

## Neither Mysticism Nor Activism: Robert L. Dabney’s “Meditation a Means of Grace”

By Peter Sanlon

### INTRODUCTION

Neither our culture nor our churches tend to encourage meditation. We favor the rapid acquisition of information and the efficient discharge of business. Those of a more contemplative disposition might, one could be forgiven for assuming, find their outlook more readily provided for in Roman Catholic or High Anglican contexts.

Yet there are Bible verses that suggest we who revere Scripture as our ultimate authority should have a theology and practice of meditation. The psalmist wrote of the true believer in Psalm 1:2: “His delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”<sup>1</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney’s article ‘*Meditation a Means of Grace*’ makes a strong argument for the necessity of meditation in Reformed believers’ lives. He enters into the reasons his culture tended to fear or deprecate meditation and analyzes the nature of meditation with both exegetical and systematic theological reasoning.

Dabney’s short article repays analysis. Not only is the topic a needful one today—Dabney’s warnings about the dangers of an activist church are still relevant—but the article also demonstrates a manner of reasoning and exploring objections and misunderstandings from which we can learn. Our study exposes the structure of Dabney’s analyses and shows us how he used Scripture and rationality to commend the vital practice of Christian meditation. If this article seeks to model how to read a theological contribution from a previous era, it must be acknowledged that some would argue we should not study or commend the writings of Dabney at all due to his well-reported views on the slavery and race issue—an issue of grave moral importance which he spoke about in his lifetime. Many theologians we benefit from today, who lived in earlier centuries, expressed views about race and slavery—indeed acted on them—we reject as unscriptural and sinful. No less men than George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Martin

Luther can credibly be shown to have fallen short of scriptural teaching on these matters. We should not refuse to learn anything from men who have greatly erred. Instead, we ought to be discerning in evaluating what they wrote. To be sure, Dabney’s words about slavery and race ought to be rejected—as indeed his sub-scriptural presentation of the nature of the image of God in humanity. That said, this article seeks to help us read a theologian from a past era in a discerning way. On the topic of meditation, he has much of value to teach us. So, 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.

### SYSTEMATIC LOCATION

Systematic theology involves appreciating the integrated order of doctrines. God’s revelation of Himself is neither self-contradictory nor disproportioned. It is His Word and, as such, reflects His nature as being perfectly truthful, ordered, and rational. Given this, we understand and are better able to preach and defend any given doctrine when we see its dependencies upon, and connections to, other doctrines. The unified, interconnected nature of doctrines is a presupposition of systematic theology, arising from the nature of God and Scripture. It is the

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1. Cited in R. L. Dabney, “Meditation a Means of Grace” in *Discussions*, Vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 1982), 643–653. Henceforth, “Meditation.”

reason B. B. Warfield could proffer a “key to the ‘broad’ use of”<sup>2</sup> a range of New Testament terms used to describe redemption. It is the reason Bavinck urged that the articles of faith be “drawn from the entire organism of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> John Webster reminds us that the systematic nature of theology arises not just from the nature of Scripture but also from God Himself:

Systematic apprehension of the Christian gospel is necessary. Theological system is rendered necessary by the comprehensiveness and singularity of the object of Christian confession and praise. God is one; all other things are held together and have their several natures in relation to God and are known in that relation.<sup>4</sup>

Error and truth in theology are discerned in large part by examining the connections between doctrines. Definitions of doctrines and their usefulness for the church depend upon the relationships between doctrines as well as the content of any given article. Getting one part of the system out of proportion will inevitably have consequences for other doctrines. The importance of meditation and its embeddedness in the organic canopy of Christian doctrine is seen by the claim that misunderstanding meditation “implies errors fatal to almost every doctrine of revealed Christianity.”<sup>5</sup>

Dabney’s sensitivity to this vital aspect of systematic theology and desire to utilize it in his argument is evidenced by his claim that wrong views of meditation impact no less than ten areas of doctrine. These include:

1. Hypostatic Union of Christ
2. Vicarious Atonement
3. Covenantal headship of Adam
4. The Fall
5. The Soul
6. Sin
7. Regeneration
8. Sanctification
9. Resurrection
10. Glorification<sup>6</sup>

2. B. B. Warfield, “The New Testament Terminology of Redemption” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1970), pp. 474–475.

3. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Part 1, Ch. 1, par. 22.

