

# “The Studies and Enjoyments of Heaven”: R.L. Dabney as Churchman and Ecclesial Historian

By Sean G. Morris

## INTRODUCTION

A Southern Presbyterian pastor, professor, philosopher, chaplain, church leader, author, and biographer of Stonewall Jackson, Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898) has been heralded as an eminent theologian and leading figure of not only Southern but American Presbyterianism in the nineteenth century. Reference is often made to the high esteem in which Dabney was held by his colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary in those days.<sup>1</sup> A. A. Hodge (1823–1886; son of the great Charles Hodge) is reputed to have said that “he [A. A. Hodge] regarded Dr. Dabney as the best teacher of theology in the United States, if not the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Dabney’s life and writings have been considered from a variety of perspectives over the years. His thoughts on homiletics and sacred rhetoric continue to enjoy widespread popularity.<sup>3</sup> His writings on church architecture,<sup>4</sup> church music,<sup>5</sup> and public worship<sup>6</sup> continue to inform thoughtful discussion among many conservative Reformed and Presbyterian disciples. Of late, there has been something of a renewed interest in Dabney’s thought on education, parenting, feminism, and the role of government.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Iain Murray, “Reintroducing ‘The Best Teacher of Theology in the United States,’” *Banner of Truth Magazine*, no. 46 (January/February 1967): 17.

2. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), p. 534.

3. See Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric: Or, A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1870). Alternatively, this same work is published by the Banner of Truth under the title *Evangelical Eloquence* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

For some time there has been an interest in Dabney’s varied theological work thanks, in large part, to the doctoral work of the late Dr. Morton H. Smith (1923–2017) in the 1960s and the re-publication of his doctoral dissertation, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Also of late, Dabney’s lamentable views on race and slavery<sup>9</sup> have been subject to renewed scrutiny and his oft-unpopular views on postbellum Southern culture and Reconstruction have been likewise examined.<sup>10</sup> Though never deliberately published in a written volume as a printed work of systematic theology *per se*, nevertheless, Dabney’s lectures in systematic theology have been transcribed and subsequently published as his *Systematic Theology*,<sup>11</sup> a work which enjoys continued appreciation in the wider Reformed church.

4. Robert Lewis Dabney, “Principles of Christian Economy” in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, Vol 1. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 20–21.

5. Robert Lewis Dabney, “The Attractions of Popery,” *Discussions*, 4:540–567.

6. Robert Lewis Dabney, “Simplicity of Pulpit Style,” *Discussions*, 3:80–90.

7. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Dabney On Fire: A Theology of Parenting, Education, Feminism, and Government*, ed. Zachary Garris (USA: Independently published, 2019). As noted on the copyright page, the four essays of Dabney’s which comprise this work were first published in 1890, 1891, 1892, and 1897 under the titles *Discussions: Theological and Evangelical*, *Discussions: Evangelical*, *Discussions: Philosophical*, and *Discussions: Secular*.

8. Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987).

9. Robert Lewis Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia and the South, Annotated.*, ed. Gary Lee Roper (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

10. Sean Michael Lucas, “Old Times There Are Not Forgotten: Robert Lewis Dabney’s Public Theology for a Reconstructed South,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997–) 81, no. 3 (2003): 163–77.

11. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, Second Edition (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985).

Presuming an audience comprised of numerous Presbyterians, Dabney (intellectual prowess, virtues, warts, and all) is a part of our theological heritage. He is a figure worthy of study, consideration, and in some cases, forceful refutation. But the aim of this present article is to consider Dabney's views from a different vantage point, one that has not always been given the most prominent of consideration. As hinted above, Dabney's works as pertaining to the Christian Sabbath,<sup>12</sup> moral philosophy,<sup>13</sup> political theology,<sup>14</sup> education,<sup>15</sup> pastoral theology,<sup>16</sup> etc. have been given a fair amount of recent consideration already. But Dabney was also a churchman and historian prior to his being, in a formal academic capacity, a theologian. In 1859, while laboring at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Dabney began serving in the theology department. But prior to that, from 1853 to 1859, he had been serving as a professor of ecclesiastical history and polity. It strikes this author that this is an area in Dabney studies that, perhaps, could be given more examination. Indeed, even in looking at the table of contents in Smith's *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, one notes that consideration is given to Dabney as a Christian, Preacher,

12. Chris Coldwell, ed., "Southern Presbyterian Sabbatarianism: Extracts from the Writings of James Henley Thornwell, Edward Martin, Robert L. Dabney, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, John Lafayette Girardeau, Kenneth Murchison McIntyre and William Swain Plumer," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 12 (2016): 27–39.

13. Douglas F Ottati, "Theology and Ethics Then, Now, and in-between at Union Seminary and Elsewhere," *Interpretation* 66, no. 4 (October 2012): 383–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964312451562>; As well, the semi-recent reprinted editions of Dabney's *The Sensualistic Philosophy* have surely brought renewed attention to his thought in this field. See Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century* (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 2003).

14. Mark J Larson, "Dabney's Political Thought: Calvinian in an American Way," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 6, no. 1 (January 2014): 234–53; Sean Michael Lucas, "'Old Times There Are Not Forgotten': Robert Lewis Dabney's Public Theology for a Reconstructed South," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997–) 81, no. 3 (2003): 163–77; Sean Michael Lucas, "Southern-Fried Kuyper?: Robert Lewis Dabney, Abraham Kuyper, and the Limitations of Public Theology," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 66, no. 1 (2004): 179–201.

15. The semi-recent reprinting by Canon Press of Dabney's "On Secular Education" essay will surely draw renewed attention to his thought on this subject. See Robert Lewis Dabney, *On Secular Education*, ed. Douglas Wilson, (Moscow, ID: CanonPress, 2008).

16. C. N. Willborn, "Nineteenth Century Southern Presbyterians: Some Theological and Pastoral Distinctives," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 15 (2019): 69–80.

17. Robert Lewis Dabney, "Uses and Results of Church History," in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, Vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 5–25.

18. Robert Lewis Dabney, "Theories of the Eldership," in *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, Vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 119–157.

Teacher, Philosopher, and Theologian, but not as an historian or a churchman, specifically. In the immediate subsequent chapter on Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818–1902), consideration is given to Palmer as "Presbyter" (churchman). One wonders if the same consideration ought to be given to Dabney?

The aim of this article, therefore, is to give some consideration to Dabney's work *specifically as an ecclesiastical historian and a churchman* and thus to offer a further contribution to Dabney studies and American Church History in this regard.

#### METHODOLOGY

First, this article will set Dabney in historical context by offering a brief biographical sketch of his early life and pastoral ministry, particularly as it led to his assuming his professorship at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Brief mention will be made of his work in the Confederate Army under General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson (1824–1863), and then attention will be given to the differing positions in which he served at the Seminary: first as instructor in church history and polity, and later his labor in the department of systematic/dogmatic theology. While Dabney's contributions as a dogmatic theologian are typically the works for which he is more widely known, it is his contributions to the areas of ecclesial history and Presbyterian church polity that will be the focus of this article.

