, 1876). Dabney then responded to Ruffner with four articles in the *Enquirer* and *Dispatch* (April 18, 22, 25, May 4).⁶³ Finally, Ruffner closed the debate with seven additional articles, six in the *Enquirer* (May 8, 12, 13, 16, 23, 26) and the seventh (June 22) printed only in the August 1876 edition

of the *Educational Journal of Virginia* (which reprinted the other six in the July 1876 edition).⁶⁴ Overall, Dabney published five articles and Ruffner eleven.⁶⁵ Adding to the intrigue of this debate is that Ruffner was a fellow Presbyterian minister and a former classmate of Dabney at Union Theological Seminary.⁶⁶ Ruffner began at Union but then enrolled at Princeton Seminary in 1846 (the year Dabney graduated from Union), although Ruffner’s health led him to withdraw in the spring of 1847.

Charles William Dabney (1855–1945), son of Robert and former president of the University of Tennessee and University of Cincinnati, summarized the debate in his *Universal Education in the South*. According to Charles, the root difference was that his father, R. L. Dabney, was an “aristocrat” and “individualist” who held that “the state’s duty was merely to protect the family and should not interfere with any of its functions, the chief

56. E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Two: 1861–1890*, pp. 343–344, citing the *Texas Presbyterian* (December 12, 1879).

57. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Two*, p. 482.

58. *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Two*, p. 481, citing an article without a named author, “The General Assembly,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1/2 (September 1847): 97–98.

59. Sweetser, *A Copious Fountain*, p. 158.

60. Francis R. Flournoy, *Benjamin Mosby Smith: 1811–1893* (Richmond, VA: Richmond Press, 1947), p. 135.

61. R. L. Dabney, “The Negro and the Common School,” *The Southern Planter & Farmer* 37/4 (April 1876): 251–262; republished as Dabney, “The Negro and the Common School,” in *Discussions*, 4.176–190. Dabney dated his article February 21, 1876.

62. C. W. Dabney said there was also an April 6 article only published in the *Enquirer* (C. W. Dabney, *Universal Education in the South: Volume 1: From the Beginning to 1900* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936], p. 154). However, Ruffner said his reply only included “four articles in the *Richmond Dispatch* and the *Richmond Enquirer*” (*The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 [June 1876]: 352).

63. Reprinted in Dabney, “The State Free School System Imposed Upon Virginia by the Underwood Constitution,” in *Discussions*, 4.191–224. C. W. Dabney listed the dates of his father’s responses in the *Enquirer* as April 20, 22, 26, and May 4 and said the April 20 article did not appear in the *Dispatch* (*Universal Education in the South: Volume 1*, p. 154). However, these dates conflict with those given in the *Discussions*.

64. C. W. Dabney listed the dates of Ruffner’s closing responses in the *Enquirer* as May 10, 18, 20, 24, 28, June 2 (*Universal Education in the South: Volume 1*, p. 154), but this conflicts with Ruffner’s given dates in *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (July 1876): 387–412; (August 1876), 453. In this August edition of the journal, Ruffner explained that his seventh article did not appear in the *Enquirer* because their office lost the manuscript.

65. Dabney’s five articles can be found in his *Discussions*, 4.176–224. Ruffner’s responses to Dabney were published in revised form in *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (June 1876): 352–362; (July 1876): 387–412; (August 1876): 453–457.

66. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 85.

of which was the training of the children.”⁶⁷ Ruffner’s argument, on the other hand, was “based on the Jeffersonian theory of the state,” where “[a]ll the people of the democracy must be educated to protect their rights,” something the family and church schools “can never do.” Charles thought Ruffner’s responses to his father were “designed to meet the local issues and win the support of the people of Virginia for the school system.”⁶⁸ Thus, the debate involved the clashing of two opposing views of civil government, differences that can be seen in their arguments summarized below.

DABNEY’S INITIAL ARTICLE AND RUFFNER’S RESPONSE

The article that sparked the debate was Dabney’s “The Negro and the Common School,” published in April 1876 in the *Southern Planter and Farmer*. Dabney spoke of the “deadly tendencies of the Yankee theory of popular State education,” which he considered a “Yankee heresy” being “imposed on us by our conquerors.”⁶⁹ He contended that the “poor, harassed Southern parent” was taking the “bait” that “promises deceitfully to relieve him of his parental responsibility” (p. 177). Defending his aristocratic view that every civilized country must have a “laboring class,” Dabney argued the attempt of universal education to “elevate that laboring class into a reading body . . . is a vain vision” (p. 185). He predicted the public school system would produce “just as many adults in the State, who practically will not read, and who will forget how, as before” (p. 188). As this relates to black citizens in Virginia, Dabney thought the school system would “fail” to elevate the “negro” in society. Yet if it were to “succeed,” this would lead to “amalgamation,” the mixing of blacks and whites (p. 185). Dabney’s solution was to reform Virginia’s school system “both for blacks and whites, back towards the system of our fathers,” a private system that “left the parent supreme in his God-given sphere” to direct the education of his children (pp. 188–189).