4. John Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology” in *The Domain of the Word* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2013), p. 144.

5. “Meditation,” p. 644.

6. These loci are listed without numbering and at some points with differing terminology in “Meditation,” p. 644.

7. R. L. Dabney, “Hodge’s Systematic Theology” in *Discussions*, Vol. 1, pp. 229–281.

8. “Meditation,” p. 646.

Sadly, only a few of the ways wrong views of meditation—or lack of appreciation for it—impact these doctrines are developed in the article. A short article cannot say everything. Nevertheless, some of the lines of argument Dabney would have had in mind can be gleaned from elsewhere. For example, he discusses relevant aspects of the soul in his review of Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between meditation and sin, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification are all touched upon—the most significant space being given to sanctification and glorification. Even the fullest systematic theology cannot explore all connections between doctrines. The list, in this case, serves not to suggest the outlines of a full theology but rather to underline that the author was very aware that treatment of any doctrine required sensitivity to other connected loci. The lesson needs to be relearned by today’s church—many errors in thinking and practice flow not from flagrant denial of a doctrine but an undue isolating and miscasting of a doctrine. There is an ecology of doctrine to which we must be sensitive, even as we study or proclaim any one part of revealed truth.

#### ANALYSIS OF ERROR

Theological analysis inevitably requires the examination and explication of error. Whether in the reformed scholastic method typified by Turretin, or the polemical writings of Luther, exposing error is a vital aspect of faithful theology. Jesus himself stated alongside the positive claim of John 14:6 (“I am the way, the truth and the life”) a negative clarification: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” The negative clarification gives meaning, power, and vitality to the positive claim.

Dabney’s article not only explains and warns against errors that are presented using a particular rhetorical method. Two potential errors are explained as lying on either side of the reader. A precipice on both sides of the path: to fall into either is fatal. We are facing “the mistake of the two extremes.”<sup>8</sup> The value of this rhetorical approach is that the student becomes aware that his efforts will be futile if all that is done is guarding against one error. To avoid the error on one side only to unwittingly plunge into the other is still fatal.

The two extremes that must be guarded against are “mysticism” and “activism.” Both are analyzed and reflected upon, though more attention is given to the nature of mysticism. This does not suggest mysticism is the greater danger. The details of the argument show that activism is more readily understood, and there are (positive as well as negative) nuances to mysticism that require elucidation.

We shall now consider the twin dangers of mysticism and activism separately before observing how the twin errors combine to encourage many to misunderstand and dismiss the nature of genuine Christian meditation inappropriately.

#### NEITHER MYSTICISM ...

Within his article, Dabney uses three terms interchangeably: Mysticism, quietism, and reverie. The latter was a term of which Locke (quoted a number of times in Dabney's broader works) said, "When ideas float in our mind, without any reflection or regard of the understanding, it is that which the French call reverie."<sup>9</sup> At the time Dabney was writing, there was a widespread fear that young people might waste their gifts and be corrupted by daydreaming and laziness. Such tendencies we read were warned against in "current treatises upon education and morals."<sup>10</sup> We are not given any details of such books. Still, the observation of widespread fear of idle daydreaming clearly was present as it is not difficult to find examples from the period. So, for example, the *Educational Journal of Virginia* (1891) warns teachers, "Any tendencies to idleness must be instantly checked, the pupil being made to feel that there is just time enough, and no more, to learn the lesson assigned."<sup>11</sup>

Dabney questions and challenges the widespread assumptions of his culture that spending time contemplating and meditating is merely a waste of time or corrupting. He ponders, "was there ever a soul"<sup>12</sup> that went on to do great deeds that had not spent some time caught up in rapturous delight about the matters that concern him? Unwilling to simply and without analysis dismiss a mystical or contemplative approach to life, Dabney does proceed to argue that the way mysticism in the past became a strand of Christian practice was, in fact, deeply injurious to the true religion. He describes and criticizes the "ancient Mystic"<sup>13</sup> who felt that primarily "intellect, [was] the true personality of man."<sup>14</sup> The goal of life for such became "disengagement from matter ... by ... quietism and meditation upon God, assisted by solitude and those austerities which macerate the flesh."<sup>15</sup> Such would imagine that they are doing all this to be genuinely Christian:

To become Christ-like [would be to] suspend the life of sense, and exist only in spiritual reverie. The obtrusive glamor of the world must be shut out by the door of the hermit's cell. Animal joys must be forbidden to tempt the eye, the ear, the palate. The body must be subjugated by asceticism.<sup>16</sup>

Given the noted cultural fear of a contemplative posture to life at the time he was writing, doubtless, many readers could happily endorse the stinging critiques of meditation that open Dabney's article. He notes that there is something of universal appeal to contemplation, for it is practiced by all religions and has "tinctured the Christian Church in all ages" with a "sincere type of perverted piety." By means of examples, Dabney lists by name Thomas á Kempis, Gerson, Molinos, Madam Guyon, and Fenelon.<sup>17</sup>

No details of these authors are given, and today perhaps the only one whose writing is well known is Thomas á Kempis. John Gerson, by way of example of one of the less well-known writers, was born in 1363 and was a canon in the Parisian church. He died in a monastery in Lyons in 1429. His short book, *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Prayer*, was typical of medieval glorification of mystical spirituality. Via contemplation and retreat from the activity to life, readers were urged to seek higher spiritual encounters with God. "Let no one excuse himself from aiming at contemplation, kept back by negligence and a sluggish heart. The consideration telling us to tend to perfection should shame such. And let no one give up on the journey to perfection because he finds snares and temptations laid in the pathways."<sup>18</sup>

It has been the case, as Dabney argues, that a passion for contemplative spirituality has in every age of the church distorted people's grasp of doctrines such as sin, sanctification, and glorification. The mystical approach to religion imagines that sin resides primarily in the mind's valuing of creation—the practical matters of life which are good become viewed as sinful. Marriage, the body, food, sport—these and almost any other good gift from God can be railed against in favor of a contemplative retreat from daily life. Such an outlook can manifest in contemporary Reformed churches in a single-minded, exclusive concern for intellectual understanding. All that matters is understanding the truth of doctrine gleaned from a sermon or books. The wider realities of life and the worship service are disdained as

9. Locke, *Human Understanding*, II, xix (1695), cited in Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. XII, 821, entry for "Reverie." Spelling original.

10. "Meditation," p. 643.

11. *The Educational Journal of Virginia* 22 (1891): 56.

12. "Meditation," p. 643.

13. "Meditation," p. 643.

14. "Meditation," p. 644.

15. "Meditation," p. 644.

16. "Meditation," p. 644.

17. "Meditation," p. 645.

18. John Gerson, *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Prayer* (T. Richardson: London, 1884), p. 33.

unspiritual. Given that the mystical contemplative approach to religions is an ever-present danger for Christians, it is necessary that it be forensically dissected and held up to be seen as a fatal error. Dabney does this with vigor, but he clearly shows that the opposite approach to life—that of the activist—is an opposite but equally fatal error.

#### ... NOR ACTIVISM

Our culture today is very much one that favors activism. Many ministers think the key to church growth and faithfulness will be found in a technique, program, or methodology. Books on leadership vastly outsell books on doctrine, and for many, pragmatism is the guiding light.

That ethos is far from recent. Writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dabney said, “Both the philosophy and the practical temper of our age are in contrast with quietism.”<sup>19</sup> The energy, drive, and expansionary activities—to say nothing of the wars—of his age fostered a disdain for those who desired to spend time reflecting and contemplating on issues of significance. So, he observed that “our active temper . . . disdains”<sup>20</sup> meditation. A cultural preference for active pursuits was not something Dabney uncritically admired. He saw that the insistence that the only thing of import was results, actions, and activity resulted in a pragmatic outlook that distorted what study and contemplation was still engaged in:

This bustling and materialistic age has so perverted our habits, not only of business, but of study, that we value truth only for the excitement of its pursuit, or from some application to satisfy our material wants. Some have so misunderstood the spirit of philosophy herself as to glory in this groveling perversion as her chief honor.<sup>21</sup>

There is a spiritual malaise to any church or culture that only values the activities and results of effort. Dabney regretfully wrote, “Our whole tendency is not only busy and utilitarian, but sensuous and materialistic.”<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, society and the church do need leaders who are men of action—who aspire to do great deeds for

God and His glory. Dabney admired the indomitable will and incredible industry of Reformers such as Luther. He praised him: “Luther burst upon Europe as teacher, preacher, critic, poet, musician, statesman, ecclesiastic, polemic, patriot, and filled it with the din of his activity.” But it is surely significant that the famed activity of Luther, which reverberated down the centuries, flowed from a contemplative outlook. We must ponder the implications of the fact that “It was amidst the musings of a convent and the reveries of his prison at Wartburg that the fires of this will were kindled.”<sup>23</sup> Dabney’s point is that genuine, impactful activity in life and ministry flows from deep contemplation upon the issues that matter. The life of contemplation and the life of activity are not opposites, as most assume. They are organically related. The one flows from the other.