Then, having situated the subject biographically, attention will first be given to Dabney's writings on ecclesiastical history, and then secondly on church polity. Since the author lacks access to the Dabney manuscript archives which are presently housed at the Presbyterian Heritage Center in Montreat, North Carolina, analysis will be given to two major primary source works from Dabney's own hand that are relevant to these subjects: "Uses and Results of Church History"<sup>17</sup> and "Theories of the Eldership."<sup>18</sup> While some other relevant primary and secondary sources will be consulted from time to time to offer further context or elucidation, the bulk of this article will essentially be an abbreviated commentary on these two works, noting the various salient points Dabney makes (sometimes peculiarly salient points) as they contribute to the fields of church history and church government. Some analysis will be offered along the way and will give thought as to how his insights might bear on present-day issues. Finally, some brief analysis will be offered at the article's conclusion.

#### EARLY LIFE AND MINISTRY

Born in Louisa County, Virginia on March 5, 1820,

Dabney was born into a family of landed wealth and elite social standing. Accordingly, he followed what was in those days a typical educational itinerary for a privileged son of Virginia. He attended Hampden-Sydney College near Farmville, Virginia for his undergraduate studies and when on to earn his master of arts degree from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Near the end of his time at the University, Dabney discerned a sense of call to ministry. Thus, he went on to study at his denomination's regional seminary, Union Theological Seminary, a relatively young institution at the time, still housed opposite the Hampden-Sydney campus. In 1846, he graduated from Union and briefly went on to serve as a missionary in Louisa County, the county of his boyhood home. But soon after that missionary stint, Dabney was called to serve as the pastor of Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church in Fishersville, Virginia, where he labored for some seven years. In 1853, Dabney was called from that pastorate back to Union Seminary to serve as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity, a position which he held until 1859 when he transferred to the theology department.<sup>19</sup>

In the midst of the American Civil War, Dabney briefly stepped away from his professorial-ministerial role for five months in 1862 when he served as Stonewall Jackson's chief of staff. During this time, he participated in both the Valley and Richmond campaigns.<sup>20</sup> Dabney's health forced him to serve a short tenure in the Confederate Army and resign his commission. Jackson eventually, reluctantly, accepted Dabney's resignation in September of 1862. Dabney resumed his professorial role back at Union Seminary in the theology department, after some further health-induced delays and some time devoted to writing. Dabney used his role at Union as the most prominent theological voice to train the next generation of Presbyterian ministers as well as proffer various thoughts on cultural and political matters, particularly as related to the War, the ideology that lay behind the Confederacy, and the worsening theological fractures that he continued to note between the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches.<sup>21</sup>

During the second portion of Dabney's tenure at Union he served in the theology department, but the interest of this article lies with Dabney's thoughts and labors prior to his time as Jackson's chief of staff and prior to his department transfer in 1859. Our focus is on Dabney the churchman and the ecclesiastical historian: a more pointed examination of Dabney's emphases when he was serving as professor of ecclesiastical history and church polity, a role in which he served from August of 1853 to May of 1859.

#### ARRIVAL AT THE SEMINARY: WORRISOME DAYS

Dabney arrived at the Seminary during a time of downgrade and discouragement. Having labored at the Tinkling Spring congregation from July of 1847 to August of 1853, he left that beloved congregation and arrived alone at the Seminary in August with the rest of his family joining him a few months later, in October of 1853. Some were tempted to look askance at his acceptance of the position. Though the general attitude toward this new calling was to view it as something of a promotion or honor to be called from a local pastorate to serve the wider church as a professor in one of her institutions,<sup>22</sup> in this instance it seemed as if Dabney was leaving a better and more eminent position for a lesser one.

The situation at Union in those days was precarious. After the death of the Rev. Samuel L. Graham (1794–1851; former professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity, whose position Dabney would fill), there were but two remaining professors—both gifted instructors in their own right, but one young and one very aged. The Seminary's remaining endowment was small and a professor's salary at the time was not overly lavish: \$1200 (approximately \$46,000 in 2022 dollars) and a house. The present enrollment of students was a mere eleven. Conventional wisdom in those days suggested that the institution's outlook was poor and, thus, students from the Seminary's regional and controlling Synods (Virginia and North Carolina) who would ordinarily pursue studies at Union were instead inclined to attend Princeton or Columbia.<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, Dabney's labors in church history and polity constituted only a part of his work for the Seminary during these years. He would devote several summers to fundraising and student recruitment—at his own expense!—throughout Virginia and North Carolina on behalf of the Seminary:

I studied and taught my department with great vigor; made laborious tours every vacation, at my own expense, one year (1855) as a collector for the additional endowment, raising just \$3000, the other years visiting

19. Lucas, "Old Times," pp. 163–164.

20. Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life*, 1st edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), pp. 115–116.

21. Lucas, "Old Times," p. 164.

22. "...the recent period of your elevation to a public post in the church..." his friend C.R. Vaughan teased him in a letter. T. C. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (hereafter *LLD*). (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), p. 136.

23. Johnson, *LLD*, p. 130.

churches, colleges, and universities, preaching, making our seminary known and canvassing for the right sort of students.... It is no boast to say that the revival of the seminary's influence under these circumstances was chiefly my work.<sup>24</sup>

The Seminary's fortune steadily improved from 1853–1858, as evidenced by the hiring of additional faculty members and even the construction of additional faculty housing.<sup>25</sup> By the beginning of the 1859–1860 academic term, total enrollment had increased from eleven to thirty-eight.<sup>26</sup> Morale was high. And with that new, improved ethos, there also had been a reorganization of the curriculum and a general restructuring of the institution. Dabney himself was instrumental in chartering this “greatly improved ... plan”<sup>27</sup> in the reform of the course of studies. This plan was formally adopted by the Seminary's Board of Trustees in 1856.

His charge was straightforward enough:

“The third department is that of *History and Church Government*. (Dr. R. L. Dabney.) This embraces the history of the Christian Church from the Christian era to the present century, the history of doctrine and theology, and the nature, planting and government of the church. The history of doctrine unfolds the rise of the successive forms of theology and philosophy which have prevailed in Christendom, and embraces the polemical discussion of errors, thus presenting the course of polemic theology, so far that it is not necessarily introduced into systematic divinity. This part of the course is, in short, a discussion of theology historically presented. As an introduction to the history and government of the church, the important parts of the Acts of the Apostles are expounded in this department. Sacred rhetoric is also temporarily committed to it.”<sup>28</sup>

24. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, 69; Johnson, *LLD*, pp. 143–144.

25. Johnson effusively describes the mood on campus: “The material side of the institution had advanced greatly. The endowment had been very much increased, a fourth professorship had been established, and a new and commodious residence for a professor had been built; and it is merely bare justice to Dr. Dabney to say that all this advance was largely the result of his influence.” *LLD*, p. 154.