In response to Dabney’s article, Ruffner wrote four letters published in the *Richmond Enquirer and Dispatch*. Ruffner’s April 13 article explained these did not encompass “a complete defence of public education” but only a brief “exposition of two or three points assailed by Dr. Dabney.” In his more personal letter to Dabney, dated April 5 in the *Central Presbyterian*, Ruffner admitted he wrote “some unpalatable things.” Yet he

reminded Dabney that it was he who “began it” with his initial “attack.” Ruffner expected what he wrote would “offend” Dabney, but he said he wrote “in sorrow, and not in anger.” Ruffner’s first article in the *Richmond Enquirer and Dispatch*, dated April 5, 1876, criticized Dabney for using disparaging language about the public schools. Things quickly got personal, as Ruffner said Dabney implied that he received too high of a salary, to which Ruffner responded that Dabney made the same amount in a less expensive area. Ruffner even dismissed Dabney’s attack as “chiefly emotional.”⁷⁰ In Ruffner’s second article, dated April 8, he argued it was the business of the state to help the poor. And in response to Dabney’s concern over taxation, Ruffner argued many forms of taxes could fund the schools, and such taxes were worth it for the benefit of the state. In his third article dated April 12, Ruffner said Dabney “knew better” than to charge that the public schools were invented by “Yankees,” and he argued that it was no problem for the lower classes to read on top of their labor (p. 355).

In his fourth article dated April 13, Ruffner addressed the issue of blacks in public schools, claiming that Dabney “ignored” using “Christian means of dealing with the colored people,” whose “moral condition” was “deplorable” (pp. 358, 360). Ruffner explained his view that the state is to educate “for the same reason that she punishes,” which is “to promote order and honest industry; but principally for the development of her citizens” (p. 360). In this way, “men might be allowed to prefer the school to the jail” (p. 359). Thus, the “negro” should be educated because he “is improvable under culture” and can be “made more intelligent, more moral, more industrious and more skillful” (p. 360). Ruffner was more optimistic than Dabney about the future of black Americans, saying, “I am strongly of the opinion that a great moral work is now going on among the blacks which will be highly beneficial to society.” Yet Ruffner still wanted “separate” (i.e., segregated) schools for blacks and whites, which he thought would “gradually overcome that contemptible ambition to associate with white people, which has been instilled into their minds by the blundering policy of the Northern people and the Federal Government” (p. 361). Thus, Ruffner disputed Dabney’s claim that public schools would lead to the “amalgamation” of the races, stating that Dabney had too low a view of his fellow whites.

DABNEY’S RESPONSE TO RUFFNER

Dabney responded to Ruffner’s four articles with four letters of his own published in the *Enquirer and Dispatch*. In his April 18, 1876 article, Dabney attacked

67. *Universal Education in the South*, p. 155.

68. *Universal Education in the South*, p. 159.

69. “The Negro and the Common School,” in *Discussions*, 4:176.

70. W. H. Ruffner, “The Public Free School System,” *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (June 1876): 352.

Ruffner's "free schools" as part of "Radicalism," declaring they were "exactly the opposite to the name falsely assumed" since they were paid for by "compulsion"—"They are virtually thrust down our throats by the bayonet." Dabney said compulsory "attendance" would soon follow in Virginia, and thus, "The only freedom of your system is *your freedom* to compel other people's money."⁷¹ Dabney argued the logic of the system would also lead to the state justifying redistributive welfare programs, as "physical destitution of the citizens is as dangerous to the State as ignorance; therefore the State would be entitled to interfere for her own protection and repair that calamitous condition of destitution which their own and their parents' vices and laziness have entailed on a part of the people, by confiscating, for their relief, the honestly-earned property of the virtuous and thrifty and their children." Thus, "the friends of this principle will in due time become consistent, and claim at least the last inference, along with the first" (pp. 194–195). Condemning the "pagan" view held by ancient Sparta and Plato that children belong to the state, Dabney said, "It is the teaching of the Bible and of sound political ethics that the education of children belongs to the sphere of the family and is the duty of the parents" (p. 194). As for influencing children, "home education" has "so much more potential than that of the school, that the little *modicum* of training which a 'common-school' system can give to the average masses is utterly trivial and impotent as a means of reversing the child's tendency. That which costs nothing is never valued" (p. 197). This is not to say Dabney had no concern for the minds and hearts of the destitute, as he simply offered a different solution than public schools—"The work must be done by laying hold of the sentiments, hearts, and consciences of parents and children together—not through their grammatical and arithmetical faculties. The agents for this blessed work are *the neighbor and the church*. Christian charity and zeal, with the potent social influences descending from superiors to inferiors, in a society which is practically a kindly and liberal aristocracy; these may break the reign of ignorance and uninspiring apathy. The State cannot; the work is above its sphere" (pp. 198–199).