While warning that activism and contemplation are dangers to the Church, Dabney analyzes them and shows that the two outlooks are related to one another. Both have something in them that is commendable. They are both dangers to the Church when embraced uncritically and as practiced by the world, but neither is wholly wrong. Both postures have been compelling and attractive through all ages. So we need to grapple with the fact that “errors which have no elements of truth can have no vitality.”<sup>24</sup> The challenge Dabney seeks to meet is not merely to warn us of twin dangers but to commend an approach to meditation that retains what good there is in activism and quietism. So, we proceed to consider his view of Christian meditation.

#### MEDITATION COMMENDED

Dabney strongly urges the necessity of meditation. He wrote, “The Christian life must have its seasons of quietude and calm meditation. Too much of even a religious bustle is unwholesome for the soul.”<sup>25</sup> In our culture, we too have a great deal of the activist spirit. We see that there is much to do and understandably want to plan, organize, manage and lead vital projects. The bustle of secular life is often replicated in a religious church setting. We are blessed with an incredible array of academic tools to help us study and research Scripture. Still, the posture with which we approach God’s Word cannot be allowed to remain at the level of intellectual knowledge, vital though that is. So, we need to allow Dabney’s strong commendation of taking time to meditate on Scripture to change our attitudes and practices.

#### DEFINITIONAL CLARITY

Sadly, the twin errors of mysticism and activism feed

19. “Meditation,” p. 645.

20. “Meditation,” p. 646.

21. “Meditation,” p. 647.

22. “Meditation,” p. 645.

23. “Meditation,” p. 650.

24. “Meditation,” p. 645.

25. “Meditation,” p. 652.

off one another and combine to compel many to dismiss the value of meditation out of hand. The mystical tradition misrepresents the nature of true meditation and does so in a way almost calculated to be repugnant to an activist culture. "The Quietists represented the meditative habit as a passive state of soul; and our active temper, regarding it as such, disdains it."<sup>26</sup> We discover that exploring twin errors was not merely a rhetorical strategy for Dabney to make a middle path more appealing. It allows the interaction between the errors to be exposed. We learn that many undervalue meditation because the distortions involved in both errors combine to make meditation seem disdainful.

The positive doctrinal step taken to remedy this is to seek definitional clarity. The errors of mysticism and activism combine to give many a false understanding of meditation. The contemplative approach they reject is not genuine Christian meditation—a straw man has been rejected. So, the solution is to promote a fundamental aspect of definitional clarity regarding the nature of meditation: "I assert that true meditation is, in the best sense, active."<sup>27</sup>

Christian meditation is neither a useless nor a wasteful, passive inactivity. Instead, meditation is an active, purposeful, joyful, and infinitely valuable adoration of God. Such meditation can be practiced (imperfectly) in this life, and it is the supreme joy of the future age:

God himself is the uncloying object of meditation, full orb'd, many sided, of manifold and infinite perfection. Let men call the meditative Christian a dreamer. It were better for us to sleep in this world of sin and sense, if only we dreamed of him. I prove the excellence of this exercise of soul by the fact that it is the great characteristic of our heavenly state. The vision and fruition of God are a part of its bliss. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Matt. 5:8)<sup>28</sup>

Time spent seeking definitional clarity is of great value in theology. Establishing that meditation is active in its nature is a definitional insight of great worth. It enables it to be shown that common reasons for dismissing meditation are baseless. It also invites us to explore further what active impact and value meditation has for the believer. It is to that we now proceed.

#### USE OF SCRIPTURE

Dabney shows the power of meditation through his citation of and approach to Scripture. Having our beliefs and practices shaped by the Bible as our ultimate rule and authority is of vital importance to the Reformed

churches. So it is decisive that "the Bible, and especially the Psalms," call us to "meditation upon God and joy in his perfections."<sup>29</sup> No less than seven Psalms are cited in the article: Psalms 1:2, 4:4, 17:15, 39:3, 63:5–6, 104:34, 119:18.