26. Johnson, *LLD*, p. 149.

27. Johnson, *LLD*, p. 150.

28. Johnson, *LLD*, p. 150.

29. Johnson, *LLD*, p. 152.

30. Johnson, *LLD*, pp. 151–152.

31. Dabney, “Lectures on Church History and Government,” MS, Robert Lewis Dabney Collection, Presbyterian Heritage Center, Montreat, N.C. (hereafter “Montreat”) as per Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, page 70.

#### DABNEY AS ECCLESIAL HISTORIAN

Dabney embraced a fundamental conviction that the Seminary was an institution built centrally around the Scripture, the Bible, the Word of God—a conviction he shared with the institution's founder, John Holt Rice (1777–1831): “This institution was intended by its great founder, Dr. John H. Rice, to be a school of *Biblical Theology*.... According to that conception, the *Bible*, THE BIBLE, is the text-book of the theologian, and the grand concern of his training is to fit him for understanding its contents.... Far better that the great biblical department be made complete, whatever else is left incomplete; for it is there that the essential work of learning Bible truth must be done.”<sup>29</sup>

In this regard, the Seminary was an institution of biblical theology or a Bible school in the best sense. Dabney espoused a balanced and logical view of the curriculum or flow of studies in such a school of divinity: fundamentally built upon the science of the Scripture, the student would begin his studies with matters of biblical introduction (biblical history, archaeology, geography, etc.), and then proceed to learn the biblical languages (including matters of exposition). The Biblical Studies department was of such fundamental import that the Seminary felt obliged to commit an entire one-half of their faculty (two out of four men!) to matters of Greek, Hebrew, hermeneutics, exegetical studies, biblical criticism, and the like. From this stage, the student would proceed to studies in systematic theology and then pastoral theology, handled by another faculty member. And then, finally, the student would proceed to the fourth faculty member who oversaw studies in church history and church government: “[As the student] is also to be an officer in the visible kingdom of Christ, he must study both scripturally and historically the nature, functions and organization of that kingdom. This finally equips him for the actual use of his knowledge as ‘a scribe instructed into the kingdom of heaven.’” In Dabney's conception, then, studies in church history and polity were viewed as capstone courses, a fitting finale for one's studies in divinity, rather than electives or side-dish courses to be added à la carte wherever the student fancied.<sup>30</sup>

We see that Dabney's approach to church history was a standard Presbyterian approach to the subject.<sup>31</sup> Given his covenantal understanding of the church/people of God spanning from the Old Testament to the New Testament, logically, he began the story of the church/people of God in the days of the Old Testament and brought that narrative forward into the modern era. He employed the Bible as a main textbook in his classes,

further underscoring this commitment noted above regarding the Holy Scripture as the central building block in the Seminary's curriculum and self-conception. Thus, Dabney used the Old and New Testaments as some of his assigned textbooks, along with Johann Mosheim's (1693–1755) *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, Humphrey Prideaux's (1648–1724) *The Old and New Testament Connected* and Archibald Alexander's (1772–1851) *A History of the Israelitish Nation*. Mosheim's work was the main textbook for Dabney's ecclesiastical history courses, though the whole Old Testament was his basic resource in teaching old covenant church history, and the Book of Acts, likewise, for new covenant church history.<sup>32</sup>

Dabney's work in this academic subject was not exactly original—a fact he himself would readily admit. Some have suggested that it is a work of tracing the development of doctrine through the ages more than anything else. Yet, while he believed that his labors in this field exposed his own weaknesses and inadequacies,<sup>33</sup> friends and colleagues believed that his work in this academic arena was eminently useful and noteworthy. C. R. Vaughan (1827–1911) urged him to “never listen to any proposition to change your present position, either for a church or another chair. Write a Church history. This, in my judgment, is your work.”<sup>34</sup>

What is, perhaps, Dabney's more particular or original contribution to the field of church history, if not content or presentation, is methodology. Dabney had strong methodological convictions as to how the subject of church history might best be taught and how seminarians might best go about studying the subject. Dabney's inaugural lecture before the Seminary in 1854, entitled “Uses and Results of Church History,”<sup>35</sup> is especially useful in providing a window into Dabney's thoughts on the matter, especially as he makes the case in that lecture for his methodological approach. Fascinatingly, though Dabney is perhaps most well-known and most regarded for his work as a *theologian*, he believed that the history of theology and polity were best taught by the *historian* because of the historian's knack for giving attention to the development of theology and polity in relation to historical context.<sup>36</sup>

Given that this author does not presently have access to the R.L. Dabney Collection of Manuscripts (housed at the Presbyterian Heritage Center in Montreat, N.C.) in order to peruse notes and syllabi relevant to Dabney's Ecclesiastical History courses, it is useful to turn our attention to his inaugural lecture, “Uses and Results of Church History,” in order to consider Dabney's particular emphases in this academic

field and to better ascertain his work as an ecclesiastical historian.

Dabney believed that the student of church history must be sufficiently familiar with the outlines of not only secular history but also geography, chronology, and political institutions because knowing the parameters of these disciplines is a necessary prerequisite to better understanding ecclesiastical history. In order to master the “science of history,” one must not merely be able to recite names, dates and events rotely. While history is indeed concerned with a multitude of facts, it is also concerned with these facts' causes and relations. For Dabney, verifying historical data as factual and accurate is a skill set which must be employed by the able historian, but it is only *one* skill among several “faculties” that must be brought to bear in order to truly master this science. One must also combine “patience, impartiality, sound judgment, subtlety, and perpetual watchfulness against the blinding influences of prescription, habits, great names and prejudices.”<sup>37</sup>

Dabney argues that in order to best understand the development of church history, one must familiarize himself with human philosophies of ancient origin because, while secular, such philosophies and schools of thought have ever had an “intimate connection with doctrine, and a potent influence upon it for good or

32. Says Dabney in a letter to G.B. Stricker, who later succeeded him as the chair of Ecclesiastical History at Union Seminary, “The plan of our Seminary, as a *biblical* seminary, makes the Bible itself a text-book for every professor. The Old Testament was my text-book for the history of the church of the old dispensation; my human helps, Prideaux's *Connexions* and Alexander's *History of the Israelitish Nation*. The Book of Acts was my text-book for the apostolic age of the new dispensation, with old Mosheim for the rest (with Murdock's notes). The extent of the Old Testament history was so large, and the time so short in which I had to dispatch it, that I made a sort of syllabus of the narrative in the form of questions, referring to the Old Testament by book, chapter and verse, or to Prideaux, to give the answers. Some interesting topics, as the Usherian chronology (as against the Septuagint), etc., I made the subject of special lectures. This series of questions, I think I have still at Red Hill. I lent them once to Dr. Addison Alexander, in Princeton, and then to Dr. Peck.” Johnson, *LLD*, p. 141.