In his second article, dated April 22, 1876, Dabney attacked what he called "the absurd and impossible idea of the Leveller," referring to the idea that the public schools could make it "possible for all men to have equal destinies in human society." Dabney said such a system "fosters a universal discontent with the allotments of Providence, and the inevitable graduations of rank, possessions and privilege." He considered this

egalitarian desire to be "anti-Christian," as the Bible inculcates "contentment with our sphere" (p. 200). According to Dabney, "It is utterly false that every American boy may aspire to the higher stations of life." Such positions can only be reached by the few, as "[p]rovidence, social laws, and parental virtues and efforts, do inevitably legislate in favor of some classes of boys in their start in that race, and if the State undertakes to countervail that legislation of nature by levelling action, the attempt is wicked, mischievous, and futile." Dabney recognized exceptions, such as King David, but in such "instances of native merit," the government "has no need to legislate." Yet attempts to level natural advantages are ineffective, as "[t]he larger part of every civilized people is, and ever will be, addicted to regular, manual labor" (p. 201). Dabney believed that such manual labor prevents humans "from abusing their leisure," which "would be devoted, not to intellectual pursuits, but to wasteful and degrading vices." He again argued that the state cannot "force" reading and writing on children, for "when these become laboring men they will cease to read and write" (p. 202). Moreover, the "smattering of State education" would only create "readers one-quarter or one tenth cultivated," which is worse than "ignorance" because it would open "Pandora's box" and launch the masses into "an ocean which they are incompetent to navigate" (pp. 203).

In his third article, dated April 25, 1876, Dabney argued Virginia's public school system would result in "a mixture of the children of the decent and the children of the vile in the same society during the most plastic age," which would corrupt the children of decent families (p. 207). Students significantly influence one another—"Every experienced teacher knows that pupils educate each other more than he educates them. The thousand nameless influences—literary, social, moral—not only of the play-ground but of the school room, the whispered conversation, the clandestine note, the sly grimace, the sly pinch, the good or bad recitation, mould the plastic character of children far more than the most faithful teacher's hand" (p. 208). Anticipating the argument that Christians should seek to influence unbelievers, Dabney responded, "While we fully recognize the Christian duty of seeking the degraded and of drawing them up to purer associations, we beg leave to demur against employing our innocent and inexperienced children as the missionaries." While some argue "it is the teacher's part to prevent those 'evil communications

71. Dabney, "The State Free School System Imposed Upon Virginia by the Underwood Constitution," in *Discussions*, 4.192.

which corrupt good manners,” Dabney dismissed this as “impossible.” He anticipated another objection—“Have children’s morals never been corrupted in private schools?” Dabney answered that such corruption only proves that parents need to be increasingly vigilant in choosing associations, but the public school system “insists upon extinguishing all such conscientious watchfulness” (p. 210).

Dabney’s fourth article, dated May 4, 1876, resembles his later essay, “Secularized Education.” Here Dabney laid out his most potent argument against state education, which deals with the subject of religion in the schools. He asked, “What religion shall be taught to the children by the State’s teachers as the necessary part of the education of reasonable and moral beings?” (p. 215). Dabney argued for the “absolute necessity of Bible instruction in schools.” And if the *state cannot teach the Bible, this proves that “the State is unfit to assume the educational function.”* Dabney quoted Daniel Webster—“In what age, by what sect, where, when, by whom, has religious truth been excluded from the education of youth? Nowhere; never. Everywhere, and at all times, it has been and is regarded as essential. *It is of the essence, the vitality of useful instruction*” (p. 219). The entire curriculum must be immersed in Christianity—“[W]e claim more than the admission that each man should at some stage of his training, and by somebody, be taught Christianity; we mean in the fullest sense that Christianity must be a present element of all the training at all times, or else it is not true and valuable education.” While it is “the prerogative of a merciful Providence” to overcome the “defects” of a non-Christian training, “surely this comes far short of a justification for us if we willingly employ faulty methods which have a regular tendency to work evil” (p. 220). Dabney continued, “The moral judgments and acts of the soul all involve an exercise of reason; so that it is impossible to separate the ethical and intellectual functions.... Man fulfills the ends of his existence, not by right cognitions, but by right moral actions ... knowledge is really valuable *only as it is in order to right actions.*” This moral basis of education led Dabney to the following conclusion—“It follows that *any training which attempts to be non-Christian is therefore anti-Christian.* God is the rightful, supreme master and owner of all reasonable creatures, and their nearest and highest duties are to him. Hence to train a soul away from him is a robbery of God, which he cannot justify in any person or

agency whatsoever. He has not, indeed, committed to the State the duty of leading souls to him as its appropriate task. This is committed to the family and to his church. Yet it does by no means follow that the State may do anything tending to the opposite” (p. 221). As a spiritual and moral task, the Bible is essential to education—“Grant the inspiration of the Bible, and we have a basis of moral appeal so simple and strong that practically all other bases are comparatively worthless, especially for the young.... There can be, therefore, no true education without moral culture, and no true moral culture without Christianity.” Further, such moral culture requires that teachers “must be Christian” (p. 222).

Secular education would bring great harm, as “[t]he exclusion of the Bible would put a stigma on it in the child’s mind which the parent cannot afterwards remove.” This would especially harm the poor since “[t]he parents who are too poor, ignorant, delinquent to secure their children secular schooling will, by the stronger reason, be sure to neglect their religious education.” In other words, if parents are unable to attain schooling for their children, then they are also not going to provide religious education to overcome the secular education of the public schools. Yet the “deficiencies” of these parents are the “sole pretext for the State’s interference” in education. Dabney concluded that the old private education system in Virginia was better because “it leaves to parents, without usurpation, their proper function as creators or electors of their children’s schools” and “wholly evades the religious question” that was “insoluble” to Ruffner. Dabney closed his portion of the debate with Ruffner with these words—“Government is not the creator but the creature of human society. The Government has no mission from God to make the community; on the contrary, the community should make the Government.... Noble races make their governments; ignoble ones are made by them” (pp. 223–224).

