

To Die For A Cause: Robert Lewis Dabney, Confederate Christian[†]

By Thomas Haviland-Pabst

Each of us find ourselves within a particular time and culture. We, for better or for worse, are a product of that time and culture. This is a virtually inescapable reality. And, this is a lesson of history, that is to say, history teaches us, as we look upon the lives of those who have lived before us, something about ourselves. This is no less the case with Southern history, and in particular, the life and thought of Robert Lewis Dabney. It is the purpose of this paper to explore R. L. Dabney in his socio-political, cultural, and religious context, that is, to look at Dabney through the lens of the prevailing currents in which he lived, and to determine, as far as one is able, how much he embodied or conflicted with these currents.

The Sociopolitical, Cultural and Religious Context

THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH¹

Before Dabney's relationship to his broader context can be explored, we must first look at what exactly defined his context. The period of the South called by historians the Antebellum Period is characterized by a complex array of socio-political and cultural forces. These include (but are not limited to): a classical republicanism, conservative religion, ideals of honor and chivalry, and the upholding of the institution of slavery. An attempt will be made to provide a sketch of these various trends while recognizing that they are in many ways influential upon and connected to one another.

CLASSICAL REPUBLICANISM²

Mark Noll, in *America's God*, speaks of the ambiguity that surrounded the term republicanism. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, saw the cornerstone of republicanism to be "the prohibition of titles of nobility," and John Adams defined it as a government where all people, rich or poor, master or servant, would be subject to the laws. Thomas Paine contrasted republicanism with monarchy, with the former promoting the interests of

the people, individually and collectively construed, and the latter promoting its own interests. Despite this diversity, Knoll notes two themes that emerge: (1) "fear of abuses from illegitimate power", and (2) "a nearly messianic belief in the benefits of liberty."³

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[†]This essay is dedicated to my dear friend, Rev. Jeff Windt (PCA), a true man of God and one of the best preachers I have heard.

1. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. xvi, dates the Old South from 1800–1860 but for our purposes, we will focus on the antebellum, or "before war," period of Southern history here (or perhaps, sub-period is more appropriate), which is dated from 1830–1860, as this is when the sectionalism, and hence, cultural homogeneity of the South began to be strengthened, as we will see below. But given the fact that the antebellum period lies within the longer Old South period, occasionally both we and authors we cite will use "Old South" and "antebellum" somewhat interchangeably.

2. Now, although this discussion focuses on a particular form of republicanism, it is recognized that there was more diversity in the Southern political landscape, but it is fair to say, that the element that we will discuss was prominent at the beginning of the antebellum period, and grew in further prominence as the South moved toward secession, thus its emphasis here. See James Oakes, "From Republicanism to Liberalism: Ideological Change and the Crisis of the Old South," *American Quarterly* 37 (Autumn, 1985): 552, 553, who states, despite the attempts of many to describe the white South as simply "republican," that in fact, there was a "flourishing two-party" with the "Whigs and Jacksonian Democrats" who had deep antagonism toward one another. Furthermore, not only is the discussion on republicanism complex, but also, many of the characteristics that we will discuss, such as religion and slavery, are much more complex than can be discussed here in detail. But, suffice it to say, as with classical republicanism, we will be here detailing the basic trajectory of the antebellum South as it moves toward secession.

3. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 55, 56.

Although there are various expressions of republicanism, for our purposes, two will be mentioned, that of the Northern and Southern parts of the United States. The difference between the two conceptions can be boiled down to an individualistic vs. collectivistic orientation. That is to say, the South, in contrast with the North, was more “deferential, class-stratified, and socially organic”; it was an “ideal of social stability” and a place to demonstrate one’s honor. The North, unlike the South, placed “commercial individualism” with republicanism, saw the ideal as “individual fulfillment,” and stressed achievement over honor, and thus, the future over the past.⁴

At this point, it needs to be noted that the South lay in a broader “transcontinental” conservative tradition, which included the North. The shared views of John C. Calhoun and Joseph Story, a Southerner and Northerner, respectively, demonstrate this reality. Both believed in a “constitutional democracy,” that is, a “representative government” which is opposed to a “participatory” or radically egalitarian democracy. Underlying this is the recognition by both men that social stratification was inevitable, and thus, a “propertied elite” was needed to guide society. Moreover, public safety was prioritized over expanded individual rights.⁵

The similarities between these two men demonstrate the continuity that the South shared with the “transcontinental” conservatism. And yet, there was disagreement between the transcontinental conservatism, to which the Northern conservatism belonged, and Southern conservatism. This difference was found in the Southern critique of capitalism, or “the free labor system.”⁶

For the Southerner, this form of economy would lead to the exploitation and impoverishment of workers by masters who would not assume actual responsibility for them. Rejecting the socialist solution, which viewed humans to highly, the South saw the solution

to be the “restoration of personal servitude for all laboring classes, regardless of race.”⁷ Thus in a free-labor economy, society would be undermined as the authority that God has ordained would be undermined, only to be replaced by a society driven by “egotism” and “personal license.”⁸

The Northern view of natural rights, or political freedom, was undergirded by a belief in the validity, and indeed, superiority of a “free-labor system and market,” and, as such, it conflicted directly with personal servitude.⁹ With the Southern rejection of the free market system, there was a rejection of its corollary, individual liberty. Various influential Southerners, such as Calhoun, defined individual liberty as the right of the individual to enjoy the privileges that belong to his station in society. Thus, liberty was, contrary to the natural and “inalienable” view of the North, contingent upon “the collective will of society” and thus not natural to a person.¹⁰

In sum, even though some of the characteristics of Southern classical republicanism were shared with its Northern (and transcontinental) counterpart, it is unique and distinguishable in its particular sense of the individual in relation to society, or more particularly, the rights of the individual within their station in society.

HONOR, CHIVALRY AND GENTILITY

Honor was a primary ethic of the antebellum South, and in fact, periods leading up to this time. Bertram Wyatt-Brown lays out three main components of honor: (1) “honor is the inner conviction of self-worth”; (2) “[it] is the claim of that self-assessment before the public”; and (3) public evaluation of the individual claim, or reputation.¹¹

Wyatt-Brown then proceeds to distinguish between two types of honor. First, there is “primal honor,” which is drawn from an “Indo-European” ethic. The second is “gentility,” a form of honor influenced by a “Stoic-Christian” ethic, which was cultivated by English humanists. The latter is a refinement and complement to the former but the three characteristics noted above bind together these two different expressions of the ethic of honor.¹²

The expression of primal honor had four main aspects in the South. First, honor was equated with valor, particularly, “revenge against familial and community enemies.” Second, it was the inseparable connection of others in the formation of a personal identity and self-worth. Third, physical appearance and “ferocity of will” were an indication of inner worth. And, fourth, a “defense of male integrity.”¹³

4. Noll, p. 216

5. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1994), pp. 28, 41–43.

6. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition*, p. 31.

7. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition*, p. 32.

8. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Slaveholders’ Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820–1860* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 37.

9. Genovese, *The Slaveholders’ Dilemma*, p. 61.

10. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition*, pp. 52, 53.

11. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 14.

12. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 34, 87.

13. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 34. The first three characteristics of primal honor will be discussed more thoroughly below, and while more could be said, the forthcoming discussion should

Valor, or bravery, was intimately connected with defense of one's family and community. It was up to the man to be brave and courageous in the face of adversity and conduct himself in a manner that shirked fear or cowardice, not merely for himself but for the sake of his family, who was dependent upon him for their defense and protection.¹⁴ Wyatt-Brown discusses how the origin of this aspect of "primal honor" is rooted in the Old World. Men such as Jefferson Davis and John C. Calhoun were raised hearing Old World stories of "warrior heroism, notions of the correct role of women and mothers, wives and daughters, and the duties attending manhood."¹⁵

Honorable revenge was the inspiration of various episodes of Southern history. For example, Andrew Jackson, after the murder of a white family by Creeks, spoke of the men being compelled to avenge them in order to restore honor. For the Southerner, like "ancient peoples," death was inevitable, but to die in the protection of kin or to humiliate an enemy in vengeance "was to win eternal glory."¹⁶

Thus, bravery, while a personal attribute, was intimately connected with the family. And, therefore, the need of kin was important to demonstrate valor, and conversely, without kin, or illegitimacy of birth, a major reason for existence was removed. In sum, to have kin, unless otherwise demonstrated, was to "have moral stalwartness."¹⁷

The importance of family for demonstrating the moral rectitude or valor of a man leads to the next aspect of primal honor, that is, the inseparable connection of the opinions of others to gauge one's own worth. Whereas modern society thinks in terms of conscience and guilt, the more collectively oriented honor and shame, which can include inner virtue or vice, moves beyond mere inner assessment by heightening the importance of social opinion. Thus, a Southerner would say "I wish to not be regarded as a liar" rather than "I do not lie," that is, integrity was equated with an unblemished reputation. How one spoke, carried oneself, or acted either commended or degraded the individual in the eyes of others.¹⁸

Given the stress on outward appearance, it naturally follows that honor would include bodily appearance as a demonstration of character. The response of Southerners to such things as "poor health, small stature, or any other physical defect" was similar to the treatment of those without kin. To have an "impressive stature" was seen to be a sign of divine favor, and, similarly, "mind, body, blood, hand, voice, head, eyes, and even genitalia" was a vehicle by which honor or disgrace was carried out.¹⁹

Blood, for nobility, transferred appropriate qualities. The heart, holding hidden intentions, needed to be open toward friends, and closed toward those without honor. The right hand was as "signal of respect" for friends, and vengeance for enemies. And, with the eyes, one either "witnessed honor" or "looked down in deference or shame." The head, though, held preeminence as the "seat of the social self," thus how one covered it showed status. And, finally, the genitalia were simultaneously "the most sacred and most vulnerable aspect of the body." So, for example, a slave who lusted after a white woman suffered castration, at first by law, but later by "community justice alone."²⁰

As was mentioned above, gentility is a more refined form of primal honor. The contribution of this form of honor is its coupling of moral virtue with social position or rank. Wyatt-Brown lists three aspects that were necessary for gentility: "sociability, learning, and piety." Sociability was the "*sine qua non*" of gentility from various times to various places, whereas piety was added later, due the influences of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century. And because learning was "an expensive commodity" in the plantation South, it did not hold the same prestige as in New England.²¹

Although sociability consisted of "Southern hospitality," it was more than this. It identified the Southerner, distinguishing him from the Yankee. Because Southern gentleman put less stress on learning, to Northerners they appeared to be ignorant and rough around the edges yet showing some of the qualities of gentility. Wyatt-Brown speaks of Josiah Quincy meeting President Andrew Jackson. In this meeting, Quincy describes Jackson as "... in essence, a knightly personage ... mistaken on many points ... but vigorously a gentleman in his high sense of honor and ... straight forward courtesies."²² Southern gentlemen were, in effect, seen to command ease of conversation and graciousness toward others.²³

Although ideals of education differed little, in the South, from the "early Republican Yankees," for both

adequately demonstrate the general character of primal honor for the purposes of this paper.

14. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 34–36.

15. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 38.

16. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 42.

17. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 43, 44.

18. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 45–48.

19. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 48, 49.

20. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 49, 50.

21. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 89, 90.

22. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 91.

23. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 90–92.

saw it as of importance for equipping “young men for the world,” learning was not always received enthusiastically. Thus, although learning marked one as a gentleman, too much of it was seen with disfavor, and this is due to an “anti-intellectual streak in Southern society” with sociability, and manliness (or the reputation thereof), having prominence.²⁴

But, despite the relative de-emphasis of learning in Southern gentility in light of the North, reference to and reading of the Greco-Roman classics in Southern gentility did mark a departure from primal honor. The Stoic influence upon primal honor placed greater value upon “pursuit of the just, the beautiful, and the true” than popular reputation of valor. It found expression in the “Aristotelian ideal of *megalopsychia*,” that is, “pride in one’s self worth and achievements,” “greatness and openness of heart,” and “high-mindedness.” Around the time of the Renaissance, it was both a rejection of the asceticism of the monastery and “Teutonic and Celtic boasting,” thus, self-assessment was tied to actual inner worth, not public repute. The effect of this is that misfortunes were to be handled graciously, and good

24. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 92–94. Although, there does appear to be this tendency in the Old South, it can be nuanced differently. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. George M. Curtis, III and James J. Thompson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1987), p. 226, states, “. . . the Southern mind is not by habit analytical. In fact the Southern mind has little capacity for analysis and I think one could almost say that it is opposed on principle to analysis. There seems to exist a feeling that you do not get at the truth of a thing—or that you do not get at the truth worth having—by breaking the thing in pieces. . . . The Southern mind is, on the other hand, synthetic and mythopoetic—it seeks out wholes, representatives, symbols.”

25. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 95.

26. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 97–99. See Drew Gilpin Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) pp. 6, 7, who states, “. . . many Southerners . . . were well aware of the intellectual deficiencies of their region. Achievements in the realm of the mind brought neither fame nor fortune . . .” which resulted in a feeling of “isolation and marginality” among intellectuals caused them to form intellectual clubs in which they could feel support for their intellectual gifts in an adverse South.

27. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 99, 100.

28. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 101, 102. E. Brooks Holifield draws out the concept of the genteel as evaluators of clergy in his *The Gentleman Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), pp. 36, 37, where he states, “It became a commonplace that a minister’s usefulness depended on his reputation, especially in the eyes of the ‘improved and elevated’ classes of society, the ‘best families.’ And, later, he writes, “While their sermons often dealt with guilt—the transgression of prohibitions—many of the clergy were more anxious about the threat of shame: fear of being exposed and found wanting.”

29. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, pp. 103, 104.

times were to be enjoyed in moderately, because one was to have a “modest self-appraisal” and “restraint.”²⁵

Southern gentility, and learning, however, began to be eroded in the antebellum South as old deferences to society and to hierarchy were more and more incompatible with “white democracy.” Because of the anti-intellectual theme of the South, the decorative and learned genteel stood in contrast to the “plain” culture of country folk, planters, and yeomen. And, further, the priority placed upon sociability and manliness in Southern gentility limited intellectual pursuits for Southern intellectual gentility.²⁶

In the late antebellum period, the growth of evangelicalism altered that which defined Southern gentility, which was already standing on fragile ground. Consequently, the virtue of piety was attached to the concept. But, with this, there was a bit of ambiguity in how piety and the church as an institution related to gentility. The Stoic form, discussed above, still upheld honor, or repute, as the “criterion for excellence of character,” thus, alienation from God or one’s own sensibilities were not seen as important of a motivation for moral conduct as repute.²⁷

With this, prior to the antebellum period, clergy was viewed with suspicion and ascribed a status on par with women. This is as due to numerous factors including the struggle for power, and the fear that a naïve public would succumb to clerical influence. Furthermore, sermons that did not disturb genteel tastes were seen to be most acceptable.²⁸

A gentility influenced by evangelicalism redefined honor as having respect for people of every station of life, for by doing so, respect from all would be earned. Thus, even a slave could enjoy honor by respecting those below and above him, and, in turn, soliciting their esteem. The temper of society was seen to have shifted with this influence. Benevolence societies were supported, missionaries welcomed, and religious journals read by these new gentlemen. Furthermore, the Sabbath was kept, church attendance increased, and temperance was promoted. The Christian gentlemen were kind toward all, lesser and greater, stranger or despised, not grudgingly but sincerely. Thus, evangelicalism gave substance to gentility.²⁹

Although there is much discontinuity between the primal honor and Stoic, and the later Christian, gentility, the Southern appropriation of the Chivalric ideal helps to demonstrate how they could, while at times conflicting, relate to one another.

Chivalric virtues were birthed in medieval times with knights who served kings and lords. They believed in

being merciful to fallen enemies, because they could be on the fallen side next battle. Yet, their fearlessness, and, in fact, recklessness in service to kings was motivated by a desire for fame. Furthermore, they increasingly placed “faith in a reputation for loyalty, generosity, courtesy, justice, and general Christian bearing.”³⁰ The minstrels who sung the knights praises, encapsulated in *The Song of Roland*, while exaggerated in their praises of the knights, fixed in the European mind “an image of knightly generosity and Christian virtue” which was passed to, most especially, the Old South.³¹

Southerners read such literature as *Jerusalem Delivered*, which asked how Christian charity related to the duel. Southerners in such areas as South Carolina, Tennessee, and even a Southern influenced Democratic Party in California referred to themselves as “the chivalry.” As this reference to the chivalric tradition grew, promising youth were described as “knights” or “knightly.” Whether or not adherence to this ideal was pretentious, it served to encourage slave-masters to be more kind and Christian in their treatment of slaves.³²

Genovese puts it well, “. . . slaveholders, like feudal aristocracy, sought . . . to bring the Christian life down to earth and to carry their own souls up to heaven.”³³ This was done by referring to the “chivalrous Christian knight” who provided an example of “[m]eekness in the ferocious warrior” and “ferocity in the meekest of men.”³⁴ And with this, we see the combination of primal honor, which emphasized valor, ferocity, and a need to vindicate one’s honor, by force if necessary, with the more genteel honor which sought to be more prudent, self-controlled and meek.

To conclude, the ethic, or code, of honor, in its various forms, served as guide of ethical conduct for Southerners. The prominence of some form of honor, whether of the primal variety, the genteel, or a mixture of the two, is undeniable, and pervasive in the antebellum South. It is fair to say that honor, along with religion, held pre-eminence in the Southern mind. Here, it is important to note that much of honor is rooted in a distinctly European, in contrast to American,³⁵ worldview, and so it can be said that this, along with other factors, led to the isolation of the more distinct Southern identity from the broader American landscape.

SLAVERY

Slavery, which is called the peculiar institution of the South, was imported from Europe, and in fact, it was an aspect of the entirety of American life during the colonial period and seen as a necessary evil in order to maintain the prosperity of society. But during and after

the Revolutionary War, opposition against this institution grew both in the North and in the South. Such eminent men as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, both Southerners, were voices of opposition.³⁶ One could say that there arose two basic positions with regard to opposition: (1) immediate abolition; and (2) gradual emancipation.

Contention with the institution also found a place in Presbyterian churches of the South. In 1792, Rev. David Rice of Kentucky, in a pamphlet, gave numerous reasons for the injustice of slavery including: the lack of protection of female chastity, “the violent separation of families,” “the deprivation by law of religious and moral instruction,” among others.³⁷ But, although many recognized that slavery was an evil, they, following the doctrine of spirituality of the church, believed that it was not the churches prerogative to interfere with the institution as any reformation or abolition of it would fall under the sphere of civil authority. That is, it was an evil, yes, but still a practical solution seemed out of reach,³⁸ and thus, it was not a matter of Christian communion.

In 1812, Rev. George Bourne published a book entitled *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*. In this book, he viciously and unsparingly attacked slaveholders, and, in fact, he covered many of the arguments that later abolitionists would use, and, as such, “he may be regarded as one of the first of the fiery advocates of immediate abolition.” Following his book, the Presbytery of Lexington, to which he belonged, brought up the fact that he had brought unwarranted charges against various members of the Presbyterian church. In his letters to fellow ministers, he urged for the “immediate ejection of every slaveholder from the church.” And consequently,

30. Eugene D. Genovese, “The Chivalric Tradition,” *The Sewanee Review*, 108 (Spring, 2000): 189.

31. Genovese, “The Chivalric Tradition,” p. 189.

32. Genovese, “The Chivalric Tradition,” pp. 190, 191.

33. Genovese, “The Chivalric Tradition,” p. 195.

34. Genovese, “The Chivalric Tradition,” p. 195.

35. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Essays*, pp. 211, 213, writes: “The first step toward understanding . . . the Southern mind and temper is to recognize that the South, as compared with the North, has a European culture . . . [not in the fully developed sense] . . . but more European than that of New England. . . . The South never showed the same interest in seceding from European culture [in contrast to political system] that the North and West showed. . . . The South retained a [European] outlook . . . while the North was developing in a different direction away from this—was becoming more American . . .”

36. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 1, 1607–1861 (Richmond, Va: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 323.

37. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.324.

38. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1.325–6.

he put on the table the idea of slavery as a matter of Christian communion.³⁹

In “the early decades of the 19th century there was a steady drainage of antislavery Southerners to the North.”⁴⁰ Rev. James Hoge, son of Dr. Moses Hoge, is one such an example of relocation to the North because of slavery. It can be stated that this exodus to the North by antislavery clergy in fact promoted the pro-slavery cause in the South. This occurred on two fronts: first, free discourse about slavery was substantially removed in the South, and second, Southern antislavery advocates joined forces with the Northern abolitionists. The latter is important because the immediate abolition advocated by them caused the South to take the defensive, as we will see.⁴¹

In January 1831, the prominent Northern abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, published the first issue of his “fiery journal” titled *The Liberator*. And, a short eight months later, on August 21, Nat Turner, along with “four or five companions,” which increased to seventy, killed roughly sixty whites who were mostly women and children. This rebellion, and rumors of others, hardened the hearts of Southerners who were fearful for their safety. In 1832, the Virginia Legislature sought to discuss the abolition of slavery. In attendance were about sixty “emancipators,” sixty anti-abolitionists, who stressed the impossibility of the task of emancipation, and about a dozen compromisers who favored gradual emancipation. This mixture demonstrates the diversity regarding the slave question in the South, and yet, “no practical plan could be agreed upon,” and fear, due to the Nat Turner insurrection, caused the legislation of further restraints upon slaves including “silencing of Negro preachers” and “strict regulation of night religious assemblies.”⁴²

Thus, by the mid 1830s, “a consensus emerged that opposition to slavery represented a crime against society.”⁴³ This arose since the open discourse concerning

the issue had largely been removed, as well as the vehement opposition by the Northern abolitionists. Therefore, an institution which only decades ago had been universally accepted in America, and upon which the South felt dependent, was being assailed, and the positive good argument for slavery was born.⁴⁴

Thomas Roderick Dew, reviewing the debate of the Virginia Legislature, mentioned above, brought forth an array of arguments “religious, philosophical, and historical” demonstrating the positive good of slavery. This, combined with the increase of antislavery sentiments in the North and a few Southern states (eastern Tennessee, western Virginia, and Kentucky), caused a polarization of pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates with the former investing much time and emotional energy into combating what was perceived as anarchist and atheistic sentiments of the abolitionists.⁴⁵ And, in sum, the Old South moved from a period where pro-slavery and antislavery sentiments existed side by side, even in ecclesiastical settings, to a period where pro-slavery became an ideological hegemony in the South.

RELIGION

Mitchell Snay describes the role of religion as “central to the culture and society of the antebellum South.”⁴⁶ The three characteristics of antebellum thought discussed—classical republicanism, honor, and slavery—have been dramatically impacted and deeply influenced by religion. In fact, to say, with Snay, that religion is central to the antebellum era would not be an overstatement. The influence of religion is seen more clearly when one understands that it was “simultaneously . . . an institution, a theology, and a mode of discourse.”⁴⁷

As was touched on above, the Southern brand of conservatism was distinguished from transcontinental conservatism in its critique of a free market economy, and, in its place, the assertion of the need for society to maintain its hierarchical structure by defining freedom in the context of the collective rather than something that is natural and intrinsic to a person. Although, as we have seen, this view of society is partially rooted in the concept of honor, it is also rooted in a distinctly Christian emphasis. In order to understand this, Southern conservatism and slavery need to be discussed together.

We noted above that slavery moved from a benign acceptance to advocacy of gradual emancipation, and, with this, arguments for the immediate abolition of the institution. And, in response to the latter, Southerners began advocating a positive good argument. Although, the Christian argument for slavery, and a classical republicanism, is not exactly synonymous with a positive

39. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1.329–330.

40. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1.336.

41. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1.337, 338; Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 192, 193.

42. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.340, 341.

43. Michael Wayne, “An Old South Morality Play: Reconsidering the Social Underpinnings of the Proslavery Ideology,” *The Journal of American History* 77 (Dec., 1990): 838.

44. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.342.

45. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1.342–9.

46. Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 3.

47. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, p. 6.

good argument,⁴⁸ on the spectrum from blatant opposition to strong promotion of the institution, the Christian argument lay closer to the latter.

Thus, it was argued that “slavery” was “the best possible bulwark” against the destructive and “un-Christian” influences of a free-market, industrial capitalism upon society.⁴⁹ Southerners saw a free-market economy as inevitably ending up in a clash between the richer and poorer classes as the employer would not care for the needs of his employee. This freedom would undermine the order given by God, which is for the safety and benevolence of society.⁵⁰

By establishing a ruling class that is guided by Christian principles, the needs of the servants, or, in this case, slaves would be taken care of by God. Social order took three forms: (1) the family, wherein basic social dependence is experienced; (2) the household, which constitutes “the basic unit of the economy and community”; and (3) the polity or community “writ large as region and nation.” These three aspects of the social order were understood by Southerners to be aspects of a Christian society in which they lived, which was maintained or destroyed by adherence to Christian principles.⁵¹

First, the hierarchal relationship that exists between men and women, with the latter being subordinate to the former, provided the original prototype of God’s ordained hierarchy concerning social relations. Thus, family order and male authority, contained within this original social relation, was extended to other distinctions such as class or race. Second, in the household, Southerners saw God’s ordination of property, with “property included in human beings.” That is to say, property was seen as “inherent in man’s social nature,” and thus, not a creation of society, or, furthermore, the state. And, in contrast to more Northern sentiments, they denied that property existed in “one’s own person and labor power,” but rather in the social role of the white male “as head of the household.”⁵²

The Southern household with its concept of property and family was virtually inseparable from its expression of social hierarchy and order. On a societal level, household designated the same concept as family, and with this, society was seen as a “network of household,” with members of society encouraged to view society as an extended family. This naturally extends to the institution of slavery whereby slaves were seen as members of the family under the organic authority of the master. Thus, the master was to protect as well as discipline the slave as if he was a child of his household.⁵³

Although the head of the family, whether broadly or narrowly construed, was superordinate to the other

members of the household, his authority was not arbitrarily wielded, but rather, his authority was only legitimate in as far as he adhered to “the entire body of laws and commandments laid down in the Old and New Testaments.”⁵⁴ In this we see clearly the influence of Christianity as providing the ideal of ethical behavior for those who enjoyed such as station in society, but, the Christian correction brought forth to address the abuse and neglect of slaves indicates that not all in fact met this ideal.

Now, at this point, it needs to be mentioned that although Christian concerns did influence how Southerners viewed the very fabric and structure of their society with its peculiar institution of slavery, it would be naïve to think that this was merely a one-way street.

Although political questions were impacted by Christians in the South, this wasn’t the case because Christians were, at base, political lobbyists. This is demonstrated by Southern adherence to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church which asserted that the church was a distinctly spiritual, in contrast to civil, institution. That is, civil affairs were left to the government, and spiritual affairs left to the church.⁵⁵

But, if an issue began to impinge upon the sphere of the church, than it was the duty of the church to speak. The rise of abolitionism, as discussed above, “pushed religion into the political realm,” as it, by its criticisms, made slavery a moral, and, hence, spiritual issue. This is in large part the case because the master-slave relation was seen as a moral relationship, and it was this relationship which was contended against by abolitionists.⁵⁶ And, with this, the use of the pulpit by Northern ministers to preach abolition conflicted with the Southern ministers’ separation of the church from civil affairs,

48. Loveland sees that evangelicals distinguished themselves from the positive good argument by rejecting that it is in fact an absolute good, but rather that it is the best possible relationship that can exist between the white and “the negro,” that is to say, “they did not defend slavery in the abstract, but only Negro slavery as it existed in the South.” Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order*, pp. 207, 208. Thus, in the denial of the positive good of slavery, they were tragically blatant regarding their own racism.

49. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, “The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Slaveholders’ World View,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Summer, 1987): 211–212.

50. “The Divine Sanction of Social Order,” pp. 218, 219.

51. “The Divine Sanction of Social Order,” p. 219.

52. “The Divine Sanction of Social Order,” p. 220.

53. “The Divine Sanction of Social Order,” pp. 220, 221.

54. “The Divine Sanction of Social Order,” p. 221.

55. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pp. 9, 10.

56. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pp. 10, 11.

with the latter not recognizing the precarious nature of their own position. Consequently, abolition was linked closely with infidelity to the church.⁵⁷

In sum, the Southern clergy gave religious substance to the “civil” institution of slavery, which, in turn, vindicated the actions of the slaveholders, while provided a corrective to the same. But, it seems, the fact that Southern clergy rose to the occasion is, in part, because they were themselves Southerners and heirs of the unique socio-political landscape of the Old South. That is, they were both influential of, and influenced by, the society in which they lived.⁵⁸

In addition to the influence of Christianity on the broader hierarchical aspects of society such as slavery, it also has a hand in influencing Southern society with regard to its code of honor as is discussed by Wyatt-Brown. As was mentioned above, and will be repeated only briefly here, at the outset of the antebellum period Christianity proved to be influential in how people understood the more secular based concept of honor as it integrated the evangelical virtues of piety, morality, and charity into the more reputation-oriented “primal” and Stoic honor, forming a distinct Christian form of honor, namely, Christian gentility.