The way an author uses (or ignores) Scripture is very significant. In his seminal study *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, David Kelsey set himself the task "to examine comparatively a variety of ways in which theologians have construed and use Scripture in the course of their actual practice of theology in order to help authorize their theological proposals."<sup>30</sup> Since that book, there have been a number of further efforts to self-consciously analyze how the Bible is used in theology. Paul Helm, for example, has been sharply critical of the widespread over-reliance on narrative models of Scripture in theology, pointing out that this has depreciated classical doctrines such as God's attributes.<sup>31</sup> Recently Katherine Sonderegger has argued that contemporary theologians do not pay enough attention in their writing to the foundational role in Scripture held by the Law and Pentateuch.<sup>32</sup> All this is to say that when seeking to read an article with understanding, we ought to regard not just what is claimed but the way Scripture is used to shape and validate claims.

Significantly, our article begins with a citation of Psalm 104:34 heading it. The verse is of particular importance to Dabney as he not only leads with it but also quotes it in the main body of the writing. Setting a verse like this in the heading of an article communicates a conscious desire of the author to submit all subsequent opinions to the Bible. A message of reformed commitment to Scripture's authority to judge and test all views is communicated to readers merely by placing a verse at the top of page one. The implicit acknowledgment of Scripture's authority is valuable because the introduction focuses not on exegesis but rather offers a poetic and whimsical reflection on reverie and daydreaming. Placing a verse at the top of the first page suggests to readers that even while talking about matters that appear removed from Scripture, and even while evaluating them at the bar of reason and experience (as Dabney

26. "Meditation," p. 646.

27. "Meditation," p. 646.

28. "Meditation," p. 648.

29. "Meditation," p. 650.

30. David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 2.

31. Paul Helm, *Faith, Form and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and its Postmodern Critics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014).

32. Katherine Sonderegger, "The Bible as Holy Scripture," *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. 31, 2 (May 2022): 127–141.

does). We are in due course to be recalled to the supreme test of all opinions: God's written Word.

Psalm 104:34 in the Authorized Translation reads, "My meditation of him shall be sweet; I shall be glad in the Lord." Such a comment describes the practice of meditation upon God as "sweet." That is, meditation on God is enjoyable and pleasurable. It offers a foretaste of heaven's joys. Time spent meditating on God trains our hearts to enjoy God more than the "fleeting pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25). As sweet meditation is commended in Scripture, believers are taught that mere intellectual understanding is sub-biblical when it comes to knowledge of God. The Authorized Version is a rendering of Psalm 104:34 full of affectional power. Some modern translations lack the affectional phraseology that made this verse so apposite for a study of meditation. The English Standard Version and New International Version both use the word "pleasing" rather than sweet. This word is more flat, unemotional, and lacks the sort of affectional pull that attracted Dabney's attention. It is also worth noting that modern translations (including the New American Standard Bible) specify that the psalmist's meditation is pleasing to God specifically. So, the NASB translates, "Let my meditation be pleasing to Him; As for me, I shall be glad in the LORD." A significant amount of Dabney's article focuses on the Christian's experience and pleasure of meditation; a point one can glean from the Authorized Version of his key text but not from other translations. So, we see that the placement, repetition, and rendering of a Scriptural text have significant implications for doctrinal analyses in a theological article.

While Dabney gives many arguments for the value of meditation to the Christian, ultimately, it is because "Scriptures ... teach the exercise of adoring meditation"<sup>33</sup> that he commends it. Reading the Psalms quoted in the article has a cumulative impact; we feel the weight of Scriptural testimony to the importance of meditation:

But his delight is in the law of the Lord;  
and in his law doth he meditate day and night. Psalm 1:2

Stand in awe, and sin not;  
commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Psalm 4:4

As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness:  
I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.  
Psalm 17:15

My heart was hot within me,  
while I was musing the fire burned:  
then spake I with my tongue. Psalm 39:3

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness;  
and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips:  
when I remember thee upon my bed,  
and meditate on thee in the night watches. Psalm 63:5-6

My meditation of him shall be sweet:  
I will be glad in the Lord. Psalm 104:34

Open thou mine eyes,  
that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.  
Psalm 119:18