RUFFNER’S CLOSING ARGUMENT

The last word was left to Ruffner, who closed his debate with Dabney with seven additional articles, six in the *Enquirer* (May 8, 12, 13, 16, 23, 26) and a seventh (dated June 22) in the August 1876 edition of the *Educational Journal of Virginia*. These responses were longer and more substantial than his initial four letters to Dabney. In his article dated May 8, 1876, Ruffner focused on the historical argument, asserting Dabney’s views did not “represent Virginia, either present or past.”⁷² Dabney “did not want the masses of the people, either white or black, to be taught by any system,” and thus, he even “oppose[d] the old Virginia restricted system” (p. 388).

72. W. H. Ruffner, “Mr. Ruffner’s Reply to Dr. Dabney on the Free Public School System,” *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (July 1876): 387.

Ruffner said the “Scotch-Irish” who founded Dabney’s former church “did not believe that workingmen should be excluded from books,” and neither did Samuel Davies nor the founder of Union Seminary, John H. Rice (p. 390). Even a 1779 committee in Virginia that included Thomas Jefferson recommended a public school system to be funded by taxes (p. 391).

In his article dated May 12, 1876, Ruffner surveyed the early 19th-century history of the push for a public school system in Virginia, the purpose of which was “to educate the poor without distinction, and to educate them with the children of the rich.” Dabney, on the other hand, favored the method of the “old Massachusetts system,” where a 1647 law required teacher wages to “be paid by the parents or masters of such children, or by the inhabitants in general by way of supply” (p. 392). Ruffner put this dilemma before Dabney—“Either you are un-Virginian in your education doctrine, or you are both Prussian and Yankee! You may take your choice” (p. 393). Ruffner then claimed George Washington, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and Thomas Jefferson as “friends of popular state education” (pp. 394–395). In his article dated May 13, 1876, Ruffner addressed the subject of literacy, disputing Dabney’s prediction that public education would produce “just as many adults ... who practically will not read and who will forget how as before.” He also disputed Dabney’s claim that his prediction was already being fulfilled in Massachusetts and Prussia (p. 397). Ruffner appealed to data that the literacy rates of countries with public schools were better than those without, as well as testimony that the poor read books in those countries.

In his article dated May 16, 1876, Ruffner responded to Dabney’s final argument that education should be religious but public schools would not be able to teach religion properly. Ruffner “fully agreed” with Dabney that, in Ruffner’s words, “Religious truth should form a prominent part of the subject matter of every child’s education” (p. 400). However, Ruffner disputed Dabney’s statement that “Christianity must be a present element of all the training at all times,” arguing that if this were the case, then “no child should be allowed to have any education which the parent does not give” and thus “all schools must be abandoned ... except the strictly family school.” Ruffner recognized Dabney allowed for primary schools and colleges so long as the teachers were Christians, to which Ruffner responded with “Amen and amen” (p. 401). Yet Ruffner went on to say a demand for Christian teachers, particularly of one’s own denomination, is “impractical.” Further, outside of exceptional cases, religion was never “a part of primary

school instruction in Virginia” (p. 402). Thus, Ruffner concluded that, contrary to Dabney, “the school teacher’s business is Christian ethics, not Christian theology.” And such ethics could “unite” professing Christians and Jews and “unbelievers of every grade,” including men like Thomas Huxley and Rousseau, who “admire[d] the Bible” (p. 403).

In his article dated May 23, 1876, Ruffner addressed the issue of the Bible in public schools. Appealing to Scotland, Prussia, and the early American colonies, Ruffner claimed that “as a matter of historical fact, the public schools, which you say dare not teach religion at all, have taught religion more regularly, and more thoroughly, and more soundly, than it has ever been taught in private schools” (p. 404). Ruffner criticized Dabney’s proposal for the state to pay the tuition only for poor children, arguing that if such education taught religion, it would still involve “religion taught by State money,” something Dabney opposed (p. 406). Ruffner’s position was that the state “may formally teach the recognized morality of the country ... but distinctively religious teachings shall be left to volunteer agencies” where the teaching “is agreeable to the parents.” Ruffner appealed to the prior 50 years of the University of Virginia and 37 years of the Virginia Military Institute, which were not “vehicles of infidelity” but contained Christianity. Thus, “There is no need to legislate Christianity into the schools of a Christian people” because “schools maintained by free, popular governments of necessity express and conserve the religion of the people” (p. 407). In his article dated May 26, 1876, Ruffner argued that public education would reduce crime. This is because “ignorance and crime” are “closely related as cause and effect” (p. 407). Experience and observation of jails show that “nine-tenths of the crimes are committed by ignorant people; and that the more generally intelligent a community is, the more moral and law abiding it is” (pp. 407–408). Thus, by combatting ignorance, public education would alleviate crime. After disputing Dabney’s statistical claims, Ruffner provided his own statistics supporting a strong correlation between illiteracy and crime in other countries and New England.