33. “But none can feel more strongly than myself that, in enforcing the high qualifications which church history requires for its study, I have been only illustrating my own deficiencies.” Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.7.

34. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, 70; C. R. Vaughan to Dabney, 10 March 1856, in *LLD*, p. 143.

35. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.5–25.

36. James H. Smylie, “The Burden of Southern Church Historians: World Mission, Regional Captivity, Reconciliation,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1962–1985) 46, no. 4 (1968): 274–307.

37. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.6.

evil.” Realizing that, for example, the ancient Greek thought of Plato and Aristotle have been interjected within Christian doctrine at various points through the ages—whether for good or ill—it is evident, then, that Christian doctrine has been shaped and influenced by these worldly dogmas. Thus, in order for the ecclesiastical historian to rightly apprehend, describe, and in some cases refute and extract certain developments from Christian doctrine, that historian must have a familiarity with these non-Christian dogmas in order to better master and then teach rightly the Christian doctrine, counterintuitive as it might seem. Moreover, Dabney reasons that in order to understand the “daughters” one must first understand the “parents.” According to Dabney, Greek philosophies are but the thought-progeny of more ancient Near Eastern schools of thought. Thus, the ecclesiastical historian must also understand the “parent” speculations originating from ancient Persia and Egypt: “we are at once compelled to journey backward to meet the very earliest dawn of human science in that orient realm from which the human race first spread,” because, whether realized or not, these secular philosophies have “infused elements into Christian theology [and] have affected every age, and are felt to this day in our modes of thought and the errors which beset us.”<sup>38</sup>

For Dabney, while so much “back study” is a necessary prerequisite to rightly ascertaining and understanding the facts of history, this is not his chief concern for the ecclesiastical historian. Dabney’s peculiar contribution to this academic discipline—at least as is conveyed in this inaugural lecture—is that of the church historian’s methodology: the church historian must not be content with merely the regurgitation of accurate data, but with deduction and with the analysis of the passions and motives which drive the human actors to do what they have done. “History is the record of the doings of the human race,” he acknowledges, but “human affairs, passions, purposes, impulses, are acts, and secret motives are their causes.” It is here that Dabney acknowledges the inherent limitations of the field: while the historian desires to deduce what drives the actions of the actors of history, exhaustive knowledge of this data is necessary for a *complete* deduction, and finite mortals will never have such exhaustive knowledge. While the church historian might wish that he

could construct a complete deduction regarding human events, “our analysis cannot be complete, unless the annalist of the events could exercise the attribute of the Searcher of hearts.”<sup>39</sup>

Dabney goes on to catalogue further impediments and frustrations that the historian will encounter in the pursuit of excellence in his field. There are a “thousand influences” which are “infinitely diverse” and because of this the finite, mortal-minded scholar ever runs the risk of overlooking or confusing some of the historical data points he wishes to analyze. There is the fact that not all ancient sources of antiquity are entirely reliable or trustworthy. The Christian knows full well the sinful perversions of the human heart and that will most certainly affect historical records as well: claims may be dubious, historical facts may be deceptive, willfully misleading, or inaccurate. Dabney readily admits that the historian cannot approach his field of study expecting some sort of clinically pristine laboratory of observation. No historian studies or records history *tabula rasa*, but rather, Dabney admits, “we only know that we see [historical events] as they appeared to the annalist through the medium of his own mind and heart. And at every stage in the stream of tradition we must expect to find additional misconceptions and errors infused.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Dabney laments, so much of history is—inevitably—at the mercy of the annalist who is (more often than not) predisposed to recording the grand highlights and events of an era that many people deem noteworthy or that strike his personal interest. Items such as battles, royal coronations, treaties or church councils, and requisite controversies—these are catalogued with great attention, but often (and here, again, we see Dabney’s penchant for motive and methodology as it lies behind actions) the more mundane aspects of a culture are given scant attention, if any at all. Factors such as “the food which nations ate, the clothing they wore, their domestic life, the state of domestic discipline, their arts, agriculture and amusements, the method of their devotions, their superstitions . . . the books they read . . . these every-day and homely influences” which may well offer insight into what drove historical actors and actions, ingredients which may well have shaped national and cultural character, are given nary any scholarly attention.<sup>41</sup>

And yet, for all the impediments which Dabney lists (only a fraction of which we have cited here), he nevertheless asserts that no branch of historical study is, in the end, a fruitless endeavor. While historical study may be unavoidably incomplete, imperfect, and an inevitably biased enterprise, it is never ultimately without

38. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.6.

39. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.9.

40. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.9–10.

41. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.10.

profit: “[I]f I shall succeed in imparting to my pupils only those old and known lessons which church history has taught all along, I shall consider the course by no means useless.”<sup>42</sup>

One of the sundry values of historical studies that Dabney highlights is that of exposing and better understanding the origins of certain movements. To his mind, oftentimes phenomena and doctrinal innovations arise which are injurious to the church and at odds with Scripture, and in many instances these developments can be fatally exposed simply by the historian doing his homework in demonstrating the origins of a movement, and not even entering into debate as to the movement’s merits (or lack thereof):

[T]here is no readier, and, we assert, no juster, mode to silence that shallow and arrogant theology ... than simply to expose, without debate as to its merits, its detested origin, as it may be found, even in its minutest lineaments, in the fragments of *Pelagius*, preserved among the works of Jerome and Augustine. Affix to it, as it may be justly done, this name, which has met the execrations of Christendom for thirteen hundred years, and it dies in merited shame and contempt.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly, for Dabney, there was always room for argument and debate and the craft of polemical theology. But, in engaging against erroneous teaching, the able historian is well-equipped to begin debasing a false doctrine *prima facie* simply by cataloguing the facts of history and tracing out the developments accompanying such a doctrine and noting its fiendish origins. He observes how many of the supposed “death blows” of theological argument leveled against Luther were quickly undone when Luther simply informed an “ignorant world” as to the origins of papal doctrine. Likewise, Dabney notes, with established English clerical arguments against the efforts of the English Reformation, and even in the post-17<sup>th</sup> Century rise of Arminianism: a fatal stab could be dealt to this ideology in the minds of would-be sympathizers if the capable church historian would but demonstrate how the seed of Arminianism is nothing but “the semi-Pelagianism of the Jesuit Molina, which even Rome, with all her instinctive hatred of God’s grace and truth has never had the hardihood to adopt...”<sup>44</sup>

