

Whither Robert Lewis Dabney?

By T. David Gordon

As I write this, over two centuries have passed since Robert Lewis Dabney was born on March 5, 1820 to Charles Dabney and Elizabeth Randolph Price, of Louisa County, Virginia. In a forward-looking, past-despising generation such as ours, it might seem impossible, or at least improbable, that a person who never used an indoor toilet would have left words or deeds that might interest or influence us today. Christians resist such “chronological snobbery,” as C. S. Lewis called it, as we resist “the tyranny of the living,” as Chesterton designated it. As worshipers of the God of Abraham, and inheritors of the gospel that was proclaimed *to* Abraham (Gal. 3:8), we are at least partially—but not entirely—immune to the disregard for history that characterizes our peculiarly insane cultural moment.

In addition to our culture’s aversion to anything or anyone who is not contemporary, we live in an age where many mistakenly believe we can atone for our nation’s most grievous national sin by “cancelling” any who lived during the time of the African slave trade, who did not also devote themselves wholeheartedly to its eradication. Thomas Jefferson’s presence at Monticello today consists merely as a foil for visitors to wag their fingers at, despite the fact that Jefferson’s proposal for educating and re-colonizing the slaves was probably the most-generous, and best-thought-out proposal ever drafted. The Virginia legislature defeated his proposal, but posterity grants no credit to him for making the effort. Surely, therefore, we must also cancel Dabney, who made no such proposal to the Virginia legislature, and even defended his native Virginia on constitutional grounds. Blindness, however, to the faults of our native culture, is common to all humans in all times; only exceptional individuals have the insight and courage to swim against their cultural tides. How many readers of this essay use Apple products, with full knowledge that China exploits the very workers who produce them (or

their parts)? How many of LeBron James’s fanboys continue to purchase his China-manufactured sneakers (at insane prices)? Robert Lewis Dabney did not rise above or protest against the sins of his culture, but very few others in his day did. Grant himself owned slaves during the War (both his own, and those who were part of Julia Dent’s dowery), and later said that he was not an abolitionist until late in the War.

Historians, and those who benefit from reading history, evaluate individuals within their own cultural context, not by the standards of subsequent generations. The first steam-driven tractor did not appear until 1871, in England. Within less than a decade, slavery disappeared from other parts of the Americas (notably Venezuela) because a tractor was far less expensive than a comparable slave-labor force. Had it been invented a decade before, slavery would have disappeared from the United States (as it did in Venezuela) without a shot being fired. It is very easy for those of us who daily eat food that was mass-produced in large industrial factories driven by electrical power to object to the manual labor that was necessary to the production of food in the nineteenth century. The next century will likely find our agri-industry to have been inhumane to animals, injurious to the environment, and damaging to the humans who eat food that has so many unhealthy components. Indeed, Michael Pollan¹ and others have already raised such concerns, but we blithely dismiss those concerns, because they are inconvenient.

If we are to “cancel” Dabney, and refuse to benefit from his contributions because, like ourselves, he was

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1. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin, 2007).

unable to acknowledge what to later generations seems obviously wrong, we should go all the way and cancel our entire culture (not just the South), and remove all books, essays, and reviews by all public individuals prior to 1868,² because the Three-Fifths Compromise was ratified by all thirteen colonies, not just by the Southern colonies. Our history, and all human history, is the record of imperfect individuals in imperfect cultures contributing imperfectly to the betterment of their fellow-citizens. Dabney contributed far more to the betterment of his culture than his cancellers have contributed to ours. Conceding his imperfection, let us benefit from his contributions.

The sheer range of Dabney's competences would have made him unusual in any day: minister, scholar, seminary professor, farmer, architect, headmaster of a private school, house-builder, husband, father, chief of staff to Gen. Thomas J. Jackson (and Jackson's first biographer), and author of a considerable number of reviews, essays, articles, and books as remarkable for their range as for their number.

Reared in a Christian home, Dabney attended Hampden-Sydney Academy (now College) in Prince Edward County, Virginia, founded by Samuel Stanhope Smith on the model of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), which Smith had attended before studying theology under the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon. The College was named for John Hampden (1594–1643) and Algeron Sydney (1622–1683), Englishmen who had devoted and sacrificed their lives to the principles of representative government and full civil and religious freedom, whose lives and writings had profoundly influenced many colonialists, including Patrick Henry and James Madison. Dabney's well-informed political writings and lectures before, during, and after the American Civil War, were surely profoundly informed by his college years at Hampden-Sydney,³ which later also housed the Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (now Union Presbyterian Seminary, and located in Richmond), where Dabney both studied and later taught.