Ruffner closed the debate with his June 22, 1876 article addressing “several miscellaneous points.”⁷³ He disputed Dabney’s accusation that Virginia’s public school system was descended from the Spartans and Plato’s Republic, as the Virginia system instead followed the view of Aristotle. Whereas Plato “advocated the absorption

73. W. H. Ruffner, “Dr. Ruffner’s in Reply to Dr. Dabney,” *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (August 1876): 453.

of the family and the individual in the State,” Aristotle “subordinated the State to the family.” Moreover, “those ideas did not originate with the Greeks,” for “a system of public schools, supported by taxation, existed in Judaea after the return from the captivity” (pp. 453–454). As for Dabney’s argument that children from vile families would corrupt the children from decent families, Ruffner said Dabney’s “real aim” was at the mixing of “different social classes.” Yet even Virginia’s former “pauper system” resulted in poor children being intermingled throughout the private schools (p. 454). Ruffner admitted “misrule” was a problem in earlier schools because of “untrained” teachers and a lack of “the guidance of regulations or the backing of law.” But “if all our influential citizens would only help, instead of trying to hinder our work, the time would soon come when every one of the evils you so broadly characterize would cease to exist. The school would become a place of safety, refinement, and moral as well as intellectual culture.” Ruffner thought the enforcement of “school laws and regulations” would protect the “decent children . . . from the association with the incorrigibly vile” and even change “the vile class . . . into a decent class.” Ruffner added, “Private teachers cannot enforce such regulations as are required in public schools” (p. 455).

While both parties made substantial arguments, readers today have the advantage of judging the debate through the outcomes of the state public school system. Of course, Ruffner did not anticipate factors such as the influence of the federal government in education and social changes in the 20th century. Yet it still stands that many of Dabney’s predictions came to pass, while Ruffner’s promises appear overstated.

SECULARIZED EDUCATION

While W. H. Ruffner had the last word in their debate, Dabney went on to write other articles on education, including “Free Schools” in the *Southern Planter and Farmer* (January 1879) and “Popular Education as a Safeguard for Popular Suffrage” in the *Princeton Review* (July–Dec. 1880).⁷⁴ Dabney built on his earlier arguments against Ruffner and appeared to sharpen them in his greatest single essay on education, “Secularized Education,” an 1879 article that first appeared in *Libby’s Princeton Review*.⁷⁵ Dabney addressed two questions in this essay: (1) “Who is the agent entitled to control education?” and (2) “What is right education?” In response to the first question, Dabney argued that education is

ultimately the responsibility of parents, not the church or the state. As for the second question, he argued that proper education has the Bible as its foundation and moral formation as its end.

If the state is to educate all its citizens, which in America includes a variety of religious adherents, how can it accommodate such diverse religious beliefs? Dabney said there have been four suggestions: (1) “forcing the religion of the majority on the minority;” (2) “Each denomination may have its own schools endowed by the State;” (3) “give ‘unsectarian’ religious instruction in the first hour of the day, while parents who dissent from it are allowed to detain their children from school until that hour has passed;” and (4) “secularize the State’s teaching absolutely” (pp. 228–229). The first solution of forcing the majority religion on everyone has the obvious problem of the state endorsing a religion and oppressing dissenters. The second solution of having a variety of religious state schools would result in many denominational schools that do not have enough students to fill the schools in all locations, as well as leave the state endorsing particular denominations, some of which contradict one another. The third solution of providing religious instruction at the beginning of the school day has the same problem as the first two, as it would involve the state establishing a particular religion. Even though families could opt out, it would punish such dissenters by taxing them for something they do not want. This leaves the fourth solution to secularize state education, limiting schools “to matters merely secular, and leaving parents or the Church to supplement it with such religious teaching as they may please, or none.” Dabney spent the majority of his essay examining this option that was later adopted by the United States—“Let us see whether this plan is either possible or admissible. This is really the vital question” (p. 229).

In order to address whether secular education is possible, Dabney said education must first be defined. He answered, “Education is the nurture and development of the whole man for his proper end.” According to Dabney, while it may be possible to teach an art or skill, such as using a hammer, in a secular manner, that is not education, and the state does not claim to limit itself to teaching such skills. Instead, the state “claims to educate,” with the goal of training students as citizens. But if the state seeks to educate in this way, it must be asked, “Is a really secularized education either possible or admissible?” (p. 230).

Dabney provided six reasons why secular education is not possible or admissible. “First, No people of any age, religion, or civilization, before ours, has ever

74. “Free Schools,” in *Discussions*, 4.260–280; “Popular Education as a Safeguard for Popular Suffrage,” in *Discussions*, 5.396–420.

75. “Secularized Education,” in *Discussions*, 4.225–247.