In perhaps one of the most salient points of his lecture, Dabney states, “The union of historical studies with systems makes the true scholar.”<sup>45</sup> For him, to be a mere theologian will get one an accurate apprehension of the truths of the faith and the needs of the church,

but the ability as an historian offers a fuller complement to the theologian’s skillset. Dabney likens it to the difference of a natural scientist who studies and attains knowledge of nature only in the lab (“in cabinets of dried specimens”) versus he who studies nature by actually going out in the fields and woods. As in nature, so also in the realm of theological studies: “The union of historical studies with systems makes the true scholar.”<sup>46</sup> For Dabney, systematic theology is good and necessary, but it serves a more clinical and diagnostic purpose. To study church history is to study *theology applied*. Systematics affords a certain knowledge, but an imperfect one. Historical theology adds to the man a more familiar acquaintance with the subject. Again we see Dabney’s continued emphasis on methodology and motive. While systematic theology enables a man to define and classify the church’s dogma, to study church history enables one to examine how these doctrines were expressed and gave shape to the church through the ages. Ecclesiastical history enables one to see how these doctrines were understood by some of the great thinkers and theologians, to observe relations and results of a dogma—who composed a creed, from what city did it arise, what were the controversies in that day that gave occasion to the formulation of this theological pronouncement? To understand these inter-relational and *causal* aspects of theological doctrine, more than merely the dogmatic definitions—however comprehensive and erudite—helps one see far more of the theological landscape than dogmatic theology alone and renders one stronger in the much-needed skill of analysis. In Dabney’s words, “[t]he history of theology, therefore, is a complete arsenal, which furnishes us with all the weapons of discussion.”<sup>47</sup>

Dabney continues on in the latter third or so of this essay, providing several illustrations and historical evidences which serve to reinforce the overall theme he continually reiterates: “Whether in church or state, man’s true political wisdom is only learned from experience; in

42. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.11.

43. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.14.

44. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.14.

45. Again, remarkably high praise for the field of historical theology since Dabney is more well-known for his contributions as a dogmatician or theologian. But, as we can deduce from this lecture, his time as an ecclesiastical historian was eminently useful and his acumen as an historian was, in his estimation, inestimably valuable in strengthening his theological prowess and making him a better, fuller, and more useful churchman. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.15.

46. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.15.

47. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.14.

other words, from history.”<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, “[Study solely of dogmatics] only produces a pedant. The union of historical studies with systems makes the true scholar. The former prepares for the forensic defence of our faith the mere disputant, the chopper of logic; the latter equips the controversialist with practical, flexible, moderate wisdom.”<sup>49</sup> And again, “[H]istory . . . teaches us to distrust the temporary and specious prosperity or gain which attends immorality and error.”<sup>50</sup> Dabney makes particular application here regarding the great need for historical education due to the dreadful lack of historical sensibilities and the woeful lack of broad reading, not only in the general public but especially for statesmen and leaders in public affairs. In Dabney’s estimation, if men took the time to be historically informed, they would realize that “from the sixteenth century forth to the great millennial consummation . . . [the great struggle of history] is the one between the Bible and Rome.”<sup>51</sup> For Dabney, if public leaders would know history and know the enmity that the Church of Rome has to the advance of the true gospel of Christ, then they would be far less eager to court the votes or garner the favor of “popish votes” and feel compelled to lock arms with agents of antichrist and give tacit aid to their cause.

Finally, for Dabney, it is the historian, and the Christian historian alone, who has the blessing of greater perspective. Related to his observations about the unfortunate countenance that public leaders give to enemies of the church, he also argues that the “history of the church and of the world, regarded as a whole, is but the evolution of the eternal purpose of that God who ‘worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.’”<sup>52</sup> Here we see something of Dabney’s postmillennial commitments coming to bear as he evaluates the advantageous position that a church historian has and the advantageous posture that such a historian has as he takes inventory of world affairs and analyzes all events in light of their subordinate function—that is, coalescing around and serving to amplify the kingly reign of Christ. As Dabney says, “We can even now understand why Wolfe conquered before Quebec, and the fair domain of the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi was transferred from France to England. This event substantially transferred

the continent from Rome to Protestantism. . . . Thus, then, did God probably decide that America should be independent and republican, and that the mighty East should fall under the control of a Protestant instead of a popish power. In all these instances we see that the means are gradually prepared to install Messiah as King of kings.”<sup>53</sup> For Dabney, the historical theologian’s vantage point and skillset are much to be preferred than the dogmatic theologian’s skills *alone*, for the ecclesial historian is able to survey the developments of history, note patterns and repetitions, predict trajectories, and scrutinize all developments in light of their inevitable movement toward Christ’s millennial reign. The skillset of the historian—more than mere clinical, logical, bare pronouncements—is that he is able to take that theological precision and apply it wisely, judiciously, and with a sage, in-the-moment practicality because of his knowledge of vast fields of learning and of the trends of history which he has studied fastidiously. With such a skill set, the ecclesial historian is in a prime position to impart wisdom, discretion, and pastoral guidance to the church in his own day, and particularly to the church’s future under-shepherds whom he is in the business of training. For Dabney, “the history of the church is one of the studies and enjoyments of heaven”<sup>54</sup> and is among the loveliest and most useful of callings.

#### DABNEY AS CHURCHMAN

For his courses on church polity, Dabney developed a great deal of his own material, supplemented by Francis Turretin’s (1623–1687) *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* and John M. Mason’s (1770–1829) *Essays on the Church of God*. In perusing the outline of Dabney’s course lectures, the first half of the course was devoted to church history, tracing the development of the church and its doctrine through the ages, while the second half focused on church polity issues. There was a fair bit of overlap in his polity courses with his ecclesiastical history courses. As has been noted above, this church history courses could just as easily be described as a course in the history or development of church doctrine as it could be called “ecclesiastical history.” Similarly, in his polity course, while certainly laying out the biblical principles from which Presbyterianism is derived, this course could just as easily be described as a soft polemic and vindication of Presbyterian polity against Independent and, especially, Episcopalian forms of church government.<sup>55</sup> As Lucas notes, even though Dabney’s lectures were neither creative nor innovative, they were well received nonetheless. His friend, William H. Foote (1794–1869; fellow Presbyterian minister who served on Hampden-Sydney’s Board

48. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.19.

49. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.15.

50. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.17.

51. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.22–23.

52. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.23.

53. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.24.

54. Dabney, “Uses and Results of Church History,” *Discussions*, 2.25.

55. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 70.

of Trustees from 1851 to 1870, and Board President from 1864 to 1866), reported, “I understand that your labors are very acceptable; that your lectures are listened to with deep interest, and that your example of study and investigation is impressing the students favorably, both as to yourself and as to their personal duties.”<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the most-ample insight into Dabney’s views on polity and the eldership is to be found in his essay “Theories on the Eldership,”<sup>57</sup> which first appeared as an article in the *North Carolina Presbyterian* in September of 1860. He begins by reflecting on the fact that so many in the present generation find it unnecessary—perhaps distracting, if not an outright nuisance—that even 150 years since the establishing of American Presbyterianism, the church continues to debate matters of “first principles.”<sup>58</sup>

In tandem with his work in the field of church polity, one of Dabney’s most notable emphases was his insistence on Presbyterian church government being a matter not of mere preference or even that of prudence, but rather that it was a matter of *jus divinum*. The limits of this essay restrict how much can be said as regards his overall contributions to the subject of *jure divino* Presbyterianism,<sup>59</sup> but for now we simply observe that his arguments and understanding of the eldership here in this essay are predicated on Presbyterian church government (and thus the eldership) being one of *jure divino* eldership.

