

## “Make Men Do”: Robert Lewis Dabney and the Power of the Pulpit

By Russell St. John

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Lewis Dabney valued preaching. He preached extensively, trained seminarians to preach for nearly thirty years,<sup>1</sup> and published his mature thought in his *Sacred Rhetoric*.<sup>2</sup> During fifty-plus years of pulpit ministry, Dabney enjoyed a reputation for powerful preaching.<sup>3</sup> While he, like every flawed herald, often failed to implement his homiletical principles in his preaching,<sup>4</sup> his principles nevertheless profit contemporary preachers who will sit at his feet.

This article explores Dabney’s homiletical thought in two areas—the preparation of the man for the pulpit and the power of the message from the pulpit. Undergirding both lies Dabney’s bedrock conviction that preaching must occupy the highest throne among the duties that comprise a pastor’s work. Addressing his preaching students, Dabney stated:

I may claim, that as you come here to be made preachers of the gospel, and as its proclamation from the pulpit is to be your prominent task, all other studies are ancillary to this which we now undertake. It is sacred rhetoric which teaches you to apply to the lips of perishing man the expressed wine of all other acquisitions.<sup>5</sup>

Dabney thus contended that preaching forms the end toward which all seminary training must press and to which every pastor must devote his best labors.

Inasmuch as Dabney therefore strove to inculcate in his students a skillful sacred rhetoric, he nevertheless understood that the agency of the Holy Spirit represents the principal component of powerful preaching. He argued that the “word is only made effectual to the calling and sanctification of any rational adults, by the almighty inworking of God’s Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Though men must plant and water, “only God gives the growth,”<sup>7</sup> and Dabney noted:

Whenever the Spirit breathes, the icy bonds of spiritual death are dissolved, and the hearer’s soul is thus enabled to respond legitimately to its proper, spiritual inducements. Human skill in the work of persuasion must obviously be in strict subordination to this divine agency, and in strict conformity to its instrument, divine truth.<sup>8</sup>

While Dabney therefore described with care the human traits that commonly accompany powerful preaching, he attributed all spiritual fruit to its true source—the presence and power of God. Dabney recognized that “[t]he best minister on earth may be appointed by God’s secret purpose to the sad mission given to Isaiah, to Jeremiah, and even to their Lord during his earthly course, ‘to stretch forth their hands all the day long to a disobedient and gainsaying people.’”<sup>9</sup> It belongs to men to

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1. Dabney joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia in 1853, and taught preaching from the 1855–56 school year through the 1882–83 school year.

2. Robert L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric; Or, A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1870).

3. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 167.

4. See Russell St. John, *Empty Admiration: Robert Lewis Dabney’s Expository Homiletic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020).

5. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 19–20.

6. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 36. Here Dabney echoes the language of Westminster Shorter Catechism 88 and 89.

7. 1 Corinthians 3:7

8. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 239.

9. Robert L. Dabney, “Spurious Religious Excitements,” in *Discussions, Volume 3: Philosophical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996), p. 472.

labor faithfully, but to God to apply a man's labor as he sees fit. All the power is his.

#### THE PREPARATION OF THE MAN

##### Overview

No sermon descends from heaven like the thundering of the LORD's voice on Mt. Sinai. Rather, God speaks through human co-laborers,<sup>10</sup> and Dabney believed that human co-laborers require thorough preparation for the pulpit. As Dabney considered what traits *must* mark a man who stands prepared to preach, he emphasized piety, calling, and weaponry.

##### Piety

Dabney understood that sustained power in pulpit ministry proceeds from God's grace. Arguing that "it is grace which makes the preacher,"<sup>11</sup> Dabney equated divine grace with ministerial piety, speaking interchangeably about grace and piety. "The first requisite is *piety*. All Protestants are agreed that it is preposterous to set that man to expound the gospel who neither understands, nor loves, nor believes it."<sup>12</sup> Yet Dabney also asserted, "It is divine grace which makes the effective minister,"<sup>13</sup> while teaching that "[t]he prime qualification of the sacred orator is sincere, eminent piety."<sup>14</sup> Bringing together divine grace and the piety it produces in believing men, Dabney insisted:

In order to be capable of any power of persuasion, you must be men of ardent and genuine religious affections. You must be men of faith and prayer; you must live near the cross and feel "the powers of the world to come." We

must learn again the great truth that it is divine grace which makes the true minister.<sup>15</sup>