thought so” (pp. 230–231). Every society in history has grounded its education in religion, whether it be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or pagan. “Second, True education is, in a sense, a spiritual process, the nurture of a soul” (p. 232). As such, “Every line of true knowledge must find its completeness in its convergency to God, even as every beam of daylight leads the eye to the sun. If religion be excluded from our study, every process of thought will be arrested before it reaches its proper goal.” “Third, If secular education is to be made consistently and honestly non-Christian, then all its more important branches must be omitted, or they must submit to a mutilation and falsification, far worse than absolute omission” (p. 233). Dabney said it is hard to see how someone can teach history, psychology, ethics, and law without speaking favorably or unfavorably of the beliefs of Christians, deists, materialists, or any other belief system. He then asked a series of piercing questions, “Shall the secular education leave the young citizen totally ignorant of his own ancestry...? Can he [the physicist] give the genesis of earth and man, without intimating whether Moses or Huxley is his prophet...? How much of the noblest literature must be ostracized, if this plan is to be honestly carried out?” (p. 234). Dabney concluded, “Christian truths and facts are so woven into the very warp and woof of the knowledge of Americans, and constitute so beneficial and essential a part of our civilization, that the secular teacher, who impartially avoids either the affirmation or denial of them, must reduce his teaching to the bare giving of those scanty rudiments, which are, as we have seen, not knowledge, but the mere signs of knowledge.” “Fourth, Of all rightful human action the will is the executive and the conscience the directive faculty.” Teachers must teach students to work hard, be obedient, and tell the truth—“But on whose authority” does the teacher give these demands? (p. 235). When God and His Word are removed, moral authority falls on the might of parents or the government, which is not Christian morality. “Fifth, We need the best men to teach our children. The best are true Christians, who carry their religion into everything.” Yet because such Christians would have trouble teaching in secular schools, “the tendency must be towards throwing State schools into the hands of half-hearted Christians or of contemptuous unbelievers” (p. 237). “Sixth, To every Christian citizen, the most conclusive argument against a secularized education is contained in his own creed touching human responsibility.” Christian parents should want to provide their children with a Christian education,

but secular education is not a Christian education and “a non-Christian training is literally an anti Christian training.”

Dabney spent the rest of his essay elaborating upon this last point that secular education is anti-Christian. He argued that while the state is “not an evangelical agent” to convert souls, it also does not have the right “to become an anti-evangelical agency.” The state does not have the right to “war against” Christianity. Thus, “While we have no right to ask the State to propagate our theology, we have a right to demand that it shall not oppose it. But to educate souls thus is to oppose it, because a non-Christian training is an anti-Christian training” (p. 238). Dabney anticipated the objection that “if the State may govern and punish, which are moral functions, she may also teach.” He responded, “If we are prepared for the theocratic idea of the State ... then we can conclude thus.” Therefore, consistency in this objection would require “a State religion, a benefited clergy, a religious test for office, and State power wielded to suppress theological as well as social error.” Yet since America does not have such a theocracy, the state should stay out of education. Dabney further argued there is a difference between governing and teaching—“while secular ruling and punishing are ethical functions, they are sufficiently grounded in the light of natural theism. But teaching is a spiritual function” (p. 239). Teaching requires redemption of the student, which cannot be attained by nature as governance can.

This logic led Dabney to make a striking prediction about America’s public schools—“But nearly all public men and divines declare that the State schools are the glory of America, that they are a finality, and in no event to be surrendered. And we have seen that their complete secularization is logically inevitable. Christians must prepare themselves then, for the following results: All prayers, catechisms, and Bibles will ultimately be driven out of the schools” (p. 242). It took almost a century, but Dabney’s prophecy came to pass when the U.S. Supreme Court banned school-sponsored prayer in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and school-sponsored Bible reading in *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) as alleged violations of the First Amendment. Dabney further predicted such secularization of the public schools would bring great harm upon the church—“for humanity always finds out sooner or later, that it cannot get on without a religion, and it will take a false one in preference to none. Infidelity and practical ungodliness will become increasingly prevalent among Protestant youth, and our churches will have a more arduous contest for growth if not for existence” (p. 242).

Dabney pointed out that the American public school system has its roots in theocratic states, including Scotland and Prussia, as well as the early American colonies like Massachusetts and Connecticut that pioneered state education. However, in what appears to be a counterargument to Ruffner's closing argument three years earlier, Dabney emphasized these "held firmly to a union of Church and State."⁷⁶ The American system thus follows the education model of theocratic nations but removed the religious aspect that was foundational to those systems. How then should state education be regarded "when it is imported into commonwealths whose civil governments have absolutely secularized themselves and made the union of the secular and spiritual powers illegal and impossible?" To answer this, Dabney returned to the question he raised at the beginning of his essay regarding who ought to control education—"Is the direction of the education of children either a civic or an ecclesiastical function? Is it not properly a domestic and parental function?" (p. 243). The family appeared prior to both the church and the state, and it is out of the family that the social institutions of church and state arise.

Along with this authority given to parents comes an extensive influence upon children—

God has provided for the parents social and moral influences so unique, so extensive, that no other earthly power, or all others together, can substitute them in fashioning the child's character. The home example, armed with the venerable authority of the father and the mother, repeated amidst the constant intimacies of the fireside, seconded by filial reverence, ought to have the most potent plastic force over character. And this unique power God has guarded by an affection, the strongest, most deathless, and most unselfish, which remains in the breast of fallen man. Until the magistrate can feel a love, and be nerved by it to a self-denying care and toil, equal to that of a father and a mother, he can show no pretext for assuming any parental function.

Thus, a state that seeks to teach children that which is contrary to the parents' beliefs is undermining parental authority. As Dabney said, "If the father conscientiously believes that his own creed is true and righteous and obligatory before God, then he must intuitively regard the intrusion of any other power between him and his minor child, to cause the rejection of that creed, as a usurpation." Such usurpation by the civil government

is "in the direction of despotism" (p. 244). Though parents are fallible, "the supreme authority must be placed somewhere." And God has indicated that "no place is so safe for it as in the hands of the parent, who has the supreme love for the child and the superior opportunity." Acknowledging many parents neglect and pervert the power, Dabney responded, "And does the State never neglect and pervert its powers? With the lessons of history to teach us the horrible and almost universal abuses of power in the hands of civil rulers, that question is conclusive. In the case of an unjust or godless State, the evil would be universal and sweeping. Doubtless God has deposited the duty in the safest place."