Dabney’s essay gets at the divergence between Northern and Southern Presbyterianism in the United States and he does this first by noting some of the recent works that had been printed in periodicals representative of the two Presbyterian camps. The variously-named *Repertory* (*Biblical Repertory*, *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, etc.) to which he refers was the publishing organ of the northern Princeton Theological Seminary and the *Southern Presbyterian Review* was the publishing organ of Southern Presbyterianism, published in Columbia, S.C., but a venture shared among representatives of several southern seminaries. Near the beginning of his essay, Dabney notes that there is a discrepancy in understanding the definition of *jure divino* Presbyterianism as articulated by Charles Hodge (1797–1878) in the *Repertory* vis-à-vis the understanding as it had been articulated in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*:

“Some, with the *Repertory*, say that Christ’s legislation only fixes the general outlines, and leaves all the rest to be determined, or from time to time changed, by the church herself, in a prudent regard to policy and convenience. These persons charge upon the class represented

by the Southern Presbyterian Review, that they, on the contrary, hold that Christ has fixed *jure divino* the whole form of the church in all its details, so that nothing can be instituted in the church unless a New Testament warrant can be found explicitly for it.”<sup>60</sup>

Dabney asserts that Hodge would have these general outlines be a sufficient authority for the life of the church and that such general outlines provide for the church to have a ministry and that that is enough, for the Scriptures do not mandate further precision than this: that authority in decisions and voting matters resides ultimately in the people (not a bishop), that rule is to be exercised representatively through the eldership; secondly, that there is to be a parity of the clergy; and thirdly, that there ought to be a unity of the church, not autonomous congregational independency.<sup>61</sup> For Dabney and his Southern Presbyterian compatriots, *jure divino* Presbyterianism provided more specificity than Hodge would grant. While certainly not claiming that the Scripture prescribed such an elaborate Presbyterianism so as to foresee every conceivable scenario or eventuality,<sup>62</sup> nevertheless, Dabney believes that Scripture provides a more *definite* and less *general* outline for structuring the life of the church than advocates in the *Repertory* would admit.

Dabney agrees with Hodge’s three-fold contour (authority, rule, unity), but goes further to add that while authority does reside ultimately in the people, exercised representatively, “[p]recisely three classes of official functions are assigned for reaching the great end of the church, viz., preaching, inspection and deaconship, of which the two first may be in the same hands, so that there are three names of office, and no more, viz., the preaching-elder, the ruling elder, and the deacon.”<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Dabney agrees that the church is one, such that smaller portions of the church (congregations) are

56. Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, p. 70; William H. Foote to Dabney, 11 January 1854, in *LLD*, p. 143.

57. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.119–157.

58. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.119.

59. Surely a subject for subsequent and more specific reflection, possibly as a sequel to this present article.

60. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.121.

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

62. “Now, we do not pretend to find an explicit divine warrant for many details under this plan, such, for instance, as these: that preachers, and not elders, shall usually moderate all presbyterial courts; that the number of courts shall be four, the parochial, district, provincial and national presbyteries, instead of three or five; that some of them shall meet semi-annually and some annually; that some things they shall do in open court and some other things by committee, etc., etc.” Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.123.

63. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.122–123.

subject to a larger portion (presbytery), and these larger regions subject to the whole church (synods or national assemblies/presbyteries). Finally, the Bible alone is the authoritative “statute-book of this government.” This, Dabney contends, is an accurate, if imperfect, description of the divine plan of church government, and that plan is known namely as “Presbyterianism.”<sup>64</sup>

Dabney begins to consider how the nature of government is the manner in which Christ is pleased to execute rule in his church and that this has direct bearing on the present question of *boards*, that is, delegated committees appointed by the General Assembly whereupon the Assembly devolves certain responsibilities to said board. The question in Dabney’s era was whether or not such a devolution of responsibility was legitimate. Does biblical Presbyterianism demand that a council of elders execute the responsibilities themselves, or is it appropriate that they should delegate certain responsibilities to a smaller panel of overseers? Dabney asks rhetorically, “[I]s a board unscriptural *tertium quid*...?” And in utilizing boards, is the church “departing from the spirit of Christ’s plan, in that she betrays a lack of faith in the universal adaptation of that simple, yet infinitely wise, organism which Christ has given his church?”<sup>65</sup>

For Dabney, the above matter is one in which honest Presbyterians may differ. But in order to better understand the disagreement and offer a possible solution, Dabney first goes to lengths to establish what we might call “the regulative principle of church government,” or the notion that, when it comes ordering the church of Jesus Christ and executing her proper functions and mission, Christians have no right to be innovative in church government, excepts as pertains to circumstances wherein the principles of church government are applied (e.g. should there be five regional presbyteries or fifty?). As Dabney puts it, “So that the absence of Scripture warrant for such additions is equivalent to a prohibition ... the powers proper to the government must be learned on this simple, common-sense rule, that the government is to contain *only what is granted*.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, while granting the reality of progressive revelation (that is, that not all of the nature of church government was revealed in one instant in the early pages of the New Testament, but rather was a gradual

unveiling of cohesive organizational principles), because we live in an era now devoid of apostles and men inspired by the Holy Spirit, is up to us to simply imitate the churchly blueprints that Christ has instituted and not seek to develop novel ecclesiastical offices, structures, or the like: “[Christ] caused that organization to be left on record in the New Testament, partly in the shape of precepts and partly of precedents for all ages to imitate.”<sup>67</sup> Dabney says this in order to get at the first issue which demands his attention: that recent editions of Princeton’s *Repertory* have made the case that ruling elders in their office (which they grant is an office warranted by Scripture) are not rightly described as *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος*, but that only the preacher in his office is given such descriptors in the Scripture.<sup>68</sup> Thus the arguments in the *Repertory* go: church powers may be legitimately exercised without ruling elders, though the church may appoint ruling elders if it is agreeable and expedient to do so. Nevertheless, these ruling elders are, at the end of the day, still laymen, given only *appointment* and not *ordination*.

Dabney proceeds to rebut these assertions—alarmed as he is that such outlandish claims would appear in the *Repertory*, under the imprimatur of Princeton Seminary, where the venerable Dr. Samuel Miller (1769–1850) would never have countenanced such a view of the ruling eldership—by offering a six-fold argument demonstrating, in keeping with the views of Dr. Miller, that ruling elders, as well as preachers, are rightly understood as *πρεσβύτεροι* and *ἐπίσκοποι* as set forth in Scripture.

Dabney’s six-fold argument is lengthy, and so a thorough summary here would be tedious and press beyond the permitted length of this article. However, we shall be content to highlight a few of his salient points here.