Sanctification, which is "the work of God's free grace,"<sup>16</sup> touches every believer, but after noting that piety must mark the life of "every common Christian," Dabney contended:

The pastor must rise far higher; he must exhibit a symmetry and elevation of Christian character, an exaltation above all carnal ambitions, which will make him venerable and lovely in the sight of his flock. Such a character clothes his instructions in a weight and sweetness which no talent or learning can give.<sup>17</sup>

Dabney maintained that the pastor's position as a herald of the King required piety, and he claimed that "no man who had not himself known Christ, and felt the powers of the world to come, could faithfully bear the responsibilities of a herald of that world."<sup>18</sup>

Dabney's understanding of unction in heraldry hinged upon the piety of the preacher. Far from simple passion, Dabney defined unction as that "temperature of thought and elocution, which the Spirit of all grace sheds upon the heart possessed by the blessed truths of the gospel."<sup>19</sup> No man under the influence of the Holy Spirit speaks from raw or uncontrolled emotion, for unction "does not expel intellectual activity, authority and will," but instead "superfuses these elements of force with the love, the pity, the tenderness, the pure zeal, the seriousness, which the topics of redemption should shed upon the soul of a ransomed and sanctified sinner."<sup>20</sup> Dabney therefore explained, "To affect unction is manifestly impossible. It is, in short, a quality not merely intellectual or sentimental, but spiritual. Although not identical to ardent piety, it is the effluence of ardent piety alone."<sup>21</sup> Apart from piety, no herald represents the King with the unction the King's message demands.

Dabney understood, moreover, that pulpit ministry often teems with discouragement. Fruit comes slowly, if at all. Men refuse the summons of the King. Congregants complain. The King's own subjects offer tepid obedience to their Sovereign. Preachers languish through seasons of doubt. In such circumstances, only a man of deep piety perseveres. Dabney thus noted:

No man is fit for the care of souls, except he is deeply imbued with scriptural piety and grace. He must have a faith firm as a rock, and humble as strong, with profound submission to the divine will, which will calm

10. 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1.

11. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 7.

12. Robert L. Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry?" in *Discussions, Volume 2: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1982), p. 32 [emphasis original].

13. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 260.

14. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 40.

15. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 250.

16. Westminster Shorter Catechism 35.

17. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 266.

18. The Dabney Collection at Union Seminary features seventeen boxes of material. Each box contains multiple files, and within each file reside multiple documents. The above quotation comes from Box 10, File 2, 2 Timothy 2:2, "Education Sermon for West Hanover Presbytery."

19. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 116.

20. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 116.

21. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 116–17.

him amidst all delays and all discouragements that God will bless his own word in his own chosen time.<sup>22</sup>

In short, piety insulates against the discouragements of the preaching office.

As Dabney summarized his understanding, he stated plainly that "only the eminent Christian can be an eminent preacher of the gospel."<sup>23</sup> Eminent personal piety, borne of divine grace, must mark those who preach, for piety represents the first, greatest preparation for pulpit ministry. No man who lacks it stands prepared to preach.

### Calling

Defining a call to ministry as a call to preach, Dabney asked, "What, then is a call to the gospel ministry? We answer, *it is an expression of the divine will that a man should preach the gospel.*"<sup>24</sup> Dabney noted that the reception of a man as a candidate for ministry under the oversight of a presbytery purposed to determine "whether he is fit for a preacher."<sup>25</sup> Preaching represents the primary outward and ordinary means of grace,<sup>26</sup> and Dabney consistently pressed the Church to identify, train, and send preachers into the harvest field.<sup>27</sup>

To that end, Dabney urged every pious Christian man to pursue a call to preach until Christ called him to a different vocation. While Dabney, of course, recognized that many pious men never receive a call to preach, he nevertheless expected all believing men to test themselves for ministry, in essence placing the onus upon the man to prove that he was *not* called to preach. Arguing that the Scriptures "plainly teach that the only condition of discipleship permitted by Christ to any believer is complete self-consecration to his service,"<sup>28</sup> Dabney remarked:

If a Christian man proposes to be a teacher, physician, lawyer, mechanic, or farmer, it must be, not chiefly from promptings of the world or self, but chiefly because he verily believes he can, in that calling, best serve his heavenly Master. If he hath not this consecration, we do not say he is unfit for the ministry only; he is unfit to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Arguing, "The truth is, the direct and main work of all secular professions is to save souls,"<sup>30</sup> Dabney urged every Christian man fully to consecrate himself to Christ and to pulpit ministry until clearly called to save souls by means of an alternate vocation:

[W]hile all Christians, of course, are not to be preachers, and while none should preach whom God does not call, in such a time as ours every Christian who can preach, should conclude that the *a priori* presumption is in favor of his doing so until the contrary is evinced.<sup>31</sup>

Inasmuch as Christians rightly fear a man who intrudes himself into the pulpit unprepared and uncalled, Dabney equally feared the opposite, arguing that "the danger is not only on the side of [a man] running uncalled, but also of tarrying when he ought to run."<sup>32</sup> He therefore asserted that "every true Christian on the earth, young and old, male and female, ought to feel, with reference to the work of preaching, that he would be glad to preach if God permitted him."<sup>33</sup>

Such permission only comes through the calling of the visible Church, and Dabney recognized that a call to preach includes both an inward and an outward component. A man's own sense of divine leading to the ministry represents the inward component, while the Church's concurrence represents the outward. Dabney believed that Christ, the Head of the Church, superintends calling through his Holy Spirit: "The full and certain call to the ministry is uttered by the Holy Spirit, both to the candidate himself and to the church"<sup>34</sup> Dabney thus taught that "God [will] make known his will to the candidate and to his brethren, not only through the medium of the Scriptures, but also of outward circumstances and qualifications viewed in light of the Scripture truth."<sup>35</sup> He encouraged men to lay more credit to the sober opinions of mature Christian brothers than to their own internal sense of calling, for "men are more often in the dark, by reason of self-love, concerning their

22. Dabney, "Spurious," 474.

23. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 117.

24. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 27 [emphasis original].

25. Robert L. Dabney, "Memorial on Theological Education," in *Discussions, Volume 2: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1982), p. 65.

26. Westminster Shorter Catechism 88 and 89.

27. In a sermon Dabney preached at Tinkling Spring Church on a "Day of Prayer for Colleges" (Box 8, File 1, Matthew 9:38), he urgently exhorted his congregation to pray for God to raise up harvesters for the mission field, and exhorted each young man in the congregation prayerfully to consider whether he was called to the ministry of preaching.

28. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 28.

29. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 28.

30. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 42.

31. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 41.

32. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 44.

33. Dabney, "What is a Call," pp. 33–34.

34. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 27.

35. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 29.

own characters, than their acquaintances.”<sup>36</sup> When, however, the inward and outward call aligned, Dabney believed that a man must answer this call as a call from Christ himself.<sup>37</sup>

When Dabney began teaching at Union Seminary in 1853, Presbyterians in America had employed a seminary model for pastoral education for just over forty years,<sup>38</sup> but over the course of that time, Dabney had observed the development of a disturbing trend, which struck at the heart of the Presbyterian practice of calling:

Presbyteries, because the seminaries profess to give a certificate of examination of a mature course of study, are far too much inclined to take for granted the candidate’s scholarship. As a matter of course, he who has his seminary testimonial gets his license. Where, in practice, is the instance to the contrary?<sup>39</sup>

Said plainly, a seminary degree essentially guaranteed ordination. This practice rankled Dabney, for he believed that the Church, and the Church alone, bore Christ’s authorization to call men to preach. He argued, “[T]he minister is God’s ambassador, and the sovereign alone can appoint such an agent.”<sup>40</sup> The visible Church, not the seminary, represents the divinely ordained mechanism through which the sovereign Lord appoints men to preach, and Dabney cautioned that no seminary degree should supplant the judgment of the Church. He even urged presbyteries regularly to reject seminary graduates for licensure, writing:

I am persuaded that one of the best things which could befall the cause of ministerial training among us, would be the constant rejection of a part of our applicants for licensure by the Presbyteries. If the worst qualified were remanded to seek more thorough preparation, it

would both infuse a more diligent spirit in our Seminaries, and increase the number of worthy candidates for the ministry.<sup>41</sup>

Dabney thus challenged presbyteries to perform their rightful work, and to examine men for fitness to preach, refusing to conflate a seminary degree with a true call to the pulpit.