Dabney invoked the different spheres of authority—"God has immediately and authoritatively instituted three organisms for man on earth, the State, the visible Church, and the Family, and these are co-ordinate in rights and mutual independence. The State or Church has no more right to invade the parental sphere than the parent to invade theirs" (p. 245). For Dabney then, the essential problem with the statewide public school system was that it confused the spheres of the state and the family, with the state, in fact, usurping the family's role in education. As Dabney argued, "God designed the State to be the organ for securing secular justice" (p. 246). The state, along with the church, ought to "recognize the parent as the educating power." The state can encourage education by "holding the impartial shield of legal protection over all property which may be devoted to education," but it should not provide that education. Recognizing the proper sphere for education—the family—would solve the problem of the state attempting to school children from different religious backgrounds. If Dabney's model were followed, he concluded, "Our educational system might present less mechanical symmetry, but it would be more flexible, more practical, and more useful" (p. 247).

IV. Was Dabney Inconsistent in Teaching at the University of Texas?

It may be asked whether Dabney, who vehemently opposed secular education, was inconsistent in accepting a position as Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy in 1883 at a non-Christian educational institution, the University of Texas. Dabney provided his explanation in this matter to Edward Porter Palmer, who served as president of the Presbyterian College of Texas from 1882 to 1885, in a letter that was published as "The University of Texas and the College" in the *Southwestern Presbyterian* (February 14, 1884). There Dabney argued that a state institution is not necessarily a "godless or anti-Christian one." In the case of the University of Texas,

76. "Secularized Education," in *Discussions*, 4.242.

it was theistic because Texas as a state required civil officials to “acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being,” and legislators were required to swear to their performance “so help me God.” Thus, “Texas refuses to recognize the atheist as a fit organ of political society.” Further, the constitution of Texas protected men’s “natural and indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences,” and Texas had a Sabbath law forbidding work on Sunday. Therefore, Dabney concluded that the state of Texas was not “agnostic or atheistic” but “theistic,” and as an institution of the state, the University of Texas reflected this same position.⁷⁷

Dabney said he was able to teach at the university because it did not “suppress all recognition of God” and was not “hostile” to his teaching or Christian students.⁷⁸ While Dabney considered the University of Texas to be “complementary” to denominational colleges, he hoped the state university would come to focus only on graduate studies, similar to the German model. Further, he considered it “better and safer” for a student to receive his ungraduated training in a Christian college than in a state university, where the teaching method should be more suited for mature men than youths.⁷⁹ Thus, state universities should have departments devoted to science and literature, and the only way to fund such departments is by the state itself (the exception being Princeton).⁸⁰ Thus, Dabney supported a state university devoted to graduate studies of science and literature so long as the state was theistic and not hostile to Christianity. Yet Dabney was aware of the potential political change that would alter the circumstances of Texas, where “[a]nti-Christian influences” would lead to rulers insisting that such public education becomes “agnostic.” In that case, Dabney said such an institution would be “virtually anti-Christian.”⁸¹

Sean Michael Lucas, a biographer of Dabney, argued Dabney “appeared strangely inconsistent with his arguments against public education made in the 1870s,” where in his debate with Ruffner, “he had argued that state-funded education had to be agnostic because the state itself was agnostic.” Lucas said, “It is hard to understand how such a vague religious requirement [the Texas constitution’s reference to a Supreme Being] could be the difference between Virginia’s public schools and the Texas state university.” Lucas added, “when Ruffner proposed a broadly ethical Christianity as the foundation of Virginia’s public schools, Dabney had mocked the possibility because education itself was a religious function that required discussion of key doctrinal issues such as sin and redemption. Yet Dabney in Texas

appeared to be content with a higher educational system that was based on a broadly ethical, natural religion.” Lucas appealed to the question Ruffner had earlier asked Dabney—“And how will you get along with your theory as respects colleges and Universities? Can you send a son to our State University?” Lucas commented, “Ruffner believed that Dabney could not with any sort of consistency do so. That Dabney still did not recognize the inconsistency at the time he wrote the article in 1884 was obvious.”⁸²

In response to Lucas’s charge of inconsistency on Dabney’s part, it should first be stated that there is a difference between whether one should hold a teaching position at a school and whether one should send a student there. Dabney seems to have been able to freely teach his Christian philosophy at the University of Texas, and thus there is no inconsistency in relation to his criticism of a state school system. If Dabney was teaching at a state university and openly teaching Christian philosophy, then the university was not godless and anti-Christian, at least not in its entirety.

Second, the context of Dabney’s earlier writings on the Virginia state school system differed from that of his letter on the University of Texas. Whether a state university should exist was not the question before him in 1884. While Dabney in the 1870s was arguing against a new statewide public school system in Virginia, in 1884, he considered “the relations of the University of Texas and the Christian denominations and colleges” within Texas, as well as his teaching position at the university.⁸³ His defense of the University of Texas was not a full-scale endorsement of the model. In fact, Dabney hoped the “tendency” of the university would be towards only training “post-graduate” students in “science and literature,” following the German model.⁸⁴ Thus, Lucas’s claim that Dabney “appeared to be content with a higher educational system that was based on a broadly ethical, natural religion” is incorrect, as Dabney wanted to limit the state university’s

77. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 465.

78. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 466.

79. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pp. 467–468.

80. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 468.

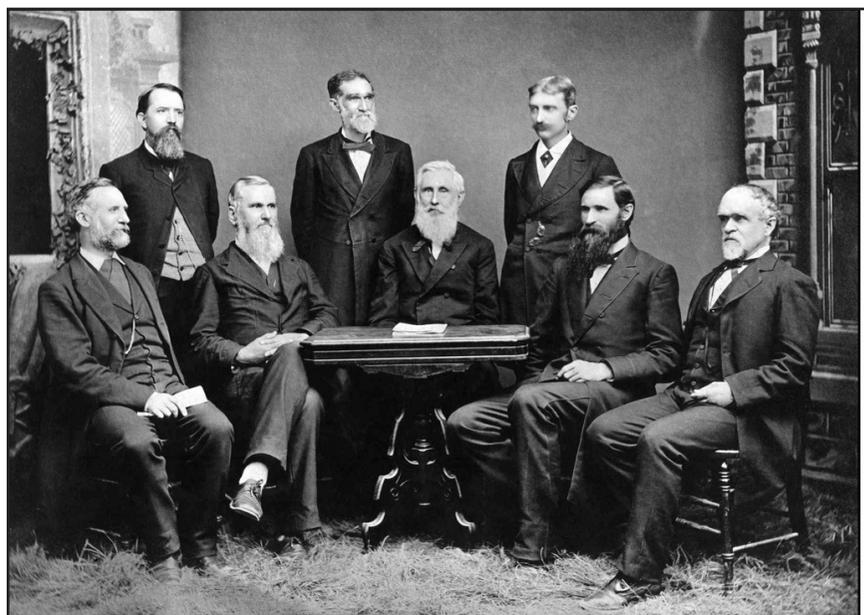
81. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 469.

82. Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2004), 204. The quote is from W. H. Ruffner, “Mr. Ruffner’s Reply to Dr. Dabney on the Free Public School System,” *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 7 (July 1876): 403. (Lucas cited W. H. Ruffner, *Public Free School System* [n.p.: n.d. (c. 1874)], p. 28.)

83. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 464.

84. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pp. 467–468.

The first faculty of the University of Texas at Austin. From left: John Mallet, physics and chemistry; Leslie Waggener, English language, history, and literature; Robert Dabney, mental and moral philosophy and political science; Robert Gould, law; Oran Roberts, law; Henri Tallichet, modern languages; Milton Humphreys, ancient languages; and William LeRoy Broun, mathematics. Used with permission of The UT History Corner, <https://jimnicar.com/>.



education to science and literature for graduate studies. This is a far cry from Ruffner's public school system for children, who are more impressionable than graduate students.

Third, Dabney's 1884 letter to E. P. Palmer revealed his own concerns about the University of Texas. While the university was not hostile to Christianity at the time, Dabney recognized this could change quickly and that a move to make the university's education "agnostic" would be "virtually anti-Christian." This was the same argument Dabney made in his earlier writings against the Virginia statewide public school system, only there Dabney predicted this would happen to the public schools. Regarding the university, Dabney even stated it would be "better and safer" at the time for a student to receive Ungraduated training in a Christian college because the state university is more suited for "mature men" than "youths" due to the "methods of teaching" and "the temptations of a city."⁸⁵

Thus, we may return to Ruffner's and Lucas's question to Dabney—"And how will you get along with your theory as respects colleges and Universities? Can you send a son to our State University?" Based on Dabney's letter to E. P. Palmer, the response is that Dabney thought colleges should be Christian, and he thought state universities should at least be theistic, not be hostile to Christianity, and only teach graduate studies. As for whether Dabney could send his own sons to a state

university, he stated it was "better and safer" to send children to a Christian college and then a state university only for graduate studies. This was the case for his son Charles, who earned a B.S. from Hampden-Sydney College and then an M.S. in chemistry from the University of Virginia (as well as a Ph.D. from the University of Göttingen). Therefore, a close reading of Dabney's 1884 letter to Palmer does not reveal the "inconsistency" that Lucas claimed was so "obvious."⁸⁶ Dabney only defended a limited role for the state university in training mature men in graduate studies.

Conclusion

From his early days as a pastor and seminary professor to his final years teaching philosophy at the University of Texas, Robert Lewis Dabney was a master educator, particularly a master *Christian* educator. Dabney was at heart a teacher, leading him to educate from the pulpit, in the classroom, and with the pen. He not only taught students but also gave significant thought as to *how* to teach students. Dabney firmly held that all true education, not just seminary education, should be rooted in the Word of God. This was why he thought the statewide public education system would fail, as the Bible would be ousted and Americans would be left with a secular school system fostering unbelief among children. While he would likely consider it little consolation, many of Dabney's predictions regarding public schools have come to pass, vindicating his criticism of secular education and bolstering his case for Christians to provide their children with a distinctly Christian education. ■

85. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pp. 467–468.

86. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 204.