As we ponder together whether and whether Dabney might influence us today, I would like to examine several areas of his adult life, to see if those areas remain important, and, if so, whether Dabney, as Abel,

2. In the year 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted, which repealed the Three-Fifths Compromise.

3. After two years at Hampden-Sydney, Dabney took some time off from school to assist his mother, and later completed his college studies at the University of Virginia.

4. Dabney narrated Jackson's practice of teaching the blacks on Sunday afternoons on pages 93–96 of his *Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson* (New York: Blelock, 1866).

might continue to speak even though he is now many years dead.

DABNEY AS ARCHITECT AND BUILDER

It is fairly commonplace in the twenty-first century for people to labor in a specialized arena, some working in academics or research, others working in healthcare, some in construction. Such a division was less common in Dabney's day, and he was involved in the role of architect in four church-buildings, and both designed and did much of the physical labor on his "Stony Point" cottage while pastoring at Tinkling Spring, placing many of the stones himself, and planting an orchard there also, though the family lived there for only eight months.

Dabney was also involved as the chief or exclusive architect of four Virginia church-buildings (Tinkling Spring, Briery Church, College Church, and New Providence Presbyterian Church), still standing today, several preserved in the National Register of Historic Places. When the old College Church at Hamden-Sydney became too small, there was consideration of making some adjustments to increase seating, but this would require removing the section for the blacks. Dabney and others undertook considerable expense to build a new building (designed by Dabney), with room to seat five hundred whites and three hundred blacks (segregated). The tower, designed for the center front of the building, was never built, so the building (yet standing and in use) does not have the pleasant lines that Dabney had designed for it. The concern to assure that there would be space for the black population to worship with the white population was more progressive than we sometimes think in our day, and was analogous to Thomas J. (later "Stonewall") Jackson teaching Bible classes on Sunday afternoons for the blacks in Lexington, when he taught at the Virginia Military Institute there.⁴

One thing that has not changed since Dabney's time is the challenge of building a new church-building without destroying the church itself. Some individuals—both then and now—have fairly firm opinions about real estate matters, and Dabney testified to the presence of such individuals at Tinkling Spring:

"The wood-work is well forwarded, and we shall have the shell of a house, at least. I fear, however, that by the time the house is finished there will be no congregation to worship in it.... Both parties in these altercations are to blame, some for meddlesomeness, and some for repelling that meddlesomeness in too rash a manner. Meantime, by an exertion of great forbearance, I steer clear of both, and try to keep the peace between

them, but in vain. The Scotch-Irish are the most inflexible people in the world when they are right, and the most vexatiously pig-headed and mulish when wrong, on the face of the earth..." (letter dated July 30, 1849).⁵

HUSBAND AND FATHER

Families in rural or small-town America in the nineteenth century were literally closer than they have become since the second half of the twentieth century. The family home and small family farm were not assisted by any of the labor-saving electrical or fuel-based machines of a later time. Each family ordinarily was its own small economy, with shared duties proper to age and ability; the Dabneys were no exception. Were it not for the occasional duty at General Assembly, Presbytery, or other ecclesiastical duties, no record of Dabney's correspondence with Lavinia would exist, and much of that was occupied either by ecclesiastical reporting and household reports. Some glimpses exist that provide a small window into a marriage that appears to have been mutually beneficial, and affectionate. When Dabney was attending the General Assembly in New York in 1856, he wrote to Lavinia every few days, and in his final letter, he included this:

Many of the members left this morning. I have spent today in shopping and sight-seeing. But there is a drawback in my pleasure: you are not with me to share it. Sometimes I think that if you could not come consistently with duty (and I know you could not), I ought not to have consented to come and see or enjoy anything without you, and that it is selfish to do so. But I know your love will not judge thus. I see a great many things which are extremely interesting; but I am not happy, except for a few minutes when I forget myself.⁶

Those who knew him only through his writings might have thought him austere, unsympathetic, or even censorious; but those who actually knew and lived alongside him (at Tinkling Springs, or at Union Seminary), described him very differently. After Dabney's death, the Rev. Dr. Thornton R. Sampson, president of Austin College and former student of Dabney at Union, characterized him as follows.