In conclusion, conservative religion had vast influence in the Old South as it often substantiated or gave meaning to the very fabric of Southern society, namely, a classical republicanism defined by the institution of

slavery. Even the competing code of ethics characterized by honor was shaped by the values and ethics of religion, which subsequently created a distinctly Christian synthesis and shape to this code.

Synthesis is perhaps the best word to describe antebellum religion in this regard. Religious values were so intimately wedded with the secular values of the culture that it is often hard to distinguish between what is religious and what is secular. Clergy were a main voice for the issues of the day by way of their preaching and their writing. Moreover, the use of Scripture, as noted by Noll,⁵⁹ was prominent in the socio-political landscape. Although at times ambiguous and complex, the role of religion as central to antebellum Southern life is undeniable.

THE CIVIL WAR

Those things which characterized the antebellum South, namely, a classical conception of republicanism, with its denial of the natural rights of the individual; honor, with its emphasis on reputation as the gauge of one’s worth; slavery, as an institution at this time peculiar to the South, and defended prolifically; and, religion, of the conservative variety, which, as we have seen, undergirds and lives in mutual relationship with those other aspects of the Southern mind that we have discussed already existed prior to the Civil War in antagonism with the mind of the North, and thus, they directly contribute to the rise of the conflict that is known by various titles including “the War Between the States,” “the War for Southern Independence,” “the War of Northern Aggression” and “the Civil War.”

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln accepted the nomination to the United States Senate, and during his speech, declared his antipathies for the institution of slavery. In his words, the South heard the voice of an element of the North which was ready to destroy that institution upon which they depended. Later, in 1859, thirteen men and five blacks, led by John Brown, seized Harper’s Ferry, a town in Virginia, with the hopes of provoking a slave uprising.⁶⁰

The action of Brown and his men provoked a two-sided response. To the North, his actions were one of courage; he was seen as a saint and martyr. And, to the South, they were seen as the “logical consequence” of abolitionist sentiments, and an affront to the safety of the South. In 1860, not long after the Brown incident, the presidential election commenced, and Abraham Lincoln, nominee of the Republican Party, was regarded by the South as a radical concerning slavery, and he “ran on a platform pledged to shut slavery out

57. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, p. 13

58. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, p. 12. This almost inseparable relationship between Southern Christianity and Southern society becomes clearer as one sees how Northern conservatives were influenced by the growing abolitionist sentiments of the antebellum period. Snay noting the similarities between Northern and Southern conservative Christians, that is, both (1) “... feared the disruption of the public order and the threat to traditional boundaries between religion and politics;” and, (2) “... argued that slavery was essentially a political and not a religious question,” writes, “The rise of abolitionism did cause a predicament for conservative Northern clergymen, but the pressures from their society pushed them away from proslavery. They sought to find out what they considered legitimate and less threatening forms of Christian action against slavery,” which, in effect, “divided the Northern clergy into two polar factions,” namely, abolitionists, who thought that churches were defending slavery, and, conservatives, who moved away from the activism that was implicit in evangelicalism. Snay, *Gospel Disunion*, p. 34. See also Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order*, pp. 53, 62–62, who notes the move from viewing ministry as a divine calling to viewing it as a profession like any other, which is another example of the clergy being influenced by society.

59. Mark Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

60. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.552.

of the territories.” Later in the year, Lincoln was elected as president. All the Northern states voted him except New Jersey. Yet none of the slave states did. To Southerners, his victory was seen as “a sectional victory of the North over the South,” which marked the endangerment of their way of life.⁶¹

Georgia, South Carolina, and others demanded secession upon hearing news of Lincoln’s election. At the time, upper South states such as Virginia and North Carolina were not as quick to urge secession, but it was a qualified hesitancy. That is to say, they would remain in the Union provided the Northern States repeal any unconstitutional rulings against slavery and as long as the Lincoln administration does not attempt to coerce those States which may secede. But in the “deep South” a movement toward secession was unstoppable. Therefore, the “border states” such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky represented one sentiment, that is, one of caution, while the lower Southern states such as South Carolina and Louisiana pushed for secession.⁶²

On December 20, 1860, South Carolina passed an “Ordinance of Secession,” removing themselves from the union that they held with the other States. But many saw the decision of South Carolina as rash. For example, an address titled “To the Clergy and Laity of the Christian Churches of the Country,” which was signed by many outstanding Presbyterian ministers as well as faculty, or former faculty, of various colleges and universities, pleaded with their Southern brethren to “explore every possibility of pacification” to give the North another opportunity.⁶³

Early in the next year, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed South Carolina in the path of secession. To illustrate the differing sentiments of the South, on February 4, 1861, “representatives of seceding states” organized a “provisional government for the Confederate States of America,” and, on the same day, the Virginia legislature invited “distinguished leaders” representing 21 states to attempt to find a peaceful road. But, the attempt of Virginia was of no avail as the seceded states sent no representatives.⁶⁴

On April 12, South Carolina began its attack on Fort Sumter. On April 15, Lincoln issued a call “for volunteers to suppress insurrection and preserve the Union,” which resulted in the secession of Virginia from the Union, on April 17, followed by North Carolina and Arkansas. The secession of the Southern slave states and the attack on Fort Sumter sparked the Civil War.⁶⁵

With the Civil War and the political secession of numerous Southern states underway, the question of nationalism arose. Although many have seen the

Southern creation of national identity as either “spurious” or “myth,” Faust urges us to recognize that no matter how we think to construe it, Southerners themselves saw the Confederacy as a nation.⁶⁶ She states, “The creation of Confederate nationalism was the South’s effort to build a consensus at home, to secure the foundation of popular support for a new nation ... The formation of this new national ideology was thus inescapably a political and social act ...”⁶⁷

Southerners during the time following secession sought to shape this national identity with a national flag, “relics,” poems, songs and monuments as well as the inauguration of a Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, in 1862. But, the view of prominent “European ... thinkers” of “political differentiation” saw a nation based on “a separate race, language, religion, and history” was problematic for Southerners who had virtually everything in common with Northerners.⁶⁸

In order to correct this, Southerners “school texts” sought to restore “a purity of diction” that would remove both “Yankee degeneracies” and “Africanisms,” thus returning to “English linguistic roots.” Also, the Southern cause was identified with the struggle of other now successful “nationalist movements” or “fledgling nations” such as the French Revolution, the Dutch republic, and the Polish and Greek rebellions.⁶⁹

Furthermore, they identified with the “American War of Independence” thus cementing the Southern struggle in that of 1776, giving the South a needed history and legitimacy as its quest for independence was seen as the “fulfillment of American nationalism” which could only be preserved by secession from the previous union.⁷⁰

To conclude, the political nation that arose out of the secession of the Southern states is intimately connected to, and indeed defined by, the antebellum characteristics that we have discussed. Farmer puts it well when he says, “... before the idea of secession and separate nationhood could become viable, a degree of the self-consciousness and self-confidence had to be produced in the Southern mind,” and, although, as we saw with the Nat Turner uprising, this “self-confidence” combined

61. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.552, 553.

62. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.554, 555.

63. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.560.

64. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.561.

65. Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1.561

66. Drew Gilpin Faust. *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University, 1988), pp. 1–6.

67. Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, p. 7.

68. Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, pp. 8–10.

69. Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, pp. 11–13.

with a fear of black insurgency, "... even nations build upon a foundation of slavery, are not born out of fear alone. The concept of nationhood involved a *zeitgeist* around which a people can cohere. A metaphysical confederacy ... had to precede a physical Confederacy."⁷¹

THE POSTBELLUM SOUTH

After the defeat of the South, the period of Reconstruction and following was met with upheaval, chaos, and

70. *Fauß, The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, p. 14; *James C. Cobb, Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 54–56.

71. James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 15–16.

72. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 1.

73. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 7, 8.

74. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 8.

75. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 10.

76. See Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 7, 8, who qualifies this description by stating: "... this study ... avoid[s] the terms 'myth' and 'civil religion' that have largely dominated examinations of the Lost Cause [here, it's important to note that Wilson includes myth in his understanding of the Lost Cause as civil religion]," for he prefers to use the term "tradition," which "still conveys the cultural importance implied by 'myth' or 'civil religion.'" But, later, despite his reservations with "civil religion" as a description, he basically agrees with Wilson's approach when he writes, "The scholars who consider the Lost Cause a form of southern civil religion ... probably take the [religious] metaphors too literally, but they are certainly correct about the cultural importance of the Lost Cause. It helped to explain ... how and why [Southerners] lost the war that marked the end of the Old South."

77. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 13.

78. Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, p. 5, describes the broader American "civil religion," writing: "Secular and religious motifs were woven into the belief that America had a unique role in bringing the Kingdom of God to this world. Millennialism fused with the political ideology of republicanism, convincing Americans that their social and political institutions had a providential destiny to serve as a model for all humankind." See also James P. Maddex, Jr.'s article, "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly*, 31 (Spring, 1979): 46–9, where he states: "Nineteenth century American Christians [believed that] [t]he deepest faith they could invest in their social system was to believe that God was shaping it into the form of the future millennial society ... [thus] [t]he future of society ... focused the question of national goals—whether slavery or wage labor would eventually be the American system," and later, he speaks of how antislavery and proslavery proponents attempted to situate the question of slavery in the millennium. Thus, it can be said that the antebellum South's "civil religion" was, in fact, a subset of the broader American "civil religion," sharing with it a God-focused vision of society but, after the Civil War, the Southern variety transformed and moved away from the commonalities it shared with the broader American civil religion as it detached from political realities in large part.

79. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 11.

uncertainty. The Southern cause was championed by the promoters of secession, and the antebellum themes of the South were solidified leading up to the Civil War. Now, this solidification of Southern identity was met with the less than solid, indeed, unclear, painful and uncertain reality of a defeated cause.

But this cause did not die out. Rather, it shifted. Although a political independence was not a reality that the South would enjoy, the Lost Cause was birthed, which replaced the desire for a Southern political national by providing a "separate cultural identity."⁷²

In 1866, Edward A. Pollard, the Richmond editor, called for a war of ideas in *The Lost Cause* in order to maintain the Southern identity. He was one of many voices who were seeking to forcefully reestablish what was perceived by Southerners to be their unique identity as God's peculiarly blessed and chosen people. That is to say, Southerners saw themselves as a virtuous people who had fought for the cause of God against "the atheistic north."⁷³

The Lost Cause was birthed out of "[t]he antebellum and wartime religious culture," and was a combination of Christianity and regional history.⁷⁴ Also, it was a response to the fear and insecurity that Southerners felt in their relationship to the North. The North, unlike the South, was characterized by a heterogeneous religious culture, which many felt threatened the stability that they knew. That is, antagonism with the North challenged the "Southern religious hegemony."⁷⁵

This combination of history and religion that characterizes the Lost Cause is described by Wilson as a "civil religion."⁷⁶ A civil religion is defined by the interpretation of historical experiences by transcendental values which in this case are religious values. The Southern civil religion, unlike the broader American civil religion, was "less optimistic, less tolerant, and more homogeneously Protestant."⁷⁷ The American civil religion was birthed out of the Revolutionary War in order to provide significance and belonging to a diverse immigrant society, whereas the Southern variety was birthed out of a dead nation, an unrealized ideal, and, thus, was more rooted in cultural than political realities.⁷⁸

Anthropologically speaking, the religious aspect of the Lost Cause is apparent as one considers that it possessed those qualities which define religion in general. These include: "symbols, myth, ritual, theology, and organization."⁷⁹

To illustrate this, numerous aspects of the Lost Cause can be mentioned. First, "stain glass windows were placed in churches to commemorate Confederate sacrifices," which explicitly linked "Confederate images"

with “religious ideals.”⁸⁰ Second, “[w]artime artifacts” as well as those Bibles that were “touched by the Cause” were considered sacred and holy. Third, numerous rituals can be noted including: (1) hymns (e.g., “Stonewall Jackson’s Way”); (2) “Confederate Memorial Day”; (3) the wartime hero funeral; and (4) the dedication of monuments to Confederate heroes.⁸¹

Furthermore, although the Lost Cause was a prominent theme of Southern Protestantism at the time, not all Protestant leaders supported the movement. Therefore, it had a distinct organizational identity rooted in voluntary societies such as the Confederate veterans’ group, and later, the Klu Klux Klan. Because of this distinctive identity, Southern ministers who were celebrators of the Lost Cause were indispensable in linking their own denominations with institutions unique to the Lost Cause.⁸²

But most important of all for this civil religion was its myth and theology. The Civil War was a crusade upon which the Southern heroes endeavored to defeat the forces of evil, expressed in the Yankee. The Yankee “symbolized a chaotic, unrestrained Northern society that had threatened the pristine, orderly, godly Southern civilization.”⁸³

This myth of a virtuous South facing off against an evil North undergirded the theology of the Lost Cause. Unlike revival movements, which focus on the future, the theological goal of the Lost Cause was to restore the golden era that was believed to have existed in the Old South. Thus, the Lost Cause sought to warn against falling from the virtue of the past, promote reforms in moral behavior, encourage people to turn to Christianity, and raise up future generations in the Southern traditions and heritage.⁸⁴

With this, the Lost Cause taught that the defeat of the South was not due to slavery but rather the failure of the South to live up to their duty of caring for the slaves spiritually and physically. But, despite some concession of the neglect of the slaves, the institution of slavery was still seen as the divinely ordained means of bringing Christianity to Africans.⁸⁵

And so proponents of the Lost Cause urged Southerners to avoid a repeat of the chastisement which came with defeat by learning from the lesson of the war “that one should follow conscience despite risks of defeat.”⁸⁶ That is to say, the Civil War was a war of principle on the part of the South, thus, although the North received the materialistic victory, the South had the spiritual one as it maintained its spiritual integrity.⁸⁷ This concept of the virtuous Old South found full expression in the equation of the South with Zion which was combined

with a warning to not be “at ease in Zion” by maintaining vigilance against evil.⁸⁸

But, the Lost Cause movement, with its moralistic focus and attempt to draw Southerners back to the virtuous Old South ideal, was faced with challenges at home as a New South began to emerge. In fact, Wilson notes that “the plans for a New South were popularized in the same period that saw the triumph of the myths of the Old South and the Lost Cause.”⁸⁹

The New South was, in effect, the encroachment of Northern realities on the South, in the minds of Lost Cause adherents. This movement, which urged laissez-faire capitalism and industrialism as the solutions to Southern problems, became the brunt of criticisms by Southern clergy who saw signs of spiritual decline in the South as the New South materialism conflicted with Confederate spirituality.⁹⁰

The arrival of the New South movement marked a movement away from that which defined the Old South which the Lost Cause so vigorously promoted. The aristocracy of the plantation began to be replaced by a “new elite” consisting of “industrialist, large merchants, and railroad officials,” which contrasted markedly with the old way of paternalism, that is, hierarchy with a moral and spiritual focus.⁹¹

Many of those who lived before the war and had a place in it began to feel displaced and passed by in this New South reality.⁹² But second and third generation postwar Southern ministers saw hope in the New South and saw it as a challenge to the South to show the nation that they were able to handle their new wealth, and in turn, demonstrate to the nation their moral and spiritual superiority. This sentiment tempered the force of those older Lost Cause ministers who decried the growing New South influence.⁹³

These younger clergy created a mediating position between a materialistic society and the vision of the Lost Cause by still urging Southerners to draw upon

80. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 25.

81. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 26–29.

82. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 14–15.

83. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 40.

84. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 11, 12.

85. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 68, 69.

86. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 41.

87. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 70.

88. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 77, 78.

89. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 84.

90. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 79.

91. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 91.

92. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 87–89.

93. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 98.

their heritage, keeping in mind that the North represents the antithesis of a moral and spiritual nation with its love of money.⁹⁴ And with this, the need for a Lost Cause began to be eclipsed, and adherents of it began to feel this reality.⁹⁵

Robert Lewis Dabney through the Eyes of his Context

Having described many of the characteristics of Southern thought from the antebellum, Civil War, and postbellum period, we will now turn to the task of understanding R. L. Dabney, as best we can, in light of these factors.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Robert Lewis Dabney was born on March 5, 1820, in Louisa County, Virginia,⁹⁶ that is, ten years before the beginning of the antebellum period. He passed away on Jan. 3, 1898, almost thirty three years after the end of the Civil War.⁹⁷ Thus, he is a man who, it can be said, is representative of the Old South of which he was an able, eloquent and passionate defender.

It can be said of Dabney that he was born into a privileged class. Although his family is not “among the great planting aristocracy or in the highest ranks of the F. F. V’s,” their roots lay deep into the Virginian past. The first of Dabney’s descendants acquired 1,200 acres of land

in Virginia in 1667, and later progeny moved westward, finally reaching the “eastern fringe of the Piedmont” in what later became Louisa County. Because of the vast land wealth that the Dabneys’ possessed, Dabney men “held important positions as sheriffs, justices, and military officers in their counties.”⁹⁸

Robert Dabney was born on a part of the plantation, Walnut Grove, which was in the family’s possession since 1724, and in 1830, his father, Charles Dabney, “accepted his patrimony” and the family moved to the main plantation. This plantation consisted of 550 acres land cared for by two dozen slaves, and thus, Dabney learned from his father how to run the plantation and supervise the work of the slaves.⁹⁹

The combination of his family’s repute,¹⁰⁰ land wealth, and deep-seated Virginian history shaped Dabney’s identification with gentility, and moreover, with the South by way of Virginia. For Dabney, it was beyond question that he and his family were right in owning and commanding slaves who were distinguished racially, intellectually, and morally from the Dabneys’ elevated status, which also lay in contrast with those poorer neighbors with less extensive land holdings and less refined tastes.¹⁰¹

At this time, the most tangible and important elements of government were found at the county level for most Virginians, and it is here that the Dabney family “enjoyed singular distinction.” With the exception of “the House of Delegates,” Charles Dabney, Robert’s father, was a member of the county court, commanded the county militia, and elected to state legislature not by popular vote but by his status in society as a large landholder. This further accentuated the reality for Dabney that social distinction was both essential and important.¹⁰²

As a religious family, and as Virginian Presbyterians,¹⁰³ the Dabney children were raised with a mixture of affection and strict standards of conduct and piety. Therefore, practices of a sinful nature as well as unworthy companions were to be avoided. Both of Robert’s parents showed signs of piety by actively praying and reading Scripture. Later, Charles Dabney brought debt on the family and died in 1833, leaving Robert Dabney with the responsibility of filling the role of male head of the household at the age of thirteen. Earnestly attempting to meet this challenge, his family called him the “old gentleman.”¹⁰⁴

COLLEGE YEARS

On June, 1836, Robert Dabney entered Hampden-Sydney College. At first reserved, distrusting of others, and an object of pranks, he later recognizing that

94. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 98.

95. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pp. 87, 88.

96. David Henry Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney: Apostle of the Old South,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1967), p. 1.

97. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 314.

98. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 1.

99. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 3.

100. Furthermore, Dabney’s maternal ancestry enjoyed even greater status as his great-grandmother, a Randolph, shared blood ties with “one of the most prominent families of Virginia and could claim common kinship with John Marshall, Thomas Jefferson, and John Randolph of Roanoke.” Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 2.

101. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 4. Dabney, in a letter to his mother, reflects this sentiment by stating, “. . . with the exception of the family, your neighborhood is a rude and dreary one . . .” Robert to Mother, April 19, 1849; in Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 4.

102. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 5.

103. This trait further endeared the Dabneys’ to distinction as Virginian Presbyterians were on “the forefront of the movement for independence” as well as a “potent influence in the development of education” as they opposed and partially frustrated Jefferson’s attempted establishment of a “complete public school system.” Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 7.

104. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 7–11.; Thomas C. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (1903; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 29, 45.

“his manners needed polishing,” while dismissing the company of young ladies, sought out the company of “elderly gentlewomen” whom he saw as representing true Virginia, and joined the “Philanthropic Society.” But, cognizant of his mother’s sacrifice to give him an education, as well as his own hostility toward others, caused him to earnestly pursue his studies, gaining him an “almost saintly” reputation from fellow students.¹⁰⁵

Dabney, desirous to pursue “prominence in public life,” strived for oral and written eloquence by writing his own political speeches rather than the rote memorization of the words of famous politicians. These speeches provide the seminal thought of Dabney especially as it related to politics. In one speech, for example, he “proposed more restrictive immigration laws” in order to protect the self-reliance and stability of American society from the worthless (“exuvia”) fermentations of Europe.¹⁰⁶ Having received the highest grades faculty could grant, Dabney’s intellectual and leadership abilities were apparent and so he was elected to “president of the Philanthropic Society.”¹⁰⁷

Although forced to return to his family’s plantation to resume his duties, “a spiritual revival” occurred at the college shortly before his departure, the seed of which found fertile soil in Dabney.¹⁰⁸ For the next two years, he worked as “plantation master and school teacher,” and, again, we see Dabney gentility assert itself as the “caste” of a former tutor was too low for him to submit to his supervision in teaching at a school.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, he started his own school, but still with an eye toward a continuance of his education.¹¹⁰

Deciding that changes in faculty at Hampden Sydney were not to his standards or liking, as well as his tentative desire to enter into the ministry, he decided to enter the University of Virginia for its wider variety of courses in order to prepare him for ministry, leaving the plantation in December, 1839. But this change in atmosphere, and culture, as students at the University were recruited from “the wealthiest and most aristocratic families in Virginia,” caused Dabney to retreat to his familiar skepticism and hostility.¹¹¹

This hostility caused him to critique everything ranging from the grounds of the university to its faculty. With the latter, he made various assessments. The manners of two Englishmen teachers he found “more repulsive than the Yankees.” He despised the innovation of the chemistry teacher, and the appearance of “an English Jew” teacher “whose strange appearance placed him in danger of being imprisoned as a lunatic.” And, thus, except for a few native Virginians, he thought the faculty ill-chosen. This attitude reflects his xenophobia,

and further, his sentiment that outside forces were not sympathetic to the ways of Virginian life.¹¹²

The immorality and barbarity of his classmates draws out further Dabney’s sense of gentility. For Dabney these students shirked obedience of the campus rules by refusing to relinquish personal weapons, avenged their honor even, at times, when offended by professors, by applying “well-seasoned cowhide” to their backs, prolifically engaged in drinking, gambling, frivolously spending, and, in general, lacked interest in learning. Further, he saw their status as coming from “successful merchants, upstart lawyers and politicians” with nothing to boast of but wealth, whose polished appearances matter little in gauging one’s worth.¹¹³

At this point, one can note how Dabney’s ideal of gentility conflicted with others of his time. The students, under Dabney’s assessment, had many of the characteristics of Stoic gentility. They prized sociability, as indicated by their drinking and gambling; displayed manliness, as indicated by the vindication of their honor; and demonstrated the anti-intellectual bent of the peculiarly Southern gentility. Furthermore, they flaunted polished appearance and manners rather than engage in morally upright pursuits.

But, perhaps more precisely, following Dabney’s description, the students demonstrate the tension that existed between the primal honor, with its bravery, ferocity, and the like, and Stoic gentility, which stressed refinement and sociability. They were a caricature of refinement in their polished appearances and manners, but Dabney, who embodies the more moralistic, pietistic expression of gentility, while not having as much polish or aristocratic manner, saw moral behavior, and implicitly, piety, as the true mark of the genteel. With this, he didn’t in fact differ extraordinarily from them for he prized refinement, albeit with a moral emphasis, and saw their lack of true character in light of his own tastes, experience, and sense of station.

105. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 11–14.

106. Robert to William, September 8, 1836; in Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 14–15.

107. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 15–16.

108. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 16.

109. William to Robert, September 4, 1837; in Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 17.

110. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 16–17.

111. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 17–18.

112. Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 20–21; Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 51.

113. Robert to Mother, May, 8, October 24, 1840, December 15, 1841; in Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” p. 23.

SEMINARY YEARS

He entered Union Theological Seminary in October, 1844, ignoring his older brother William's advice to pursue preaching at a "gentlemen's church."¹¹⁴ Not seeing those with whom he was familiar, he disparaged the company of the other seminarians, seeing them as uninteresting and below his social station, albeit kind. Hence, he doubted the ability of his fellow students to set the "tone of manners and feelings" in their respective communities,¹¹⁵ but, he reasoned, perhaps a ministerial position accompanying their rank could be found. Despite the gentlemanly assessment of his humbler companions, he felt himself more at home here than the University.¹¹⁶

The seminary was an "essentially Southern institution," serving, primarily, the "Synods of Virginia and North Carolina," and reflecting the Old School theological conservatism and rejection of doctrinal innovation. It was here that Dabney's belief in a full Calvinistic system, "the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible" as well as the value of a "Presbyterian polity" were solidified. Moreover, although Dabney chose ministry over public service, he saw religious and secular causes as connected, asserting that it was the task of the minister to protect the lesser educated against those "false opinions" which threatened the order and institutions of society,¹¹⁷ and thus, the political dimensions of "Popery and atheism" were as important to comprehend as "the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions."¹¹⁸

114. Here, again, we see the influence of gentility upon Dabney.

115. Robert to Mother, February 6, 1845; in Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," p. 30.

116. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," pp. 30–31.

117. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," pp. 34–35.

118. Robert to William, December 14, February 2, 1845; in Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," p. 35.

119. Much could be said about Dabney's statements during this period, but, here, we will merely focus on a few representative examples.

120. Robert to William, January 15, 1851; in Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," pp. 49–50.

121. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," pp. 50–51.

122. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," p. 64.

123. Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney," p. 75.

124. Dabney gives definition of free-soil by stating, in their words: "The national domain belongs to the Federal government, of which we hold the effective control; and while we claim no right to dictate in your domestic concerns, we resolve that this common domain [i.e. Western territories] shall not be polluted by the encroachment of slavery;" to which Dabney provides the retort, "[t]his common domain was purchased by the money, toil, and blood, of us and, our fathers, as well as by yours; and we will have our share in its enjoyment." Robert Lewis Dabney, "Christians, Pray for Your Country," *Central Presbyterian* (March, 1856); in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. II, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 393.

THE 1850S¹¹⁹

Dabney both enjoyed the benefits and was a supporter of slavery, but more than this, he was a loyal Virginian, and consequently, Southerner, the decline of which he felt keenly. He felt that the North had already taken so much from the South that "the Fugitive Slave Law" was thrown to the South "as a bone to quite [our] snarling." While believing that the Northern states would avail themselves of the opportunity to trample the South if given the chance, he urged moderation, discerning "two major weaknesses" in the North. First, he saw the socialism of Europe as weakening the individual necessary for Northern success. Second, he saw the rise of false religion, namely, "Universalism, Unitarianism, and Catholicism" as sapping Northern strength. Thus, the South may rise above the North in a moral superiority that would trump its "territorial and material" inferiority.¹²⁰

Moreover, the South must render the attacks of the abolitionists void by safeguarding for slaves "all those rights which are a part of our essential humanity," because, unless this is done, and slavery is brought under God's law for humans, it is "morally vulnerable." Furthermore, he stressed that the South must expose the heresies of abolitionist by use of the Bible, which will have the double effect of drawing true Northern Christians to their side and compel staunch abolitionists to "assume an anti-Christian position."¹²¹

Dabney assumed his professorial duties at Union Seminary on October, 1853.¹²² Dabney, along with others, began two publications. The first, *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review*, appeared in January of 1855, and the second, *Central Presbyterian*, was founded in autumn of the same year. The latter replaced the old *Watchman and Observer* and had the goal of being a moderate voice amidst the sectional radicalism both of the North and South. It was in these pages that Dabney rebuked Southerners of their sins, encouraged Christians to emulate Christ's forgiveness, and warned of impending disaster if sectional hatred continued.¹²³

In "Christians, Pray for Your Country," an editorial article in the *Central Presbyterian*, he sought to address "the danger of *disunion*." After discussing the growth of "anti-slavery agitation . . . for twenty-five years" with its cause moving from an "impotent principle of *Abolition*" to the "national question of *Free-Soil*,"¹²⁴ urges his readers to pursue a Christian attitude in the face of potential civil conflict. In dramatic and powerful fashion, he states:

Civil feud has ever been known as the most bitter of all.
"A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong

city, and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." The very tenderness of brothers' love makes them more tender [*sic*] to the injury. The strength of mutual obligation which should have bound them to offices of kindness enhances the hot indignation of mutual outrage.... Brothers! should we not rather weep tears of blood at the wretched and wicked thought, that the common prowess, which hath as often made North and South side by side carry dismay and rout into the ranks of common enemies, that terrible prowess, which, in North and South alike, withstood all the force of the British lion while we were in the gristle of our youth ...¹²⁵

Here, we can note Dabney's recognition of North and South as brothers, who have a "mutual obligation," and his exhortation for Christian brethren to weep at the thought that those who, with "common prowess," withstood the British Army. Later, drawing on the Christian faith of his readers, he states:

Christians of America, will ye suffer this? If such a crime against God and man be wrought in this land of thirty thousand evangelical ministers and four millions of Christians, how burning the sarcasm which will contain against your Christianity? ... What, was there not enough of the oil of love in all these four millions of the servants of God of love to sooth the surging billows of party strife? ... Were not all these strong enough to throw the arms of love around their fellow citizens, keep down the hands that sought each others' throats, and constrain them by a sweet compulsion to be brethren?¹²⁶

In sum, it would be a blemish upon the Christians of America if they could not avoid conflict. We see in this period of his life a tension between his attitudes toward a North who seems on the precipice of "trampling" the South, but who are both morally inferior to the South and stand on less biblical ground in their anti-slavery sentiments, and a North who consists of brethren, "fellow citizens," who, indeed, share in the same basic American heritage with Southerners. Below, as the danger of disunion becomes more evident, we will see Dabney continue to be a voice of moderation.