He begins by observing the usage of the Hebrew word for “elder” and tracing it through its Old Testament usage and observing how it was applied both in the synagogue and later in the New Testament church: “called in Hebrew, *זְקֵנִים* and in Greek, *πρεσβύτεροι*, or among the Jews of the dispersion, *ἐπίσκοποι*.”<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, he shows that the Christian ruling elder is understood in the same sense as the Hebrew presbyter and thus he is a full-fledged elder and overseer in the fullest sense of the New Testament category, right alongside the preacher.<sup>70</sup>

He goes further to refute what is suggested in the *Repertory*, that the preachers were known primarily by their attribute of *preaching* and not by their attribute of *governing* or *ruling* as an elder in the congregation. Rather,

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

65. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.124.

66. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.124–125.

67. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.125–126.

68. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.126–127.

69. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.128.

70. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.130–131.

as Dabney demonstrates, it is that the pastor-teacher of Ephesians 4:11 is drawn from among the already-extant class of his fellows, namely the *presbyters* or the *ruling elders*. Not unlike a cadre of soldiers: one may be a private and the other may be a general, but they are both described by the general denominator of “soldiers,” so it is with the elders and the further distinction of the preacher-elder. While some invoke 1 Timothy 5:17 in order to support this hard distinction, Dabney views it as only a further reinforcement of his soldier analogy—that there is one “class” of presbyters embracing two “orders,” the preaching elder and the ruling elder. While the writer in the *Repertory* objects to James Henley Thornwell’s (1812–1862) statement regarding one *order* of presbyters embracing two *classes*, Dabney regards this as mere quibbling and hardly a serious argument.<sup>71</sup>

Dabney goes on to demonstrate that, contra the *Repertory*, the New Testament is clear that there was a plurality of elders established to govern in each individual congregation. Titus 1:5 reads “ordain elders in every city” and Acts 14:23 says that Paul and Barnabas “ordained elders in every church.” Moreover, these elders were settled and permanent fixtures within their local congregation, within their own residential village. They were not some “college of elders” dispersed throughout a wide province or region, but they were local officers with a local charge—overseeing a singular flock, not “flocks.”<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, it is untenable that all these elders, argues Dabney, should be about the work of preaching. Common sense would dictate that given the size of any average congregation, how could it be that there would be enough work of pastoral visitation to occupy five or six elders total, and only enough public preaching opportunities to occupy one or two, yet all five or six total elders will still continue to preach? Of course this would not be the case.<sup>73</sup> Rather, Dabney alleges that Christ intended *two species* of elders and that he appointed two such species and that they had different tasks assigned to them. 1 Timothy 5:17 itself even makes this distinction, that there is a pool of elders who all rule together, but there are those from among the pool that *especially* labor in word and doctrine. Meaning that not all *especially* labor in preaching and teaching, but *some especially* labor in this capacity as they all serve together in the eldership.<sup>74</sup>

There are some, including the author in the *Repertory*, who want to make the argument that the ruling elder is not of the same class as the “presbyter,” but it is more of an honorific title and not one that is of *technical* office and power, but merely a title of general seniority and honorary recognition.<sup>75</sup> Briefly expositing from 1 Timothy 5:17 again as well as the opening salutation to the

Philippians, Dabney demonstrates that the ruling elder is called “presbyter” in the same sentence with the preaching elder, noting that these are both rightly understood as presbyters (only differing slightly in their functional exercise of the office). Dabney reasons that it would be nonsensical for one to be a fully ordained presbyter, and then half a sentence later that another elder (also referred to as “presbyter”) would have the word apply to him in only a partial sense. In the introduction to the letter to the Philippians, Paul mentions only bishops (επισκόποις) and deacons and makes no mention of the ruling elders. This is because, according to Dabney, the apostle’s intention is that the ruling elder and the preacher are both subsumed under the title of επισκόποις, and therefore the ruling elder is a presbyter.<sup>76</sup>

In his fifth rebuttal, he observes that the *Repertory* does not grant that the office of ruling elder (as a regularly ordained office) has sufficient warrant from Scripture. And yet at the same time, the author does regard it as a scriptural office and finds a warrant for it in the term “governments” as found in 1 Corinthians 12:28.<sup>77</sup> Dabney again notes that, under our aforementioned “regulative principal of church government,” we have no right to introduce whole new branches of officers without scriptural warrant. But moreover, there *is* scriptural warrant for the office of ruling elders, and that they have been understood as official ordained presbyters, not only in Scripture, but even from the earliest days of the church. Even the primitive church recognized this, and (even though the nomenclature has since changed and definitions have been unfortunately warped) the early titles of *bishops*, *presbyters*, and *deacons* have always been known in the church. And these titles, *bishops*—or *preachers*—and *presbyters*, are descriptive of their function and denote the same office.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, in his sixth point, Dabney seeks to offer a rebuttal to the *Repertory*’s supposition that if ruling elders are proper presbyters, that there can be no distinction between them and ministers, and they must all be preachers because all alike must be “apt to teach,” per 1 Timothy 3. Dabney is happy to grant that all elders must be apt to teach, but this does not limit a man to exercising his gifts of eldership *only* in the pulpit. They were plenty of

71. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.131–133.

72. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.135–137.

73. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.137.

74. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.138.

75. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.140.

76. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.141.

77. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.142.

78. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.142–144.

occasions for the ruling elder to exercise doctrine, such as in home visitation, and that the spiritual power of Christ is wielded through teaching. Therefore, the ruling elder rules through teaching the doctrine of Scripture. And though he may not be the primary teacher in the pulpit, he nevertheless is often teaching in his ruling and therefore must be “apt to teach.”<sup>79</sup>

Dabney concludes his essay offering rebuttals to the suggestion that in the history of Reformed churches the ruling elder was never considered properly a presbyter and that he was never ordained by the laying on of hands.<sup>80</sup> Some would cite the practices of John Calvin (1509–1564) and some of the other Reformed divines as positive evidence for their case, to which Dabney responds that even if the *Repertory* were correct in this allegation, the precedents of most of the early Reformers do not bolster the argument of the *Repertory*. For example, consider the fact that ruling elders in the Scottish churches were sometimes appointed by the minister or a local magistrate, or that the ruling elders in some French and Dutch churches were appointed to serve only for a limited period of time. Surely these are not consistently scriptural practices, though they be the practices performed by certain Reformed churches in history. Indeed, Dabney says that the precedents are wrong and therefore they cannot prove that our current practice is wrong, but that appeal must ultimately come from Scripture itself, once again invoking passages such as 1 Timothy 5:17 among others.<sup>81</sup>

Dabney goes on to conclude persuasively that, as reflected even in the language of the *Book of Government* (the *Book of Church Order* in his day), the ruling elder is referred to as a *ruling presbyter* and that he serves as a representative of the people in the courts of the church. The ruling elder therefore is not a simple layman but is entitled to full and proper ordination including the laying on of hands. And unlike the reasoning in the *Repertory* which would potentially have the laypeople be entirely unrepresented in the courts of the church—since they regard the courts of the church to be rightly constituted even if only pastor-teachers are in attendance—Dabney argues that ruling elders are rightly

presbyters and rightly representative of the people because they derive their power to rule from the consent of the people whom they are governing.<sup>82</sup> Contrary to the claims of the *Repertory*, the convictions and practice which Dabney is advocating here is the same as that of Dr. Miller and the authors in the *Repertory* have misrepresented Dr. Miller’s opinions.<sup>83</sup> Both Miller and Dabney are convinced that the ruling elder is properly a presbyter and his presence and participation are essential to proper biblical church government.