He was a kind neighbor, a tender and most affectionate husband, and an over-indulgent parent and a most faithful friend. In fact, he scarcely seemed, with all his acumen, to be able to see the faults of a friend, and his judgment possibly failed him oftener in speaking or writing of those whom he loved than at any other time.⁷

The Dabneys were blessed with six boys, but three died of diphtheria, Robert and James in 1855, and Thomas in 1862.⁸ The first two died within a month of each other, and Dabney's letters to his brother, Charles William Dabney, after each death, are painful for any parent to read. After Jimmy died, he wrote:

He was intelligent to the last, even after he became speechless, and his appealing looks to us and to the physician could have melted a stone. Some half hour before he died, he sank into a sleep, which became more and more quiet, until he gently sighed his soul away. This, my dear brother, is the first death we have had in our family, and my first experience of any great sorrow. I have learned rapidly in the school of anguish this week, and am many years older than I was a few days ago.⁹

Several weeks later, Robert joined his brother James in death, and Dabney wrote his own brother again:

When I turned away from Jimmy's corpse to my lovely infant (the third son, Charles), my affections and my fears seemed both to flow out towards him with a strength delicious and agonizing. I never tired of folding him in my arms, as the sweet substitute for my loss, nor of trembling for him also, lest the loss should extend to him. But when Bobby was taken, and our little one remained our only hope, it seemed to me, I was both afraid and reluctant to centre my affections on him.... This is strange, perhaps inexplicable. Death has struck me with a dagger of ice. He has not only wounded, but benumbed.¹⁰

CHARACTER

Those who knew Dabney personally regarded him as being profoundly, even disturbingly, honest. He admired

5. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (1903; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 109.

6. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 165.

7. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 538.

8. The remains of Robby and Jimmy reside in the cemetery at Hampden-Sydney college, marked by two small, blank stones of hardly a foot high, and an obelisk of about five feet between those two stones, on which are written the full names of both boys, along with a citation from 2 Samuel 1:23, omitting the reference to Saul and Jonathan, reading: "Lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided." Later, in 1862, Thomas's remains were buried nearby, and, after Dabney and then Lavinia died, their remains were returned from Texas to Virginia where they were buried alongside their boys. Keen-eyed visitors to the graveyard today will discover a marker also for Dabney's junior colleague and successor at Union, Thomas E. Peck.

9. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 168.

10. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 172.

honesty in others (especially in his sister Betty), and was committed to it as the essential component of human society, as the trait that most cultivated trust. Thomas Cary Johnson, editor of *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, recalled an anecdote that was typical and telling:

When his *Collected Discussions* were being brought out, there was some criticism of one of the articles to be presented in the first volume. The critic made the point that the article objected to would injure Dr. Dabney's reputation if republished. The Doctor, on hearing this, turned somewhat sharply to us, and said: 'What do you think of this? Do you like the plan of trimming a man, whose life and work you would perpetuate, to suit your notions, and handing the resultant down as if it were real?' We made answer, that it seemed to us that, if a man's works and life were worthy of preservation through the medium of the press, they and he should be handed down as they were, warts and all. He replied emphatically, 'The truth demands it, sir.'¹¹

Such forthrightness is less appreciated now than it was then, as our culture now expects not only tolerance, but affirmation, of any and every viewpoint, without any warts.

TEACHER

Other than two years at a classical school he founded in Tinkling Springs, nearly all of Dabney's teaching took place in his thirty years at Union Seminary, then on the campus of Hampden-Sydney College near Farmville, Virginia, where his influence greatly increased the size of the student body and the financial security of the Seminary (apart from the war years, during which both were largely decimated). He began as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity (1853–59), and then moved into the chair of Theology from 1859–1883 (minus some disruption when he served as chief of staff for Jackson during the war), before moving to Austin, Texas in 1883, where he spent his final fifteen years of regular teaching as a founding member of the faculty of the University of Texas. During his thirty years at Union, he occasionally taught also as an adjunct at Hampden-Sydney College.

The mind that addressed philosophical or theological matters with great acumen disclosed the same acumen

in the classroom. In his theology classes, it was his custom to assign a particular theological locus to his students, with reference to its appearance in Turretin's (then-Latin) systematic theology, with the assignment that they present a brief statement of the matter and its likely resolution in a two-page composition. Dabney would read each, and at the next class discuss the matter in its entirety, supplementing and correcting, as needed, both Turretin's efforts and those of his students. One such student said this about Dabney as an instructor:

Dr. Dabney was a born teacher, and he loved his work. It has been my privilege, as a student, to sit at the feet of some of the most distinguished scholars and teachers of America, Great Britain and the continent of Europe, such as McGuffey, Gildersleeve, Davidson, Delitsch [*sic*] and Luthardt; but Dabney was the peer of any, and in some respects the superior of them all. He always left his impress upon the mind of his students. One might differ with him in conclusions, but could never deny the force and aptness of his reasoning. His thorough mastery of the subject, his clearness and thorough analysis of it, his forceful, apt illustrations, and his sympathetic recognition of the students' difficulties, gave him most remarkable force as a teacher.¹²