ON THE EVE OF THE CIVIL WAR

In November 1, 1860, a fast-day was held, by appointment of the Synod of Virginia to pray for reprieve from those political convulsions which were seizing the nation, both North and South. At this time, Dabney, with his skill as a preacher, gave a sermon titled "The

Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism." He begins by reminding his audience that "[t]he Kingdom of Jesus Christ . . . in whose prosperity the hopes of a suffering race are all involved . . . alone can arrest the flood of sins and woes which now sweeps generation after generation into ruin"¹²⁷ From this, he begins to discuss how "political agitation is most unfavorable to spiritual prosperity." Not only do "political convulsion" serve to grow, in great manner, "all forms of vice," but "[w]ar is the grand and favorite device of him who was a liar and murder from the beginning, to obstruct spiritual good, and to barbarize mankind."¹²⁸ Then, he again turns to the theme of how truly bitter strife is between those who were once brothers. Poignantly, imagining the reality of war, he states:

And, then, this vast frontier must be fortified and guarded. This hostile neighborhood, so dangerous because so intimate, must be watched on either hand by armies; and these armies become . . . as much the machines of internal oppression as of outward defence [*sic*]. Our future growth of men and wealth would be swallowed up by the devouring maw of strife.¹²⁹

Again, Dabney calls his audience to think of how such a war would stand with their Christian reputation, proceeding to speak on the duty of Christians in light of political convulsions:

... first, Christians should everywhere begin to pray for their country.... The guilty churches of all our land should humble themselves before a holy God for their Christian backsliding and national sins.... Let ... the ministers of the Lord, weep ... [saying] Spare thy people, O Lord ... [and furthermore] go humble [*sic*] confessions of our sins, individual and social.... not ... sins of fellows-citizens of another quarter of the Confederacy ... [but] our own sins.... You have allowed too often the man of violence, the duelist, professing his pretended "code of honor" ... Last: Every Christian must study the things which make for peace.... they will demand of others nothing more than their necessary rights, and that in the tone of moderation and forbearance.¹³⁰

125. Dabney, "Christians, Pray for Your Country," pp. 396–397.

126. Dabney, "Christians, Pray for Your Country," p. 398.

127. Dabney, "The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism," in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. II, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 401.

128. Dabney, "The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism," p. 402.

129. Dabney, "The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism," p. 404.

130. Dabney, *ibid.*, pp. 406–7, 412.

Later, on January 4, 1861, mere months before the Civil War began, Dabney writes, in a letter to Dr. Moses D. Hoge:

I have considered the state of Northern aggression as *very ominous* for many years ... But I do not think that Lincoln's election makes them all more ominous than they were before. ... I consider [his] election no proper *casus belli*, least of all for immediate separate secession, which could never be the right way under any circumstances. Hence, I regard the conduct of South Carolina as unjustifiable toward the United States at large, and towards her Southern sisters, as treacherous [and] insolent ... She has *worsted* [*sic*] the common cause [and] forfeited the righteousness of our position¹³¹

Here we see Dabney, although still suspicious of “Northern aggression,” urging caution in relation to Lincoln's election and, moreover, denying that “immediate” secession is ever right. This stands in contrast to the sentiments, and consequent actions, of South Carolina, which we discussed above. Thus, moderation is still the theme of Dabney's thought, and he proceeds to discuss what would be the right course in the wake of events such as the secession of South Carolina:

... the Legislature of Virginia ought, *on the first day* it meets, to call a State Convention. It ought also to take immediate steps for a concern of the Southern States ... to present a united front to the North, for two objects—to demand firmly our rights [i.e., to own slaves] *within*

131. Dabney to Dr. Moses Hoge, January 4, 1861, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pp. 221–22.

132. Dabney, “The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism,” pp. 222–23. The limits above are that the United States President should, as the head of said government, “hold the forts; to strengthen your garrisons; to do anything defensive in them you choose, till they lawfully change owners by equal purchase.” This would be proper according to Dabney because South Carolina now considers itself a foreign nation, but they have, in fact, taken United States “soil and property.” The limitation here is that the US President should give South Carolina the opportunity to purchase the land and property that was previously hers, and if the United States President sought to subdue South Carolina without offering “redress of her federal grievances,” than South Carolina would be vindicated if she wages with the U.S. government. Dabney, “The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism,” p. 222.

133. Dabney, “The Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism,” p. 223.

134. Dabney, “On the State of Our Country,” *Central Presbyterian* (April, 1861); in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. II, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 421.

135. Dabney, “On the State of Our Country,” p. 421.

136. Dabney, “On the State of Our Country,” pp. 421–22.

137. Dabney, “On the State of Our Country,” p. 422.

the Union, and to limit any Federal or Northern collision with South Carolina within the limits defined above.¹³²

And, with this, he remarkably sees the North with a kind heart stating, “... we should all remember that America is one in race, in geography, in language, in material interests. Even if we angrily divide, there will be powerful interests to draw us together again....”¹³³

CIVIL WAR

The Civil War commences, and Virginia, following the rest of the South, secedes from the Union on April 17, 1861. On April 20, three days after the Virginian secession, Dabney published a letter to “Rev. S. I. Prime, D. D., one of the editors of the *New York Observer*” entitled “On the State of Our Country.”¹³⁴

He begins by stating that his purpose is to “lay this final testimony before the Christians of the North on behalf of myself and my brethren in Virginia, that the guilt lies not at our door.”¹³⁵ Prior to this, we note how he had called “Christianity in America” to “save the land from fratricidal war,” but now, in passionate fashion, he states:

... it was the Christians of Virginia, combined with other citizens, who caused her to endure wrongs until endurance ceased to be a virtue; to hold out the olive branch, even after it had been spurned again and again; to study modes of compromise and conciliation, until the very verge of dishonor was touched ... to decline all acts of self-defense even which might precipitate collision.... So long-suffering, so reluctant to behold the ruin of that Union to which she contributed so much ... [even] her own sons were disgusted by her delays and driven to fury and despair by ... the taunts of her enemies.¹³⁶

From this, he proceeds to intensely describe how the North mistook Virginian moderation for cowardice and dishonorable submission, but Virginia has arisen “in her immortal youth ... a Minerva radiant with the terrible glories of policy and war, wielding that sword which has ever flashed before the eyes of aggressors”¹³⁷ For Dabney, the time for moderation and dispassionate talk is past. Virginia will not lie down in passive submission, she will fight! He states with much anger and passion:

... her too generous concessions of right have been met by the insolent demand for unconditional surrender of honor and dignity ... the infamous alternative has

been forced upon her, either to brave the oppressor's rod or to aid him in the destruction of her sisters and her children, because they are contending nobly if too rashly, for rights common to them and her ... Hence, there is but one mind and one heart in Virginia ... there is flung back with high disdain the gauntlet of deathless resistance. In one week, the whole State has been converted into a camp.¹³⁸

But, one must ask, what of South Carolina, and the firing on Fort Sumter? Has not Dabney gone against the very moderate and cautious stance he presented merely months before in his letter to Dr. Hoge. Rather, he sees the actions of South Carolina related to this event as just since the North initiated the "first act of war ... when fortresses, intended lawfully for her protection, were armed for her subjugation." Moreover, "armed preparations were twice made to reinforce these means of her oppression," to which South Carolina, upon continual action, "proceeded to what was *an act of strict self-defense*—the reduction of Fort Sumter."¹³⁹

So, even if one does not agree with Dabney's reasoning in this regard, it is clear that his earlier moderation has been replaced with a passionate sense of the "righteous" cause of the South in conflict with the wickedness of the "Northern aggression." One can note, at this point, the tension between the genteel and primal forms of honor found in the South. Earlier, we see a more moderate, caution, and reasonable man in Dabney, indeed, a gentleman. But, when war is inevitable and secession as a reality, he quickly turns to "primal" honor, or the vindication thereof.

The North, by way of the federal government, has infringed upon and mocked the honor and dignity of the South by seeing her as a weak, submissive woman, but rather, she is fierce and ready for battle. Here, we see the manly valor expressed by vindication of honor, by force if necessary, which characterizes "primal" honor crop up in Dabney's passionate letter. Ironically, in the fast-day sermon "Christian's Best Motive for Patriotism," Dabney criticizes Southerners for tolerating the "man of violence, the duelist," yet, images of honor in the above letter carry with them the same code which he criticizes, albeit on a broader level. The one man vindicated his honor by way of the duel, now the South vindicates her honor by way of the same valorous violence.¹⁴⁰

Once the Virginian secession was complete, both the young of his church and of his seminary classrooms volunteered to the "18th Virginia Volunteers." At this time, Dabney, leaving pastoral duties of College Church to his co-pastor, B. M. Smith, he sought a commission as

a chaplain in the summer to watch over young soldiers. Having received a "state commission," he followed the 18th Virginia into northern Virginia.¹⁴¹

During his time with the 18th Virginia, he was reacquainted with "the recently minted 'Stonewall' Jackson," whom he knew as a relative by marriage (Dabney's wife was a cousin to Jackson's wife), and also "through shared contacts" such as William S. White, a "longtime ministerial friend." This once acquaintance between the two men led to a friendship. During this time he wrote numerous letters to his "womenfolk" back home.¹⁴² In a letter to his sister Betty, on July 12, 1861:

I hope you all are not permitting any apprehension for my safety to distress you. I am not so romantic in my ideas as to think of mixing up secular and sacred callings. If our regiment were actively engaged in battle, I should expect to give my assistance to the surgeons in ministering to the wounded, a place harrowing indeed to the sympathies, but exposed to little danger under any circumstances.¹⁴³

And on July 19th, he writes:

I assure you, I am a *non-combatant*, and intend to remain so. I have persisted in refusing to get any uniform or side arms. I shall make it my business to attend upon the wounded in time of action ... You know it is the rarest thing in the world to hear of a surgeon attacked; in civilized warfare they and their benevolent work are considered as sacred.¹⁴⁴

And, again, recounting a skirmish between Virginia regiments, including his own, and "Yankees," he asks his sister to tell his mother (on July 22) "... not to be uneasy about me, for I do not intend to expose my life

138. Dabney, "On the State of Our Country," pp. 422–3.

139. Dabney, "On the State of Our Country," p. 426.

140. See Weaver, *The Southern Essays*, pp. 165, 166, who also notes a connection between the duel and the Southern secession. He states, "The South went into the first modern war thinking it was a duel, an 'affair of honor,'" then he proceeds to discuss how the South, equating the war with the duel, thought that warfare was, in effect, "a game," which, like the duel, followed certain prescribed modes of action. This contrasted with the Northern approach to war, that is, "total war," or the "systematic" destruction of the enemy.

141. Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub, 2005), p. 110.

142. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 111.

143. Robert to Betty Dabney, July 12, 1861, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 238.

144. Dabney to his mother, July 19, 1861, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 239.

to danger; I do not consider it my duty.”¹⁴⁵ Yet, his biographer T.C. Johnson notes that Dabney did not inform his family that he didn’t avoid danger when he rode “as an orderly for his colonel during the battle of Manassas.”¹⁴⁶

After the summer, numerous forces drew him back home. First, Union Seminary, with fourteen students, would remain open. So, in a letter to his brother, he states, “It would have been utterly useless for me to ask them for a furlough for a year. The only terms . . . would be by just resigning my place . . .” Also, that same year, the “Spring Resolutions” were passed by a “Northern majority in the Old School General Assembly,” which decided for the entire Old School Presbyterian Church that “active” allegiance must be given to the “Federal Government at Washington.”¹⁴⁷

Due to these “Spring Resolutions,” the presbyteries in the Confederate States of America declared its independence from the Northern church in the summer of 1861.¹⁴⁸ The Synod of Virginia met in the fall of ’61. All of the presbyteries had severed their connection the Northern church and “appointed commissioners to organize a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.” At this time, Dabney was the retiring moderator for the Synod of Virginia, and was appointed to be the chairman for a committee to take action with regard to disunion from the Northern General Assembly. The report of this committee approved of the actions toward separation, because allegiance to the Federal Government was “unjust, harsh and unconstitutional.”¹⁴⁹

Dabney’s thoughts on this are, in many ways, parallel to his “On the State of Our Country,” albeit without the same passionate tone. By making Federal allegiance mandatory, “the sin of rebellion” was equated with political secession, and thus, subject to the censure of the church. For him, it was a person’s allegiance to their

own state which stood closest to him, and, after this, to the federal government. Thus, ultimate political loyalty lies with the states, and a Virginian citizen would be rebellious for not following the Virginian secession. Although the election of Lincoln destroyed the “fundamental intent” of the constitution, which was to join together sovereign states that would give to the federal government direction over those affairs which were “common . . . to all” by creating a new union, it would be wrong to be forced to recognize these “new terms of union,” since the American government was founded on “the right of people to choose.” This new union, a perverted one, was a tyranny not worthy of obedience.¹⁵⁰

On February 22, 1862, Dabney’s sister Betty died, and it was on this same day that Jefferson Davis was elected as president of the Confederacy.¹⁵¹ Further, the “conscription law” was passed by the Confederate government around this time, removing the remaining few students from Union Seminary. Subsequently, Dabney began desiring another tour as a chaplain.