Many today depreciate the citation of Bible verses, claiming that it is proof-texting. The assumption is that such an act treats doctrinal matters in an immature, simplistic, and reductionistic manner. This prevailing view is a misunderstanding that the Reformed reject. The Westminster Confession includes a vast number of Bible verses cited as proof texts. These are themselves part of the Confession. Those who hold to the Confessional Standards are obliged to uphold the doctrines there proved and the method of so doing. The rich history and value of so using Scripture has been defended in Michael Allen and Scott Swain's article "In Defense of Proof-Texting." They make a convincing case that proof-texting "historically has served a wonderful function of disciplinary symbiosis amongst theology and exegesis."<sup>34</sup>

Dabney's quotations from Psalms legitimize his doctrine of meditation and commendation of it. They invite readers into an experience of the pleasures and joys of the very meditation he writes of.

The way Dabney introduces and cites Bible verses is direct, plain, and clearly with the assumption that Scripture is authoritative. His citations are numerous, but they are not exhaustive. So he wrote, "This text, with its kindred ones, teaches us that the Christian life must have its seasons of quietude and calm meditation."<sup>35</sup> With this comment, Dabney shows that he is selecting verses that he knows reflect the tenor and wider content of the Bible. His quotations from the Bible gesture toward the rest of Scripture. Readers are implicitly invited to search the Scriptures for

33. "Meditation," p. 650.

34. R. Michael Allen & Scott Swain, "In Defense of Proof-Texting" *JETS*, 54, 3 (Sept. 2011): 589–606.

35. "Meditation," p. 656.

themselves and see that the doctrine of meditation outlined is to be found there also. Such an invitation underlies the manner in which Dabney cites Scripture. In some other articles he makes the invitation to search Scripture explicit. So, for example, he elsewhere concludes an article:

The best book to be read by him who is inquiring into the evidence of the Bible is the Bible itself. This is no paradox. There is a stranger who wishes to be received as a trustworthy person. He offers you certain testimonials from abroad which, he claims, will prove satisfactory when verified. But you, as a practical man, thrust them aside, and prefer to converse with the stranger himself. If you can do so frequently and intimately enough, to gain a thorough personal acquaintance of your own, you prefer to judge him for yourself. Thus do with the Bible. Search the Scriptures honestly and diligently, and you will find out whether they are from God, or whether they speak of themselves.<sup>36</sup>

#### USE OF TRUTH

Having relied much on citations from the Psalms, Dabney proceeds to make more comprehensive doctrinal arguments about the use Scripture enjoins we make of truth. Since new covenant believers have "a sweetness which the Psalmist could not taste,"<sup>37</sup> it is only right to expect doctrinal explication of meditation that goes beyond citation of Psalms.

So, it is argued that without meditation upon truth, we are unable to use truth. We are like a "miser"<sup>38</sup> who hoards up gold but cannot use the coinage for its intended end. By showing that meditation is necessary for the proper use of truth, Dabney allays activists' fear that meditation will be a gateway to idleness. In reality, it is only by meditation upon the truth revealed in the Bible that it so seeps into our souls that we are empowered by God's Spirit to act on it in real life. To show how desirable such action-oriented meditation should be, Dabney reflects on four impacts Christian meditation has on believers:

Firstly, meditation leads people to perform great deeds. We earlier mentioned Luther as an example Dabney gives. King David is given as a Scriptural model. He meditated on God's Words in his Psalm-singing and composing. This planted the Word of God deep in his heart, such that he felt compelled by great zeal for God's glory to act for God. King David was a "warrior, conqueror, legislator, busy founder of a polity and dynasty; he, more than any other inspired author, delighted in holy musings, and satisfied

his soul with midnight meditations, as with marrow and fatness."<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, the practice of meditation gives the believer great joy and pleasure. Against those who urge duty to be set against pleasure or who misrepresent the Reformed Faith as dampening of pleasures, Dabney urges that both Scripture and general human experience show us that meditation upon beautiful subjects brings happiness:

The habit of silent adoration is a fountain of happiness to the soul. "I will be glad in the Lord," saith the text. There is immediate pleasure in the sight of a material object of taste. We pause instinctively over a flower. We stand before a masterpiece of art, and crave leisure to enjoy it, deprecating analysis, criticism, and even converse, that the soul may silently imbibe the happiness of its perfection. When we look up, and see the moon walking in brightness, and the stars shooting their radiance from a stainless and unfathomable depth, we receive a spell of peaceful joy upon our hearts.<sup>40</sup>