PREACHER

Though Dabney's initial sermons as a licentiate may not have been either to his liking or those of his auditors, he fairly quickly became recognized as a fine preacher, of the "didactical" sort. In the nineteenth century, "didactic" was not a pejorative term, equivalent to "tedious;" to the contrary, it was a descriptive term, indicating that the would-be persuader did not aim directly at the passions, but appealed to the understanding first, providing reasonable grounds for interpreting the text or applying the text as the preacher did. In his *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric*, one of Dabney's "Seven Cardinal Requisites of the Sermon" was that it be, as he put it, "instructive." In his description of what this means/meant, he wrote:

But the instructive sermon is that which abounds in food for the understanding. It is full of thought, and richly informs the mind of the hearer ... it is opposed also to those which seek to reach the will through rhetorical ornament and passionate sentiment, without establishing rational conviction.... Religion is an intelligent concern, and deals with man as a reasoning creature. Sanctification is by the truth. To move men we must instruct. No Christian can be stable and consistent save as he is intelligent.¹³

11. Preface, T. C. Johnson, *Life and Letter*, p. v.

12. Dr. Thornton Sampson, in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 538.

13. R. L. Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric, or a Course of Lectures on Preaching* (1879; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), pp. 117–119.

Dabney's emphasis on instructiveness should not be mistaken as rationalism or impiety. In his earliest years as a minister, his mentor Dr. White had instructed him: "Preach as if your preaching was everything, and then pray as if it were nothing." This blending of scholarship with piety was a characteristic of both of the two seminaries established by the Presbyterians in 1812: Princeton and Union. This blend was perhaps what occasioned the remarkable remembrance of F. P. Ramsay about Dabney's preaching:

In the early part of 1886 I went on a Sabbath morning to the Franklin Square Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, as I was accustomed to do, being then a student in the Johns Hopkins University. For some cause I was quite late, and was disappointed at seeing a stranger in the pulpit with Dr. Lefevre, whom I expected to hear. There was no introduction of the stranger after my entrance, and there was no one near me to tell me his name. His appearance did not much impress me, and my first conjecture was that some elderly brother had come in on Dr. Lefevre, and courtesy had been constrained into putting him up to preach. Then when announcement was made, or when I recalled that on next Sabbath the Lord's Supper was to be administered, I conjectured that the pastor had invited some fellow-Presbyter, personally liked by him, to preach during the week preceding, the pastor of some small country charge.

The stranger read the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, and his subject was "The Vicarious Atonement." The method was to state and refute the false or incomplete theories of the atonement, and then to establish the true theory. The discourse lasted an hour or more. I was soon listening with profound interest. I abandoned my previous conjecture concerning the identity of the speaker. When he had been speaking perhaps half an hour, stating with the clearness of light false theories, and crushing them to powder under resistless logic, I came to the conclusion that it must be Dr. Dabney. I had never seen him or his picture, but had heard his students talk of his teaching, and was familiar with his writings; and I saw in the giant reasoner, aflame with scorn of error and of subterfuge, yet bowing with meekness at the cross, one so like our great Dabney, that Dabney it must be. And so it turned out to be.¹⁴

That the identity of the unknown preacher could be guessed by the nature of the discourse itself is a testimony both to Dabney and to a culture that antedated

moving pictures (and almost antedated photography itself).

Not long after his death on January 3, 1897, memorial services were held in many places to commemorate Dabney's life. Perhaps the most prominent was the one held at the College Church in Hampden-Sydney, of which building Dabney had been the architect. Clement Read Vaughan and Givens Strickler both spoke (among others), and Dr. Moses Drury Hoge, himself only two years from his own passing, concluded with a marvelous address, in part of which he said this:

...a man was ordinarily regarded as having fulfilled the great end of life when he had been successful in any one department of useful labor, but that it had been the privilege of the man whose loss we mourn to-day to be distinguished, first, as an able and impressive expounder of the Word in the pulpit; second, as one of the strongest writers on philosophic, secular and theological themes; and, third, as one of the most successful of teachers in a Seminary devoted to the training of young men for the gospel ministry; that it was his rare lot not only to win distinction in each, but to combine and nobly employ all three of these great instrumentalities for wide and permanent usefulness.¹⁵

At least in the estimate of Hoge, Dabney's labors in the pulpit were listed "first." There is little reason to doubt Hoge's estimate, and plenty of reason for those of us who know Dabney almost exclusively by his writings to lament never having had opportunity to hear him preach or teach.