During this time, “Stonewall” Jackson’s wife was sent to live with her cousin: Dabney’s wife. Due to intercession of Jackson’s wife, Dabney was offered “the position of chief of staff” by Jackson. Dabney, unsure of this proposal, visited Jackson “at Swift Run Gap in April 1862” in order to explain his unfitness for the position and “to secure a chaplain’s commission.” Jackson would not hear his objections, and he was consequently placed in the office.¹⁵²

During his five months with Jackson as his chief of staff, he combined the chaplain and soldier callings, that is, “he preached on Sundays” when the enemy was not engaged, and preached on other occasions as well. Additionally, he “helped the army kill the ‘enemy.’”¹⁵³ Due to his acquiring of a “second bout of camp fever,” which almost killed him, he was given clearance by a doctor to remain home in order to recover, and “in September 1862” Jackson accepted his resignation.¹⁵⁴

In 1863, Dabney began to write *Defence of Virginia and the South*. He “conceived of fighting for the Confederacy with his pen,”¹⁵⁵ saying, “labors of scholars, while humbler, are no less necessary to the welfare of our country, than those of a soldier.”¹⁵⁶ The motivation for his writing of *Defence* draws us to an important theme, namely, fighting for the cause as a Christian writer and scholar, rather than as a soldier. For Dabney, as for so many others in the South, the cause that was fought for was indeed a Christian cause. Statements from two sermons will help to illustrate this theme in Dabney’s thought.

In December of 1862, after resigning from the

145. Robert to Betty Dabney, July 22, 1861, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 241.

146. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 241.

147. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, pp. 243, 244.

148. See also S. Donald Fortson III, *The Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729–1870* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 182–83.

149. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 244.

150. Dabney, “Declarations of the PCCSNA,” in Lucas, *Dabney*, pp. 112–113.

151. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 249.

152. Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 115.

153. Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 115.

154. Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 117.

155. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 273.

156. Dabney, “Autobiography,” in Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 117.

Confederate Army, he gave a sermon commemorating the death of Abraham C. Carrington titled “The Christian Soldier.” In discussing the “duties of patriotism,” he states, “Civil government is God’s ordinance, and if it be just, one of his greatest temporal blessings.” The appointment of institutions both to maintain “internal order” and “external” defense against aggressors is “of divine appointment,” and, thus, it is “our duty” to “to sustain our government with *heart and hand*.”¹⁵⁷ He further states:

I therefore believe that there is nothing opposed to an enlightened Christianity in a warm patriotism for our particular country. This feeling made up of several elements: a legitimate regard for our own welfare and worldly estate, interest in that of our families, and a wider benevolence towards our fellow-citizens; together with an honest pride in the glories of our history, and in the justice of our institutions, with the attachments of local affection to the very scenery and soil of our native land.¹⁵⁸

Later, speaking of the “criminality” of an unprovoked war, and the impropriety of a “passive,” non-resistant nation, he states, “... the injured party are entitled to their redress, and are justified in inflicting on the injurers such chastisement as will compel their return to justice, even including the death and ruin which they were preparing against their inoffensive neighbors.”¹⁵⁹ After setting the stage for the defensive nature of the war on the part of the South, Dabney states that his purpose for this is to “ground firmly your belief in the righteousness of the calling of the Christian soldier. God has authorized him. The objects for which he contends are excellent, noble, yea of supreme value.”¹⁶⁰ Drawing further on Christian values, he states:

The godly soldier is called to defend also the far dearest interests of the church of God, involved in so many ways with those of the country in which it is planted. He protects all of these precious objects by the exercise of the noblest attributes of manhood, courage, self-devotion, faith in God.¹⁶¹

From this, he notes that “[t]he glory of the soldier’s prowess has always” stirred up the hearts of the people, and how some see this as a “remnant of the more bloody and ruthless ideas of Paganism ... unworthy ... of a Christian age” where the “true hero” is the philosopher, the inventor, or the peaceful man. But, says Dabney, although there is a “black deformity ... [a]

counterfeit” to “true military glory,” these attest to the latter reality rather than deny it.¹⁶²

From these he begins to describe what characterizes the “true glory of the Christian soldier.” First, his courage is not unthinking and amoral; rather, it is courage because it is found in a duty to uphold “the home, the life and the love.” That is, “Christian courage is but another name for self-sacrifice.”¹⁶³ Second, “the temper of the Christian soldier is also one of high faith and profound submission to God,” that is, he accepts God’s hand as he, with every nerve, “strain[s] to perform the task allotted by providence of the hour, manfully, and if in its performance death or defeat is met, all is well.”¹⁶⁴ Then, Dabney continues by saying:

I am not one of those who hold that these sentiments are the birth only of pagan ferocity, or unholy pride. The principles of personal honor and the love of glory have been perverted among us into a code of wickedness and bloody retaliation [the duel], for which we now doubtless suffer the chastisement of an offended God.... But there is a true glory and a true honor, that which cometh from God and not from man: the glory of duty done, of obstacles overcome, of fears resisted, and of generous sacrifices made to a worthy cause, the honor of an integrity of principle stronger than the sense of pain or the fear of death. He deserves most of the honor who from pure motives braves the direst evils and pays the costliest sacrifice for the noblest object.¹⁶⁵

Thus, we see Dabney integrating the cause of the war, a defensive war, with the heart of the soldier. The duty of this soldier is rooted in his Christianity, and so, he takes up his duty as a soldier not out of base ferocity, but out of duty toward his family, his society, and, also, the church. Furthermore, he is a man, in his martial duties, who has a deep faith and submission toward God. But a clearer expression of this combination of martial honor with Christian virtue is seen in his sermon titled “True Courage,” in which he states:

157. Dabney, “The Christian Soldier,” in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. I, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967) p. 614.

158. “The Christian Soldier,” pp. 614–615.

159. “The Christian Soldier,” p. 616.

160. “The Christian Soldier,” p. 616.

161. “The Christian Soldier,” p. 617.

162. “The Christian Soldier,” pp. 617, 618.

163. “The Christian Soldier,” pp. 618, 619.

164. “The Christian Soldier,” p. 620.

165. “The Christian Soldier,” p. 622.

... he is the bravest man who is the best Christian. It is he who truly fears God, who is entitled to fear nothing else. [That is to say,] [h]e whose conduct is governed by the fear of God, is brave, because the powers of the soul are in harmony. [Also, he believes that] ... [b]y that almighty and omniscient providence, all events are either produced; or at least permitted, limited, and overruled.... Each particular act among the most multitudinous which confound our attention by their number, or the most fortuitous, which entirely baffle our inquiry into their causes, is regulated by this intelligent purpose of God.¹⁶⁶

Previously, Dabney notes that the glory that comes from God is of a man who self-sacrificially gives himself for that which he cares about. But, in this sermon, the connection between soldier and Christian is eclipsed as he asserts that the “bravest man is the best Christian.” Thus, it is not merely one who is honorable in battle, but one who fears God and trusts in his providential hand, namely, the Christian. To put it another way, the most honorable, and worthy of glory and esteem, is the Christian man.

Now, concluding this section on Dabney during the Civil War period, we can note that he was fierce in his indignation from the start of it, moving away from his earlier moderation. The “War of Northern Aggression,” as perhaps he would see it, has placed the South on the defensive, and thus, their war is a just war. Having served both as a chaplain to a regiment, and as the chief of staff to “Stonewall” Jackson, albeit for only a short time, he is thoroughly immersed in the “righteous” cause of the South.

But, because he couldn’t serve in the lines of battle, he chose to fight with the eloquent word of his pen. Consequently, two works were produced by him during this time: *A Defence of Virginia (and Through Her, of the South)* and *Life and Campaigns of Lt. Gen. T.*

166. Dabney, “True Courage,” in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. III, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), pp. 456–458.

167. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 281.

168. Given the fact that Dabney lived some 33 years after the end of the Civil War, we will only trace in brief some of the main events during this period of his life while giving attention what seems expedient in order to gain an understanding of Dabney during this period, hence, selections will be limited.

169. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 292.

170. Dabney to his brother, August 7, 1865, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 304.

171. Dabney to Dr. Moses Hoge, August 16, 1865, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, pp. 304–305.

J. Stonewall Jackson. The former, written in the latter years of the Civil War, wasn’t published until its end in 1867, and the latter was finished “a little before the surrender at Appomattox.”¹⁶⁷ Although these works were written during the War, they reflect the thought of Dabney even as he entered the postbellum period. In fact, both *A Defence* and *Life of Jackson* were printed after the war, in 1867, and much of his concern in these works will be seen, albeit more strikingly, as we move into the next era.

POSTBELLUM¹⁶⁸

At the end of the Civil War at Appomattox, we see Dabney hiding himself “in Buckingham ... to escape being carried off to a Northern prison. When he came back to Hampden-Sidney, he found his wife and children safe, but his home pillaged.”¹⁶⁹ Given to thoughts of leaving the United States, in a letter to his brother, he writes:

... the least tolerable part of the United States would be a good neighborhood in the Valley of Virginia; fewer free negroes to blight it ... but I have no idea of removing to settle again *anywhere* under Yankee despotism. The real motive ... for seeking a new country is not the petulant feelings of pride galled by defeat, nor any reference to future hard times ... It is a regard to the moral well-being of myself and children.... To my children, life under a mean, brutal despotism must be a gradual school of lax principle and degraded aim. If history teaches us anything, it teaches that the subjects of such governments always become a mean people.¹⁷⁰

Later, in a letter to Dr. Hoge, he writes:

I do not see what reasonable ground of hope there is ... When we said, during the war, that we were contending for everything which makes the heritage of a free, Christian people dear to them, I, for one, believed what I said, and as I see we are whipped, I must regard all this as lost.... It appears to me that there are only two prospects for the South. Parts of it will continue under the present paralysis, until they sink permanently ... Other parts, as Northern Virginia and the Valley, will again see material prosperity; but only by being completely Yankeeized.¹⁷¹

Here, we see Dabney, upon defeat, pitting an evil Yankeeism against a once-righteous South, and, given the defeat of the South in the war, he expressed a deep sense of hopelessness, even toying with the idea of leaving the country. Later, in the same letter, he writes:

... people do not allow for the poisonous moral effects of an oppressive government.... I fear the independence, the honor, the hospitality, the integrity, the everything which constituted the Southern character, is gone forever. The Yankee said they would conquer the South, or exterminate it. They *have done* the latter, literally.¹⁷²

After discussing a variety of options of where to leave to such as Brazil, New Zealand, and Australia,¹⁷³ he writes:

Isn't it a little queer that I should be lectured on the great crime of deserting the interests of Southern Christianity, I, who have devoted my life to Virginia, and persistently refused the most brilliant allurements to the Fifth Avenue, New York, or to Princeton, for my dear love to our own mother? These plans ... of emigration are prompted by the same fidelity, because I fear that the only way to save Virginia is to take her out of Virginia.... to take Virginia, along with myself, away from that race [the Yankees].¹⁷⁴

We see here Dabney's thought that the only way to preserve the "Southern character" is, perhaps, to remove her to somewhere else away from the dangers of the North. Now, this is not merely a Southern identity, but a Southern Christianity that he wishes to preserve. He states, "... the only way to save any of the true Christianity of the South is to transplant it as quick as possible."¹⁷⁵ He later gave up his thought of emigration.¹⁷⁶ Continuing his pastoral duties at College Church, Dabney, deeply affected by the loss of the war, "did an unusual amount of pastoral visiting ... No people could have had a pastor who sympathized with them more."¹⁷⁷ Not only do we have a man who still held to his ideas, as he so vehemently reasserted above, and yet, he is no longer a member of the same society. That is, the institution of slavery which was so fundamental to it was now abolished, and those slaves, who, as we noted earlier, were only able to be slaves in relation to whites, according to prevailing opinion, were now emancipated. With this, the question of the ecclesiastical office in relation to African-Americans had to be answered.

At a meeting at the Synod of Virginia on Nov. 9, 1867, Dabney gave a speech about the ecclesiastical equality of "Negroes." This speech arose when a resolution for an overture to be brought before the General Assembly was proposed, which stated, concerning the ordination to "the full work of the gospel ministry" that "ordination ... is to be given to all those called of God to, and qualified for the work, without respect of persons."¹⁷⁸ When a motion for "indefinite postponement"

was rejected, and a debate about the issue arose, Dabney felt the need to speak.¹⁷⁹

He speaks to the statement that "ordination" is "without respect of persons," by stating that all present would "assent to this general proposition," but then, he asks, "... in which meaning is it meant to be taken?" First, he states that if evidence of "God's call and qualification" can be seen as "fatally defective" with regard to blacks as there exists "an insuperable difference of race, made by God and not man, and of character and social condition, makes it plainly impossible for a black man to teach and rule white Christians for edification," then he "adopts it." Second, he states, concerning the resolution, "Or does it mean that it is right to ordain a black man—if we have any such—possessed of the piety, integrity and learning required by our standards, to preach to black Presbyterian congregations, if we have any? Then I adopt it."¹⁸⁰

After asking if it in fact means that black men would be "co-equal member[s]" of the presbytery, and seeing approving nods in this direction, he states, "I am utterly opposed to you," and he goes on to call this "agitation ... unpractical" as "the negro is not coming to you." Rather, he insists, "[they] wholly prefer the Yankee to you." Further, he voices his doubts that a "negro" exists who could "come fully up to that high standard ... which our constitution requires"; instead, the overture will be passed and used as a "pretext for a partial and odious lowering of our standard in favor of negroes."¹⁸¹

Sadly, Dabney's racism continues to swell in this speech. First, they would not be worthy to be equal members of the presbytery with the white man; second, they could not even obtain to the high standards required of Presbyterian ministers, and, in fact, we would have to lower the bar because of their lack. But, more blatantly, he states, "I oppose the entrusting of ... our church in any degree ... to black rulers, because that

172. Dabney to Dr. Moses Hoge, August 16, 1865, in Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 305.

173. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, pp. 305–306.

174. Dabney to Dr. Moses Hoge, August 16, 1865; in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 307.

175. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, p. 305.

176. Charles Wilson Reagan, "Robert Lewis Dabney: Religion and the Southern Holocaust," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 89 (Jan., 1981), p. 83.

177. Johnson, *Life and Letters of Dabney*, p. 318.

178. Dabney, "Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes," in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. II, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 199.