The subject of Christian meditation is God himself. This grants even more pleasure than the lesser matters people tend to enjoy reflecting upon. "But most happy are we when our meditations are charmed by the beauty of holiness and our eyes filled with the perfections of God; for there are the transcendent glory and symmetry to satisfy the intellect, the taste, and the conscience at once. What thought can be as sweet and grand as that of the Christian's God."<sup>41</sup>

Thirdly, Christian meditation is a holy act. Other forms of meditation are merely intellectual or aesthetic. Since the believer meditates on a Holy God, the experience of so communing with Him is a holy devotion. There is an ethical, moral purity to Christian meditation that is unique to it. Our "divine object is the image of perfect moral beauty, the supreme object of moral complacency. And this is at once the highest and purest sentiment of the soul, in which reason and heart and conscience find their supreme satisfaction."<sup>42</sup>

Fourthly, meditation upon the holy God sanctifies

36. R. L. Dabney, "The Bible its own Witness" in *Discussions*, Vol. 1, pp. 115–131.

37. "Meditation," p. 652.

38. "Meditation," p. 647.

39. "Meditation," p. 650.

40. "Meditation," p. 650.

41. "Meditation," p. 650.

42. "Meditation," p. 651.

us. As we gaze by faith upon God, we are united to Him and changed by His Spirit. We become like that which we ponder. “The crowning good of a meditative spirit is that, as it dwells upon God, it is sanctified by its converse with” God.<sup>43</sup> Dabney observes that in heaven, Christians will see the Lord and through that vision be transformed to become like him. He quotes 2 Cor. 3:18 and 1 John 3:2 to support this biblical view of heaven often associated with Augustine.<sup>44</sup>

Having commended meditation as essential to a healthy Christian life, Dabney diagnoses some of the spiritual illnesses that arise from neglect of meditation. He notes that there is a kind of churchgoer who can only tolerate church if the service titillates intellectual vanity by means of a sermon that appeals to pride or curiosity. The only purpose of a sermon to such a listener is to increase their intellectual knowledge of the Bible. He jests of such listeners:

Had these men stood where Isaiah was when he heard the Seraphim proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory,” while the temple was filled with smoke, and the solid pillars of its door vibrated with the thunder of their tones, they would only have said in their hearts, “Well, what of that? We knew it before.” The triteness of such a doxology would quite have fatigued them!<sup>45</sup>

So, we see the essentialness of meditation for healthy Christian living and worship. The knowledge we glean from Scripture was never intended to merely satisfy academic curiosity. It should be pondered, prayed over—meditated upon—so that our hearts are warmed and changed by the spiritual reality of seeing Christ by faith. Meditation on God’s Word is a primary means of grace that the Spirit uses to sanctify our desires and shape our attitudes.

#### CONCLUSION

While mystics thought meditation would drive those who excelled at it to retreat from the world and live in solitude, the Reformed believer finds that meditation on God draws them into regular church fellowship—which equips them to live the following six days a week in the world for God’s glory. Meditation, as Dabney commended it, draws believers into regular church worship

and gives them a taste for the spiritual joys found in the ordinary means of grace:

Sacred meditation explains the delight which every true believer takes in prayer and praise. These acts of worship are sweet to him, because they are simple and direct acts of communion with God; because they present his perfections as the immediate objects of adoring thought and love.<sup>46</sup>

Union with Christ is the spiritual heartbeat and reality of our relationship with God. Meditation on all God is and all He has done for us in Christ is the practical means that the Spirit uses to press the sanctifying joys of heaven into our hearts. Shallowness in our spiritual experience leads us to not care for worship on the Lord’s Day. Without regular meditation on God and His Word, our intellectual knowledge and religious practice withers on the vine. “The indifference of the major part of men to these exercises shows how shallow and external is their religious life.”<sup>47</sup> Perhaps we should heed Dabney’s advice and set aside time to meditate on all that God is and all God has done for us. It could be what God uses to change our attitudes, actions, and churches at the deepest level possible. ■

43. “Meditation,” p. 652.

44. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 22, p. 29.

45. “Meditation,” p. 653.

46. “Meditation,” p. 653.

47. “Meditation,” p. 653.