THEOLOGIAN

Perhaps Dabney is most remembered for his ability as a theologian. No less an individual than Archibald Alexander, the first professor at Princeton Seminary when it was founded in 1812, referred to him as "the best teacher of theology in the United States, if not in the world."¹⁶ This high praise is all the more remarkable for the fact that Princeton's own Charles Hodge was twenty-three years older and more experienced than Dabney, and was still teaching theology at Princeton at the time Alexander made the statement. Hodge himself attempted

14. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 477.

15. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 527.

16. R. L. Dabney, "Preface," in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 1, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1966), page v; and Alexander's son, Joseph Addison Alexander, also a Princeton instructor, called Dabney "the most learned man on the continent" in *Life and Letters*, page 198.

to persuade Dabney to leave Union Seminary in Virginia to join the Princeton faculty, writing him twice in 1860, urging him to relocate, as did Hodge's Princeton colleague, Alexander T. McGill (each to no avail).

Thomas Cary Johnson, biographer of Benjamin Morgan Palmer as well as Dabney's biographer, said Dabney was entitled "to the first place among the theological thinkers and writers of his century," and remarked that "Dabney's Theology marks him out as very much superior to Charles Hodge as a thinker of profundity and power, and a stimulator of thought."¹⁷ Nor was Johnson picking on Hodge by comparing him unfavorably to Dabney; Johnson regarded Dabney as being greater than other theologians of the era also:

The three great theologians of the century were Shedd, Thornwell, and Dabney.... Of these three, Dabney's theological writings entitle him to the highest place.... What is maintained in this estimate is that Dabney's writings entitle him to the first place amongst the theological thinkers and writers of his century.¹⁸

This high estimation of Dabney's ability as a theologian continued well into the twentieth century. Dr. Morton Smith, in the "Foreward" to the 1985 reprint of Dabney's *Theology*, said, "I can think of no finer work than R. L. Dabney's *Lectures in Systematic Theology* to be made available for our generation (emphasis mine)." And Smith noted that Europeans Auguste Lecerf (France) and Herman Bavinck (Netherlands) regarded Dabney as one of America's outstanding theologians.

PHILOSOPHER

In light of the high praise for Dabney as a theologian, T. C. Johnson's comment about him as a philosopher is striking, as he ranked him with Archibald Alexander and Jonathan Edwards:

Many of Dabney's friends and admirers have claimed for him a nobler preeminence as a philosopher than as a theologian.... Dr. Dabney ... crushed the objections to these truths, and vindicated our knowledge of them, our right to hold them, as Dr. Alexander did not, and perhaps, could not do. For sheer philosophical mental

might, we suppose that old Jonathan Edwards was more nearly Dr. Dabney's equal. Even in this case, the greater caution of Dabney pulls the balance in his favor.¹⁹

In the twenty-first century, Edwards is routinely, nearly universally, regarded as America's preeminent Christian philosopher, and many do not even know about Dabney at all, and certainly not as a philosopher.

In addition to numerous smaller articles, Dabney wrote two significant philosophical volumes. The first, *The Sensualist Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered*, appeared in 1875. In this volume, he examined and repudiated the positivism of thinkers such as August Comte and Herbert Spencer, who reduced all knowing to what the senses experience, rejecting any notions of *a priori* or intrinsic thoughts. For many years he regarded this as his most able book. B. M. Palmer said this about it, and about the character of its author:

That wonderful subtlety of mind which penetrates the core of a subject,... that incisiveness of expression..., that firmness of grasp and positiveness of tone which belong only to those of the strongest convictions; that honesty of mind that leads to the embrace of what is held to be the truth, and a corresponding fearlessness in its defence, and that glow of indignation against the wickedness and impudence of error—all these make the book the impression of the man who wrote it.... What he believes, he believes thoroughly, and his blows against falsehood go out straight from the shoulder.²⁰

Over twenty years passed before Dabney wrote his final philosophical treatise, *The Practical Philosophy*, in 1897, which grew out of his teaching as Professor of Moral Theology at the University of Texas in Austin. The Rev. Dr. A. R. Cocke, said this about the *Practical Philosophy*:

Dabney's name will abide because of several distinct additions to the philosophy of the ages as presented in this volume. *The Practical Philosophy* can take rank beside Kant's *Critique of the Practical Reason*.... Dabney's expression of Free Agency is by far the most satisfactory I have ever seen. Edwards's masterly work on the will cannot equal our author's discussion, either in clearness or in full bringing to light of all the facts... Dabney solves the problem and easily unties this difficult knot.... As a philosopher, this man was so preeminent that it is safe to say he will appear larger to men one hundred years from now than he did to his contemporaries.²¹

Again Dabney was compared favorably to Edwards

17. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 556. While Johnson also taught at Union Theological Seminary, he did so several years after Dabney had left Union for Texas, so they were never colleagues.

18. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 557.

19. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 558.

20. *Southern Presbyterian Review* xxvii, #3 (1876): 491.

21. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, pp. 560–61.

(this time as a philosopher), and as Kant's equal. Dr. Cocke may have estimated Dabney rightly, but he appears to have over-estimated the appreciation for Dabney a century later.

THE AUTHOR

The amount of Dabney's literary efforts is nearly as breath-taking as its range. His major works include:

—*Memoir of Rev. Dr. Francis S. Sampson* (1855), whose commentary on Hebrews Dabney later edited (1857).

—*Life and Campaigns of Lieutenant General Thomas J. Jackson* (1866).

—*A Defense of Virginia, and Through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests, Against the Sectional Party* (1867).

—*Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (1870).

—*Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology* (1871; 2nd ed. 1878), later republished as *Systematic Theology*.

—*Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Examined* (1875; 2nd ed. 1887).

—*Practical Philosophy* (1897).

—*Penal Character of the Atonement of Christ Discussed in the Light of Recent Popular Heresies* (1898, posthumous), on the satisfaction view of the atonement.

In addition to these important books, Dabney wrote many occasional addresses, articles, and reviews, now collected in at least five volumes of *Discussions* (1890–1999), edited by C. R. Vaughan. The range of his considered thoughts in the *Discussions* is remarkable. In addition to the expected ethical, philosophical and theological writings, he addressed geology, jurisprudence, political philosophy, psychology, educational theory (“The Influence of the German University System on Theological Literature”), homiletics (“An Exposition of 1 Corinthians iii.10-15”), missions (“The World White to Harvest: Reap, or it Perishes,” “The Gospel Idea of Preaching”) and commentary on contemporary political events. He reviewed large-scale theologies of Robert J. Breckinridge, Charles Hodge, Alexander Campbell, and W. Robertson Smith. To my knowledge, he wrote nothing about architecture or farming, but he practiced both, and was competent in each, as evidenced by the lasting quality of his constructions.

The high praise extended to Dabney as a theologian and philosopher probably accrues to this remarkable range of his intellectual competence; the *breadth* of matters he considered perhaps contributed, if ironically, to his *precision* in dealing with many particular matters in philosophy or theology. He was also a remarkably

prescient writer; his essays on secular education suggest that he had time-travelled a century and a half to our present moment. In the Preface to the 1984 reprinting of Dabney's *The Practical Philosophy*, Dr. Douglas Kelly rightly observed many good traits in Thornwell, Shedd, Hodge, Alexander, and Palmer, and then said:

...yet in one important way—if in no other—the events of this rapidly concluding twentieth century have shown that Dabney excels them all. Dabney was a far-seeing prophet in a way that few theologians of the nineteenth century—or any other time—have ever been.... It is appropriate that his final work should contain some of his most remarkable prophecies. Believe it or not, Dabney foresaw [*sic*] the life and death struggle that would take place between secular totalitarianism and Christian liberty in America in the latter part of the twentieth century.”²²

CITIZEN

Educated as Dabney was, under the influence of Englishmen (Hampden and Sydney) who had suffered for their efforts to establish republican government in England, and to separate civil and ecclesiastical authority, he was an early believer in the American republic, and the principles that governed the majority of its founders. In full consistency with his views about the spirituality of the church, which caused him to evade/avoid specific recommendations of a political nature from the pulpit, he would occasionally declare his mind on matters of public policy from other venues than the pulpit, and from the pulpit could and did exhort people to their proper Christian duties of submission to lawful government.