179. Dabney, "Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes," p. 200.

180. Dabney, "Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes," p. 201.

181. Dabney, "Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes," p. 202.

race is not trustworthy for such position. There may be a few exceptions—I do not believe I have seen one, though I have known negroes whom I both respected and loved in their proper position.”¹⁸²

Later, he says:

They have measured accurately the degrading effects of subjugation, of poverty, of grinding oppression, of despair, upon a people once chivalrous.... They know the ever-increasing assumption of the negro’s [*sic*] character, growing in indulgence. Hence ... once political equality is confirmed for blacks ... [it will lead to] ... *social equality* ... Yes, sir, these tyrants [the North] know that if they can mix the race of Washington and Lee and Jackson with this base herd which they brought from the fens of Africa ... the adulterous current will never again swell a Virginian’s heart with a throb noble enough to make a despot tremble.¹⁸³

Here, we see Dabney at his worst. The plotting Yankee, knowing that the weakening of Southern society will degrade “the chivalrous” South, which will, in turn, lead to the mixing of the black and white races. The former he describes as a “base herd” and the latter holds within its ranks such men of esteem as Washington and Lee. This Yankee plot will prevent any “noble”

182. Dabney, “Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes,” p. 203.

183. Dabney, “Ecclesiastical Equality of Negroes,” p. 206.

184. Dabney’s *A Defence of Virginia [And Through Her of the South] in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (Harrisonburg, Va: Sprinkle Pub, 1991), p. 25, demonstrates in thorough detail his racist attitudes toward African-Americans wherein he says: “... the African race, such as Providence has made it, and where He has placed it in America, slavery was the righteous, the best, yea, the only tolerable relation.” Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 118, says of this book: “[its] ... burden ... [is] to demonstrate that slavery per se was not a sinful social and economic relation. ... Dabney ranged widely through historical, biblical, and economic arguments” to prove this.

185. Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 151. See also Fortson, *The Presbyterian Creed*, pp. 232–38.

186. Lucas, *Dabney*, pp. 151, 152. This contrasts striking with an early sentiment he expressed fourteen years earlier. Overy states: “In 1956, when as a delegate to the General Assembly meeting in New York [Dabney] made his first trip into the far North, he carefully reported to Virginia Presbyterians the harmony and good will he had seen. he announced proudly that the Presbyterian Church [united, North and South] remained the only ‘great conservative religious body’ standing undividedly ‘in the breach.’” Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney,” pp. 78–79.

187. Dabney, “Fraternal Relations,” *Southwestern Presbyterian*, January 4; February 15, 1877; in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. II, (1890; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 472.

188. “Fraternal Relations,” p. 481.

189. “Fraternal Relations,” p. 482.

Southern sentiment to oppose the “adulterous,” despotic North.

One might surmise at this point that Dabney is merely angry, resulting in his racist and anti-Northern remarks. It needs to be recognized that his racism,¹⁸⁴ and anti-Northernism, had existed before the war, during the war, and now after the war. But his anger toward the North finds even fuller expression in the 1870s as the Northern Presbyterian church pursues reunification with the PCUS.

In 1870, at the PCUS General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, Dabney was elected to be moderator of the Assembly and “discovered that delegations from the Northern united church ... had come to seek fraternal relations.”¹⁸⁵ While cordial, Dabney referred “the whole matter to the committee of foreign correspondence,” whose head was B. M. Palmer. The report of this committee demanded that all Northern political platforms must be “disavowed” and all “broad church men” be removed. This report was rejected by some, and Dabney, sensing the danger of reunion with the Northern church stated, “Mr. Chairman, I do not forgive. I do not try to forgive. What! Forgive these people, who have invaded our country ... spread desolation and ruin over our land! ... they have destroyed us.”¹⁸⁶

As this theme of reunion continued, Dabney continued to have responses. A series of articles titled “Fraternal Relations” serve to demonstrate his opposition to a North/South reunion.¹⁸⁷ He says:

Good men [say] that past grievances ought not to prevent “fraternal relations” with those whom we recognize as, notwithstanding the wrongs they have done us, Christian brethren. This seems almost self-evident: that we should not be *unfraternal* toward admitted *fratres*! But we ask: What are “fraternal relations?”... We have allowed the Northern Presbyterians ... to assume that “fraternal relations” are nothing else than a certain very questionable ... custom of interchanging annual compliments and flatteries by dignified delegates.¹⁸⁸

From this, Dabney goes on to state that it is the Southern church that has maintained “fraternal relations,” and it was, in fact, they who were “unchurching us, usurping our spiritual liberties, hounding on a civil faction to seek our blood.” Therefore, “they [are] the only parties who have ever interrupted fraternal relations,” yet, they call the Southern church “uncharitable” for not restoring “fraternal relations.”¹⁸⁹ So, in sum, if they ruptured the bond, they are the ones that need to restore it. Furthermore, reunion, for Dabney, would be dangerous.

Responding to the argument of some that the North and South churches “were formerly associates, they bear the same name ... they profess to hold the same doctrines and constitutions,” and therefore, “special intimacy” should be shared between the two churches, he states:

Because we do [share much with them], we should have least to do with them. It is not from Yankee Congregationalism ... or even Northern Popery, that the present danger arises! No; the peril of having principles sophisticated—an imminent peril—is from these former associates; and it is because of the former intimacy that the peril rises thence.¹⁹⁰

Thus, for Dabney, given the closeness of the two bodies, the North is a greater danger to the South than even Roman Catholicism. So, we have seen both his continued adherence to a racist South, formerly defined by slavery, and we have seen his distrust and caricature of the North, a sentiment that is corollary of the pride of place the old way of the South has in his mind and heart. But, further, as a voice of the Lost Cause, he gave a speech at the “Annual Commencement of Hampden-Sydney College, June 15, 1882, before the Philanthropic and Union Literary Societies” titled “The New South.”¹⁹¹ Here, he echoes the classical republicanism (of the Southern variety), which denied natural rights, when he says:

Our fathers valued liberty, but the liberty for which they contended was each person’s privilege to do those things and those things only which God’s law and Providence gave him a moral right. The liberty of nature which your modern asserts is absolute license; the privilege of doing whatever a corrupt will craves ... But now, by this new Republicanism, the supreme law is the will or caprice of what happens to be *the major mob*, the suggestion of the demagogue who is most artful to seduce.¹⁹²

Southern classical republicanism also critiqued the free-market economy of the North, seeing it as inevitably creating worsening conditions for the employee. Dabney, reflecting this, states:

Once the commonwealth owned all the highways by water and by land, and each private citizen might become a carrier of it if he chose. Now the highways of property of great carrying corporations, who command more men as the disciplined *employees* than the government’s own standing army, before whose revenues the whole

income of commonwealths are paltry trifles; to whose will legislatures bow. Each of these roads point virtually to New York.¹⁹³

He goes on to discuss how manufacturing has moved from “the occupation of people *in their homes*” to “vast factories, owned by monopolies,” which “now undersell the home products everywhere.” With the mass of capital collected by these monopolies, “the free-holding citizen is sunk into the multitudinous hireling proletariat.”¹⁹⁴ He then proceeds to compare the old way of wealth with the new way:

When our late constitution was enacted, American citizens enjoyed a general equality of fortune and comfort, which made a real, republican equality of rights practical.... The richest citizen was only a farmer, somewhat more abounding than his neighbor in the breadth of his fields.... some of our “kings of industry” count their incomes by almost [\$20,000] dollars a day. Set ... a Vanderbilt ... beside the hireling laborer in his tenement-lodging, who is his theoretical EQUAL! Yes, the starving hireling’s vote ... shall count for precisely as much as the vote of Vanderbilt.... This enormous inequality in wealth will seek to protect, to assert itself in politics. But our new-fangled Republicanism asserts that, politically, the Vanderbilt shall be the precise equivalent of the pauper. It leaves the rich man no legitimate form, for the assertion of his superior weight or the protection of his superior interests in the State.¹⁹⁵

And because the rich man will seek a way to assert his “superior weight,” wealth will become corrupt, and with it, the “institutions of the land.” Later he speaks of directly of the “new South,” saying:

“The North triumphed by its wealth.” Here is the temptation of the New South, to which I already see ominous symptoms of yielding, to make wealth the idol, the all in all of sectional greatness.... young men ... exclaim: Let us develop! develop! develop! Let us have, like our conquerors, great cities ... great factories and commerce ... then we shall cope with them.... [Although] a knowledge, and hardy, diligent practice of

190. “Fraternal Relations,” p. 483.

191. Dabney, “The New South,” in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions*, 4 vols. (1890–97; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1994), IV, p. 3.

192. “The New South,” pp. 6, 7.

193. “The New South,” p. 7.

194. “The New South,” p. 8.

195. “The New South,” p. 9.

the industries of production are among the civic virtues which it behooves the New South to cultivate.... you have to learn ... how to combine possession of great wealth with the personal practices of simplicity, hardihood and self-sacrifice.¹⁹⁶

Here, we see Dabney, recognizing that some industry needs to happen, while at the same time encouraging his audience to have strong characters characterized by such traits as “self-sacrifice.” One can recall that this concept of “self-sacrifice” draws us back to Dabney’s earlier portrayal of the truly glorious soldier as having bravery in battle out of “self-sacrifice,” thus, he probably is implying here a Christian character. And, like a Lost Cause proponent, he says, “It behooves the New South ... to see it to retain all that was true in its principles or ennobling in its example.” And later, he says, “... constitution and laws may change, but honor, justice and right are immutable.”¹⁹⁷ Drawing on the old, brave history of the War, he states:

As long as the hearts of the New South thrill with the generous though defeated endurance of the men of 1861; as long as they cherish these martyrs of constitutional liberty as the glory of the State and its history, you will be safe from any base decadence. If the [next] generation ... learns to be ashamed of these men ... that will be the moral death of Virginia.

Like those in the Lost Cause “tradition,” Dabney calls the youth of a new generation, indeed, of a “New South,” to remember the glorious sacrifice of the martyrs of “constitutional liberty,” as well as the principles and “ennobling” examples of the Old South past. These principles, in Dabney’s mind, are Christian principles, and these examples of heroic soldier-martyrs draw on his earlier combination of the soldier’s glory with the Christian’s honor.

To put it differently, his description of these soldiers as martyrs, drawing on Christian conceptions, and his encouragement to his audience that the remembrance of them will guard them “from any base decadence,” seems to fit with Wilson’s thesis of the Lost Cause as a civil religion, that is, the interpretation of history by transcendental, or, in this case, religious realities. In sum, with the exception of direct statements about race, Dabney drew upon many of the themes that we have seen in our discussion of the antebellum South, and the basic

“cultural” preservations of its ideals in the postbellum Lost Cause, as he addressed a “New South” generation.

Evaluation/Synthesis

Having looked at Dabney’s life, while occasionally noting the context in which he lived, it is the purpose of this section to evaluate and synthesize that which we have learned of him.

Dabney, born in 1820, ten years before the “antebellum” period, to a family who, although not belonging to the wealthiest members of society, still had a prominent social standing and place in the region of Virginia in which they lived. In fact, the Dabneys’ had lived in Virginia since the latter half of the 17th century, and as a large land-owning family, they enjoyed the privileges of the station by holding various positions of power and influence and by possessing the one commodity that marked one as belonging to the higher strata of society, namely, slaves.

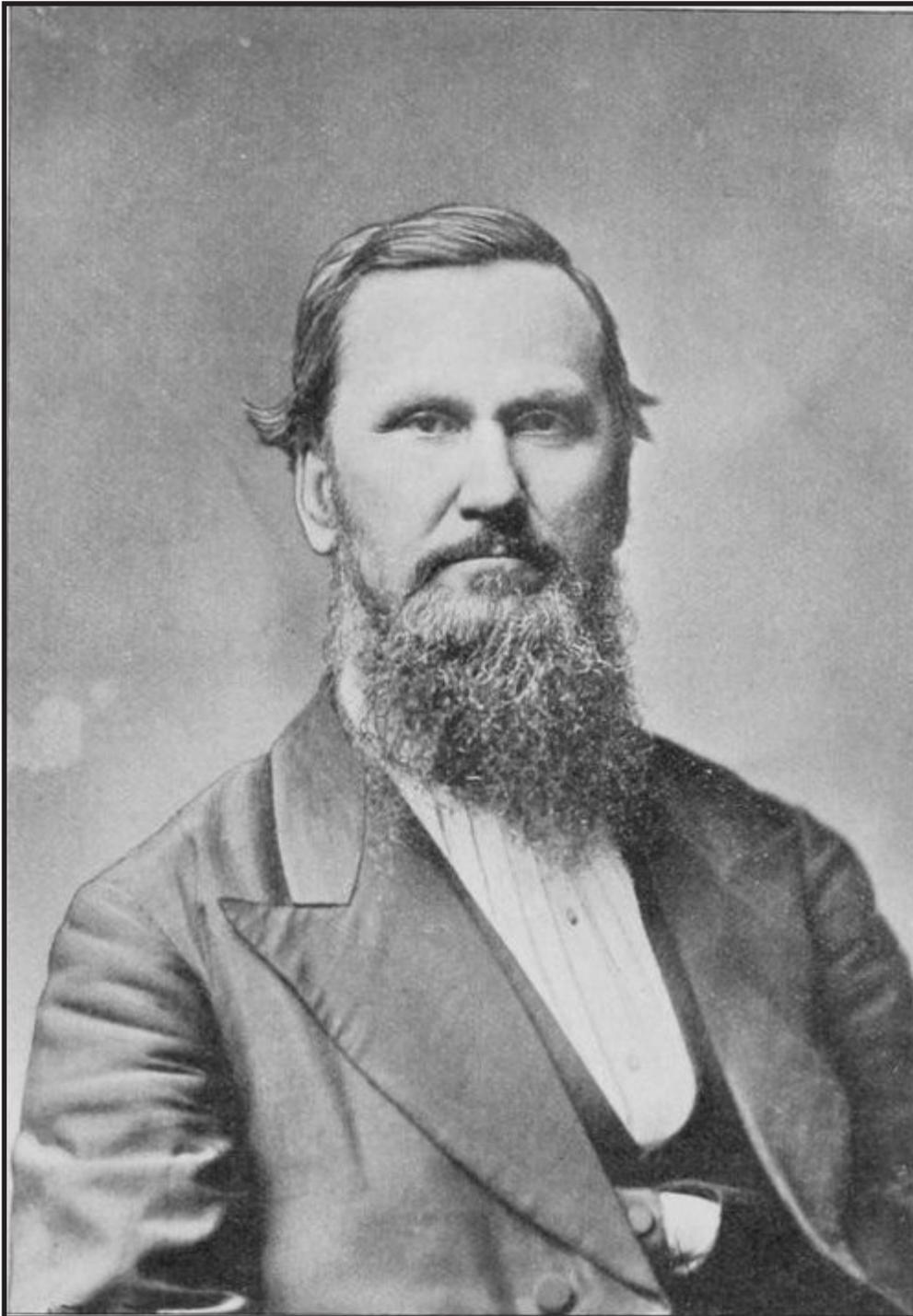
Undeniably, with the upbringing of Robert Dabney on a plantation, learning the task of caring for and directing the slaves by his father, he was enmeshed from the start in what would qualify as a distinctly Southern upbringing. For him and his family, this meant a Christian form of gentility, where reputation was prized alongside piety. But they were not merely Southern gentry, they were Virginian gentry, and thus, they strongly identified with, and found a home in Virginia. This identification was strengthened in their identity as Virginian Presbyterians. The blending of the aristocratic ideals of a large land-holding family, a strong sense of regional loyalty, and an emphasis on piety and Presbyterianism were the beginning influences brought to bear on Dabney’s life.