In Dabney’s estimation there was a fair to strong preaching ministry throughout the Presbyterian Church in his day, but where the church is lacking is in her *spiritual inspection*. This is precisely the area where the ruling elder is needed. Furthermore, many of the parachurch ministry endeavors taking place contemporaneously, such as temperance movements and other Christian associations, would be well served by the ministry of ruling elders and would not need to be outsourced to agencies beyond the church—however noble the aims and sympathetic he was to their efforts. Just as one field officer can command many more men than he can possibly drill, likewise one man can preach efficiently to a great many more people than he can inspect. Therefore, the church needs a greater ratio of inspectors to preachers, and in His divine wisdom, Christ has ordained that the church should have men invested with just this kind of sacred authority to serve the church with this kind of shepherding (“spiritual inspection”), to govern the church and to aid the ministry of the Word. This ministry of the ruling elders is essential to biblical Christianity and is, in a word, Presbyterianism.<sup>84</sup>

#### DABNEY: TWO OR THREE OFFICE?

Fascinatingly, while many advocates of the classic Southern Presbyterian two-office view will look to Dabney as a wellspring from which to draw support for their cause, other scholars are not persuaded that Dabney can be so easily pigeonholed as an advocate of the two-office position. Some argue that, despite his “southern” vocabulary in describing the offices, Dabney’s view is more of a “classic” Reformed three-office view.

Mark R. Brown is one such scholar who makes this argument. In his helpful annotated bibliography at the back of *Order in the Offices*,<sup>85</sup> he notes that Dabney is a man that is claimed by two office advocates, “but in reality his view is much closer to a classic three-office position.”<sup>86</sup> Brown notes the divide in opinion amongst some in the Reformed camp as to whether there should be ruling elders, or if there should just strictly be two offices

79. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.145–146.

80. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.148–149.

81. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.149–150.

82. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.150–152.

83. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.153–154.

84. Dabney, “Theories of the Eldership,” *Discussions*, 2.155–157.

85. Mark R. Brown, *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, 1st U.S. ed edition (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993).

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

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**Editorial. Continued from Page 2.**

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

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

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

JONATHAN LAIR MASTER (on behalf of the editors) ■

**Whither Robert Lewis Dabney. Continued from Page 10.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

nature of the Repertory's disparagement of Thornwell's view. Over against the Repertory, Dabney invokes a Thornwellian defense, incorporating both the ruling elder and the preaching elder as both members of the same office: "Well, then, let us state it thus: 'There is one class of presbyters embracing two orders, the preaching elder and the ruling elder.' Where, now, is the objection? This supposition shows that, even if it had any correctness, it would be merely a verbal quibble."<sup>95</sup> To this author, Dabney seems firmly within the camp of the two-office proponents. If he is, as Brown intimates, actually advocating a three-office view, he would seem to be doing so unintentionally or non-consciously.

In any event, Brown's argument is a line of thought in Dabney scholarship that is relevant and warrants the attention of readers and those with more than a passing interest in Dabney, Presbyterian church polity, and the distinctives of Southern Presbyterianism.

#### CONCLUSION

There can be little doubt that Dabney is widely regarded for his towering intellect, incisive analysis, and thorough-going loyalty to confessional Reformed and Presbyterian theological commitments. He is admired for his contributions to nineteenth century dogmatics. His Systematic Theology, while being largely the work of transcription thanks to the efforts of diligent students, is still widely read, its insights availed by many. His works on education (and theological education in particular) continue to enjoy extensive readership and appreciation. But his tenure as a professor of dogmatics reflects only the latter portion of his service at Union Seminary. His earlier years in service as a professor of Church History and Polity were not unremarkable, and his published writings on these subjects continue to serve the church with their tightly-reasoned arguments, biblical rationale, and thoughtful analysis. Surely this is why many of his writings continue to enjoy widespread consultation and have ongoing relevance to the church some 125 years after his death. Dabney's view that ecclesiastical history is the "crown jewel" of theological studies and in a seminary's curriculum is a view not likely shared by many in our day, but one which is worth serious consideration. And in the ongoing debates regarding the nature of church office and the way churchly office is expressed in the life of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, Dabney's thought continues to be relevant. It is not ground-breaking scholarship or fresh new theological insights which make Dabney's writings in these two subjects so useful, but rather his prowess of mind and pen: the thorough nature of his consideration (including the views of his opponents), the logic of his reasoning, and the unexpectedly succinct manner by which he

is able to give treatment to such a vast topic in a way that is surprisingly accessible, comprehensive, and, at the same time, intellectually formidable.

One can hope that Dabney's writings on church history and polity will continue to inspire future generations to take up the noble cause of serious attention to biblical church government, and, perhaps not a few might come to see the great dividends that are rendered when one views historical theology as that "crown jewel" of theological studies!■

#### Mandate or Warrant? Continued from Page 156.

according to the law of our fathers." Under the famous Jewish rabbinical doctor Gamaliel, Paul studied, learned, practiced, and championed the teaching of the sect of the Pharisees and their scribes. In the following chapter, recording the next day's proceedings of Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin, he proclaimed, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6b). Likewise, he wrote to the Church in Philippi, "If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:4b-6). The profile of himself that Paul reported is characterized by fervent zeal for his "school." Prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus recorded in Acts 9, Paul was a model student and alumnus of the school of Gamaliel. However, like the many relationships which existed within the band of disciples who followed Jesus, the example of Paul's relationship to Gamaliel is a far cry from modern-day grade schools, being more akin to seminaries, internship experiences, apprenticeships, or perhaps certain types of undergraduate education.<sup>66</sup> As intimated above in the observations of Dabney, Machen, and others, the home is the only setting biblically mandated for the education of children. However, the absence of a biblical mandate for extrafamilial schools does not entail a prohibition against Christian schools. On the contrary, prudential considerations may warrant the family's enlistment of assistance from Christian schools to fulfill the biblical mandate for Christian education.

#### CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset of this essay, there is no explicit or inferential biblical mandate for Christian schooling. However, there is a clear biblical mandate for Christian education ensured by and radiating out from the Christian home. Parents have the option of taking on the challenging—but rewarding—task of providing formal education to their children in the setting of the home. There are more resources and "helps"

95. Dabney, "Theories of the Eldership," *Discussions*, 2:133.

66. See Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*, p. 200.