From five years prior to the attack on Fort Sumpter until just after, Dabney issued four public addresses urging the avoidance of war: “Christians, Pray for Your Country” (29 March, 1856 in the *Central Presbyterian*); “The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism” (1 November, 1860, sermon preached in the College Church at Hampden-Sydney on a fast-day called by Synod); “A Pacific Appeal to Christians” (March, 1860, in the *Central Presbyterian*); and “On the State of the Country” (20 April, 1861 in the *Central Presbyterian*, just 8 days after South Carolina fired on Fort Sumpter, and before Virginia had seceded). In these addresses, Dabney reflected a common understanding of the American Republic at the time in Virginia, that the Constitution was

22. Robert L. Dabney, *The Practical Philosophy* (1897; rpt. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), “Preface to New Edition,” second page, unnumbered.

an agreement between otherwise-independent states, an understanding at odds with the (Jeffersonian) understanding of the Republic as a “social contract” among individuals.²³ As Dabney himself put it:

It is to me simply incredible, that a people so shrewd and practical as those of the United States, should expect us to have discarded, through the logic of the sword merely, the convictions of a lifetime.... The people of the South went to war, because they sincerely believed (what their political fathers had taught them, with one voice, for two generations) that the doctrine of State-sovereignty for which they fought, was absolutely essential as the bulwark of the liberties of the people.”²⁴

Reading these addresses, even a century and a half after the war, there is little to object to in these several calls to avoid/evade a national war; Dabney’s tone, as well as the substance, of these addresses was and is genuinely “pacific.” During the war, Dabney served briefly as chief of staff for Gen. Thomas J. Jackson (whose wife was a first cousin of Dabney’s wife), and later wrote the first biography of Jackson, which remains in print.

It was only after the war ended that Dabney published his much fuller work, *A Defence of Virginia, and Through Her, of the South [in Recent and Pending Contentions Against the Sectional Party]* in 1867. This work was and is almost certainly the reason we raise the question, “Whither R. L. Dabney?” Dabney’s defense of his native Virginia (and service under Jackson) may have been regarded as tolerable, perhaps even admirable, to post-war sensibilities. But Dabney’s defense of the African slave trade (chapters II–IV), followed by his biblical (chapters V and VI), ethical (VII), and economic (VIII) arguments in its defense made him a pariah in non-southern states then, and in virtually all of them for the last century or more.

DABNEY’S LEGACY

At first glance, it is inexplicable that Dabney is not more widely known or appreciated in our day. He was, after all, compared favorably to Charles Hodge, W. G. T. Shedd, James Henley Thornwell, and Jonathan Edwards.

23. See Thomas Fleming, *The Great Divide: The Conflict Between Washington and Jefferson that Defined a Nation* (DeCapo Press, 2015).

24. Dabney, *Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson* (Sterling and Albright, 1865), pp. vii–ix.

25. Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2022).

26. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, Riverhead, 1998).

As a philosopher, he was regarded as the equal or superior to Edwards and Kant, and well-travelled individuals such as Thornton Sampson regarded him as either the peer or superior to all theological instructors in America or abroad. His book on preaching remains in print, and his auditors regarded him as near-famous as a preacher. How could it possibly be that we speak frequently of Hodge, of Alexander, of Edwards, of Shedd, and not of Dabney? How can every sophomore philosophy student know of Kant, while even some Ph.D.’s in philosophy have never heard of Dabney? The obvious answer, of course, was his unwillingness to condemn all forms of human slavery *per se*. I suspect, however, that there are three other, somewhat-more-pernicious factors that account for the near-silence about a man of such extraordinary achievement and virtue.

First, of course, is the self-celebratory hubris of contemporaneity. Few things are more instinctive to the unregenerate, natural man than to be self-centered; and the first cousin to self-centeredness is the blithe assumption that my generation is wiser than any other, which renders one’s self and one’s generation immune to comparison, since the past is excluded and the future is not-yet-here. Such a notion may be, even more than patriotism, the last refuge of a scoundrel. It is so self-serving (on the short range) to simply assume that we have nothing to learn from those who preceded us; yet it is also self-destructive, for we thereby set the example for the next generation to dismiss us.

Second is our tendency to notice hypocrisy or inconsistency in others while conveniently overlooking it in ourselves. We criticize Dabney and banish him from our thoughts for not rising above the conventions of his culture by condemning slavery in any form, yet we blithely read Saint Paul regularly, who expressly did not evoke apostolic authority to demand the release of Onesimus by Philemon, and made no efforts to emancipate the many Roman slaves in his day.

A third, and much-more recent, trend is the tendency of cancel culture to remove, effectively, from the arena of human companionship any whom we disagree with in any way, functioning with a young child’s naïve belief that everyone is either entirely good or entirely evil. Emory’s Dr. Mark Bauerlein²⁵ attributes this tendency of the younger generation to be due to the fact that they are practically non-readers; Bauerlein believes that the literary experience introduces and reinforces awareness that all humans since the Fall are internally conflicted, which is why Yale’s Harold Bloom regarded Shakespeare as the “inventor” of the human,²⁶ because

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With that by way of preface, we are pleased to present in this eighteenth issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian* a fine collection of articles on the life, theology, and influence of R. L. Dabney. These cover the areas of Dogmatic & Polemical Theology (Scott Cook on the Doctrine of God, Nick Willborn on Imputation/Original Sin, and Frank J. Smith on “Sensualism”), Historical Theology (Sean Morris on Dabney as Historian) and Personal Piety & Applied Theology (Peter Sanlon on Meditation, Russell St. John on Preaching, and Zachary Garris on Education).