Later, we see this loyalty to his region, and more importantly, to his family and sense of identity play out in his college and seminary years with his initial impression when entering into Hampden-Sydney College, the University of Virginia, and later, Union Theological Seminary being one of skepticism toward, and distrust and disparagement of, his fellow students. In fact, one could describe his attitudes during these periods as prudish and unusual for a young man, but, alas, this was his way.

Throughout these years, it seems that he is self-conscious about his station in life. He disparaged working under a particular school tutor, because he was of a higher caste, and, later, in the face of wealthier aristocratic students, we see him recoil in disgust at their

196. “The New South,” pp. 18, 19.

197. “The New South,” pp. 21, 22.



Robert Lewis Dabney, Hampton Sydney, Va., 1872 or 1873. Frontispiece,
In Memoriam Robert Lewis Dabney (Knoxville: University Tennessee Press, 1899).

juvenile and unbecoming behaviors, and, consequently, lack of attention to their studies. Although belonging to the Virginian gentry, by right of birth and family repute, he did not merely frolic in this station, but rather

had a sense of sacrifice and hard work. Thus, perhaps here, we can detect the particular brand of gentility to which he belonged, that is, a more pietistic, moralistic, and, at least implicitly, Christian one, which, forsaking

the rough and forceful characteristics of those who he saw as flaunting their station, focused on the value of character not merely repute.

Coupled with, and perhaps inseparable from his gentility, we see his fierce allegiance to all things Virginia, and consequently, animosity toward all that is not, in his assessments of both students and professors. At the University, he only favors those teachers who seem to reflect Virginia's best, and he despises and distrusts those who are foreign and outside, and with this, we see his early hostility to what he saw as the antithesis of the Virginian, namely, the Yankee. Upon attending seminary, those below his station were seen to be uninteresting and not reflecting those genteel manners which would guide the community. But, more positively, it is here that his Christian and, moreover, Presbyterian identity was fostered.

As we enter his thirties, which is also known as the "late antebellum period," his animosity toward the Yankees continues to grow as the "peculiar" Southern institution of slavery is in the throes of attack. He is both a benefiter and supporter of this institution, and sees it as necessary to the integrity of a Southern society, with the outside, and basically non-Christian, influences of the North seeking to encroach upon the South, but the South is the one who holds moral superiority. Thus, we see the blending of slavery, paternalism, and Christianity occurring in Dabney's mind, reflecting the characteristics of many Southerners at that time.

But, despite his strong beliefs, Dabney was also a voice of moderation during this period of his life. Seeing the damage that would result if sectionalism continued, he earnestly pleaded with and rebuked Southern readers in the pages of different religious journals. This stands in striking contrast to the theme of "anti-Yankee" sentiment that we have already seen, or so it seems. Perhaps a better way to understand it is to recognize that Dabney, while distrusting outside influences, and even sensing the growing aggression of the North, was also a gentleman and a Christian.

As a gentleman, reasonableness, moderation, and caution are prized over violent retribution, or manly valor in combat. That is, passion is less favorable than dispassionate reason and thoughtfulness. This becomes clearer as we recognize that, as the Civil War approached, not only he but many in Virginia were opposed to such a passionate and ill-meaning action as secession. But, also, as a Christian, violent recourse was not an option nor was passionate hatred. Rather, Christian love, forgiveness and restraint, which honored God's reputation, were better than a premature

violence which served the opposite effect of dishonoring Christ and Christianity.

Later, as Civil War seemed more imminent in 1860-61, we see Dabney directly criticizing the "primal" form of honor, which fueled the duel, and which now fuels secession. Again, in the train of a more Christian gentility, the premature insolence of the South Carolinian secession stands in marked contrast to the moderation and reasonableness of Dabney's attitude. But, as Civil War commences, the primal honor which he formerly combated begins to override his prior modesty and forbearance.

The South, and, thus, Virginia, has been dishonored by the Northern persistence. It is at this time that we see Dabney clearly employing the vocabulary of the "code of honor," and also, it is at this time that we see a marked shift in Dabney's tone from a strident unionist with proslavery sentiments, to a proslavery, pro-secession, and pro-war advocate. Following the train of the just war theory, he sees the war as entirely permissible as a righteous South is being coerced and invaded by a tyrannical North. Thus, theirs is a defensive, and, hence, just war.

The primal honor which characterized his words as the war began meets with his responsibilities as a chaplain, a non-combatant. Here, he is in the same place as a surgeon, and thus, removed from the ability to partake in the display of honor and bravery that characterizes a man in war. Perhaps it was this pull toward primal honor which caused him, unbeknownst to his family, to ride "as an orderly for the colonel" during a battle. Later, he blended the roles of soldier and minister when he served as "chief of staff" to "Stonewall" Jackson. But, a poor constitution, which led to constant sickness throughout his life, also caused him to resign from the army as chief of staff.

From here, no longer able to contribute to the war effort by serving on the field, he contributed by writing two powerful books that promoted and defended the Southern cause and way of life. That is to say, he fought with pen rather than sword. Later, he gave two sermons, one of which was in honor of the fallen "Stonewall" Jackson. In these sermons, we see his attempts to bring the honor of the soldier, perhaps a "primal" honor, under the greater honor that is enjoyed by those who follow Christ. Even more, he redefines bravery as preeminently possessed by those who fear God.

Thus, it seems, he is seeking to lift the Christian, and consequently, the Christian minister and teacher, into a place of preeminent honor. Although a soldier garners fame and glory, the true glory of a soldier comes

when they, while desiring peace and safety, sacrifice themselves for others—an action which all Christians are required to do as their head, Jesus Christ, has done. It seems fair to say that he is attempting to navigate the tension that exists between the valorous, primal honor of the man on the battlefield with the moderate, reasonable, and pietistic (and scholarly) man of gentlemanly honor. Clearly, he is the latter in many respects, and, as a passionate lover of his section, a passionate lover of her institutions and ways, and a passionate lover of the Christian faith that she powerfully seemed to embody, he needs to find a way to serve and sacrifice for his home, family and love.¹⁹⁸

Now, turning to the postbellum period, we see Dabney, who has such passion, zeal and love for his section and his God, which are not mutually exclusive, turn into a man of anger and unforgiveness. As a man of integrity, and truly believing what he claimed he believed, it is understandable the internal crisis he felt. But, with this, the distrust of the “Yankee” already solidified into animosity during the Civil War only to turn into a complete distrust of all Yankees even those who share a common Presbyterian and Christian heritage.

Also, given that the institution of slavery was so bound up with the moral integrity of the South in the minds of Southerners, not least in Dabney’s mind, it is understandable that he feels that there is no other recourse but to leave a situation of spiritual darkness (i.e. Yankee rule). To put it another way, his regional loyalty is still fierce, yet, he has no home to rest as Virginia, and the South, has been dramatically changed. Therefore, hope of a righteous society is also lost, which contained those values which are eminently good and honorable. He, like the South, is, in a word: crushed.

His adherence to the Old South dogma of the proper relation to exist between the black and white man finds forceful expression as he opposes ecclesiastical equality with blacks. To him, like before, they merely stand in a servile and diminished position in relation to the white man. In fact, not only will they be unable to qualify as Presbyterian ministers, but also, the bar will need to be lowered for them because of their, it seems, intrinsic ineptitude. For Dabney, they are closer to cattle than they are to great men such as Washington and Lee. That is, they are belonging to a different species of human, although earlier he had challenged the abuses and neglect toward slaves and spoke of their “essential humanity.” Thus, a postwar Dabney was, perhaps, an even a more passionate and convinced racist than before the war.

As late as 1882, when Dabney is in his sixty-second year, he is still a staunch defender of an older way, a

now perhaps dead way, the Old South. The powerful lecture titled “New South” shows a competent understanding of socio-economic issues but, moreover, it shows a strong adherence to the doctrine that teaches that “free labor” capitalism is inherently destructive to society. This criticism, and his continual plea with his audience to remember the Christian-soldiers, the Christian, and thus, righteous cause of the Old South, places him in the tradition, the myth, and the civic religion that is the Lost Cause. So, his is a prophetic voice, not looking forward, but rather, looking back to a glory-filled past (the quintessential “good old days”) and calling the new generation of Southerners to repent and behold her former glory.

The next year “he accepted the position of professor of philosophy” at the newly constituted University of Texas, which, in effect, became his “southwestern exile.” Shortly after this, he founded “the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary,” and later, in 1888, asked his friend Thomas C. Johnson to teach there. But, in 1890, he again remembered his old home, Virginia, and desired the company of the gentry of that land; at the same time, he began to see the growth of “Yankee” sentiments in the University of Texas. Later, in 1894, he was asked to resign.¹⁹⁹

The diminishing quality of the University he attributed to the decline of the South after the fall of the confederacy as well as the influence of Yankees on campus. Exhibiting his characteristic despondency toward all that was not becoming of him, he was repulsed by Texas, and although he would die there in 1896, he asked his son to bury him in Virginia.²⁰⁰ Wilson describing the scene, says, “The old minister died . . . and Charles Dabney returned his father’s body, clothed in Confederate uniform, to Virginia, where he rests at Hampden-Sydney.”²⁰¹

As Dabney nears the end of his life, in exile, and estranged from his long residence and home in Virginia, we see a man who held on to his convictions about what is a right and ordered society, and how this society upholds a pious, conservative and God-fearing religion. Truly, just as he pronounced his views with integrity before the war, here, we see him hold on to

198. Lucas, *Dabney*, p. 129, also reflects this view when he states: “According to Dabney’s way of thinking . . . he was as heroic, as honorable as Jackson himself—for they both feared Jesus Christ above all else. This redefinition of honor and manhood . . . was Dabney’s attempt to rationalize his avoidance of the war and to reclaim his manly honor.”

199. Charles Wilson Reagan, “Robert Lewis Dabney: Religion and the Southern Holocaust,” pp. 86–87.

200. Reagan, pp. 88–89.

201. Reagan, p. 89.

them, for to do otherwise would be to lose himself and all that he stood for, and, in turn, be a traitor to the glorious Old South.

Concluding Thoughts

No matter how you dice it up, Dabney, perhaps like all of us when analyzed by one sitting in a time distant from our own, is a complex man. He is a man who provides a picture into a different way of life, namely, the Southern way. He is a man who embodies some of the best that conservative, and Reformed, religion has to offer. He is a man who, despite potential disgust with him, had achieved great things and left a mark on the society in which he lived, but, furthermore, his impact is still felt, albeit perhaps more as the foil rather than the protagonist.

Upon reflecting on Dabney in his broader Old South context, one is left with the impression that any of us could be misguided and deceived by the culture in which we live. Truly, a man of such great intelligence as Dabney, who was able to effectively wield the intellectual swords of theology, economics, history, and politics, among others, could see the inherent contradictions in his position as both a Christian and a Virginian, slaveholding gentleman. Or could he?

It is easy for us to look at the man and think that we would somehow triumph over the evil that was slavery for we deeply cherish the truth that all are the same in the sight of God, all our equalized by sin and salvation. But, if we were in fact, from the start of our lives, the wielders of a power over human beings that literally and truly robbed them of their freedom, forcing them to do our will rather than their own, would we emancipate them from our control?

As a complementarian in my view of women in the church, some of the thoughts of the Southern sense of hierarchy resonated as true. Truly, a society without order is anarchy, a chaotic rumble, only fit for those who are, at best, unchristian ... or so the sentiment goes. Romans 13 speaks of the role of government in God's plan, that is, his sustaining of government for the purpose of providing order and protection for the innocent. In a society, especially among the younger generations, where all allegiance or obedience to authority is questioned and deeply distrusted, it seems that perhaps Dabney and friends had a point.

So, to conclude, Dabney is a prime example of how the church interacts with culture. With regard to the North in which he and others perceived the seeds of

irreligion, Dabney was against the culture. He was fiercely antagonistic to the North, and all that it stood for, and, yes, although his Christianity was mixed with the values of honor and a classical republicanism, there was something within him as a man of God, as a Christian, and as a pastor-theologian, that perceived rightly some of the dangers inherent in American realities.

Regarding the South, he was nursed at her breast, and feed with her food from the day he was born. Not only was he a Southerner, but he was a fairly wealthy, upper-strata Southerner (at least for a while), so he had much invested in the old ways and roads of the South.

Like so many others of his day, his Christianity was blended with his culture, and, at times influences it, as with reforming of slavery abuse and neglect, with his contention against duels, and at times conforming to it. Sadly, the latter is the more prominent heritage in many ways. Southern Christianity, especially during the pre-war, and war times (and some, like Dabney, the post-war times), was, it must be said, a syncretistic religion which was so tragically blind to its moral failures concerning the African that it exerted much effort and will to uphold his bondage.

Now, returning to earlier thoughts of this section, we must not be deceived in thinking that we stand above Dabney because of our refined and purified conscience, and high sense of good. Rather, we need to see Dabney as a complex man. That is to say, a deeply religious man; a man who lived most of his adult life serving his family and the church, both local and universal, and a man who believed with all the integrity of his heart that the Southern way was the right way. Would that God, and Christ, our perfect high priest and savior, keep us from falling and bowing down to the often shouting and seducing voice of a culture with a seared conscience. ■