However, in addition, not all of the material in this issue pertains to Robert Lewis Dabney, as the table of contents shows. The selection of reviews and articles is, as always, more wide-ranging than the main cover might suggest. We also encourage readers to look at our regular features at the back of the issue, including a new Psalm setting by Todd Ruddell, and a fresh translation of William Ames’ *Prolegomenon in Psalmum Secundum* by Michael Hunter.

Notwithstanding this diversity of content, this issue is primarily devoted to considering Dabney. To ignore Dabney would be to ignore history, especially the history of American Presbyterianism, in which he played such an outsized role. Peter Sanlon, while acknowledging Dabney’s faults, writes this: “We seek to read with discernment and grace, recognizing that in centuries to come, our own views on significant areas of life and theology may become repugnant to our progeny. We, too, are men of our times and cannot be sure we have escaped and refuted all errors present in our generation.” Let us bear this in mind as we look to a man who, as one apostolic historian said of David, “after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption” (Acts 13:36).

JONATHAN LAIR MASTER (on behalf of the editors) ■

Whither Robert Lewis Dabney. Continued from Page 10.

his dramas routinely display this conflictedness. The literary person therefore recognizes the imperfections of others as similar to his own in some respects, and the literary person recognizes also the remaining reflections of God’s image in others, as he also does in himself. The non-literary person “cancels” those in whom he finds flaws, and refuses to benefit from his virtues. Ironically, however, cancellers end up cancelling themselves, by reducing the fullness of human experience to discourse and fellowship only with those who are identical to us; a culture that cancels Robert Lewis Dabney cancels itself, by robbing itself of sympathetic knowledge of such a remarkable person.

One blind spot of our present cultural moment for which Dabney might be a partial remedy is our expectation of

specialization, whether in ourselves or others. To encounter Robert Lewis Dabney via his own writings is to encounter a person with surprising knowledge in a variety of disciplines, an individual capable of interacting intelligently with a broad range of human experience and concern. Yet he also had sophisticated knowledge of many specialized fields, even publishing penetrating studies of text-critical matters. Hardly any sphere of important human activity escaped his intelligent appraisal, and perhaps that breadth of vision, rather than any specific excellence in any particular field, could be—if we would permit it—Dabney’s greatest legacy for us. ■

R. L. Dabney as Churchman and Ecclesial Historian. Continued from Page 102.

(deacon and pastor-elder), where every elder is functionally identical in his service within the congregation. For Dabney, the existence of the role of ruling elder is assumed and is not up for question, but rather what is discussed is what the nature of his office should be.⁸⁷ Dabney, in agreement with Thornwell, believes that both preachers and elders are presbyters,⁸⁸ but observes a distinction in function between the preaching elders and the ruling elders.⁸⁹ Dabney speaks of three functions of church officers: preaching, inspection, and deaconship, and, along with that, proffers three distinct names for office-bearers in the church: preaching elder, ruling elder, and deacons.⁹⁰ Brown notes how Dabney writes about “the official execution of these three great functions “preacher, inspector, and deacon.”⁹¹ Brown goes on to allege that George Knight attempts to artificially “squeeze” Dabney into a two-office view when, in fact, what Dabney articulates in his “Theories” essay is essentially a three-office classification of church office: two orders of presbyters,⁹² such that preaching and ruling are two distinct offices,⁹³ not two orders within the same office.⁹⁴

Whether Brown is correct in his assessment is beyond the purview of this particular article, though his thesis might be worth some follow-up research, evaluation, and possible rebuttal. As a passing observation, this author has reason to question the conclusiveness of the argument given the way that Dabney takes the time to defend Thornwell’s view (whose convictions on the matter are widely regarded as the classic two-office articulation), even minorly rearranging Thornwell’s word-choice in order to demonstrate the trivial

87. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.134.

88. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.150.

89. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.122, 133.

90. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.123.

91. This argument made by Brown, *Order in the Offices*, 285, citing Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.154.

92. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.133.

93. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.122, 154.

94. Brown, *Order in the Offices*, p. 285.