More than the bane of slack presbyteries, however, Dabney perceived in lay-preaching a grave threat to Presbyterianism. He insisted upon an ordained ministry, arguing against the practice of lay preaching, which waxed popular among Methodists and Baptists. Addressing the “success” of D. L. Moody, Dabney recognized Moody’s gifts but also chastised him for refusing to hone his gifts by means of thorough preparation:

If his natural gifts, unassisted by ministerial training and sanctions, enable him already to surpass us, that is not the question. The question is, whether the gifted layman, with this training and ordination, might not surpass us a great deal farther in glorifying God? If he might, then he is solemnly bound to do it.<sup>42</sup>

Dabney therefore explained: “[W]e do not complain that [Moody’s] preaching is not good, but that it is not better,”<sup>43</sup> and he illustrated the infidelity of an untrained ministry by describing the actions of a burly lumberjack in the service of a master whom he loves:

He may be gifted by nature with a giant frame, so that with a dull and inferior axe he cuts more wood for the master in the day than another with his natural feebleness who has the keenest axe. By “putting to more strength,” he may even cut the average day’s task. But if, by grinding his axe thoroughly, he is able to cut even two days’ task in one, if he loves the master he will grind it. And even if his day is advanced toward the middle of the forenoon, if he finds that an hour devoted even then to a thorough grinding, will result in a larger heap of wood well cut by nightfall, he will stop at that late hour to grind.<sup>44</sup>

But Moody refused to grind.

Exposing in stark terms the question at issue, Dabney argued, “If [a] man is mistaken in supposing he has the gifts for lay-preaching, he should be stopped. If he really has them, then Christ thereby calls him into the regular ministry, either as a pastor or evangelist.”<sup>45</sup> Any man so called ought willingly to submit to a course of seminary preparation, for “[t]he man who is fit for a minister

36. Dabney, “What is a Call,” p. 32.

37. Dabney, “What is a Call,” p. 34.

38. Princeton Seminary began in 1812, while Union, Columbia, and others followed in the years and decades thereafter.

39. Dabney, “Memorial,” p. 59.

40. Dabney, “What is a Call,” p. 26.

41. Box 10, File 2, 2 Timothy 2:2, “Education Sermon for West Haver Presbytery.”

42. Robert L. Dabney, “Lay-Preaching,” in *Discussions, Volume 2: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1982), p. 86.

43. Dabney, “Lay-Preaching,” p. 86.

44. Robert L. Dabney, “A Thoroughly Educated Ministry,” in *Discussions, Volume 2: Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1982), p. 660.

45. Dabney, “Lay-Preaching,” p. 84.

will not refuse the additional labor for Christ, when he learns that it is requisite for his more efficient service of Christ."<sup>46</sup> Moody's refusal to submit to ministerial training, coupled with his hubris in assuming himself fit for preaching *without* the call of Christ through his Church, seemed to Dabney to disqualify Moody from the very office he pretended to hold.

Dabney believed Presbyterians could not "out-Baptist the Baptists" and should never attempt to do so. Lay-preaching, absent the oversight of the Church and without its call, militates against biblical Presbyterianism and "opposes the deliberate judgment of the wisest and best of our fathers."<sup>47</sup>

Dabney thus maintained that any man who sought to preach must own a call *from the Church*, proving his preparation to ascend a pulpit.

#### Weaponry

In 1869 Dabney wrote a "Memorial on Theological Education,"<sup>48</sup> presenting it to the General Assembly's Committee on Seminaries. In his "Memorial," Dabney noted that the Synod of Virginia had, in 1853, increased the "parochial duties" of students at Union Seminary, ostensibly to equip them with greater practical skills for parish ministry,<sup>49</sup> and he stated, "In my opinion, the attempt has been a failure and should be relinquished."<sup>50</sup> In explaining his view, Dabney likened the seminarian's work to that of a bladesmith who forges and hones a sword for combat:

No one can dispute that a practical knowledge of pastoral duties, and skill in preaching the gospel from house to house, are essential to the scribe who is thoroughly instructed to the kingdom of God. But it by no means follows that therefore the two kinds of preparation must, or can be, pursued together. A sword needs to be not only forged and tempered, but ground. Until the latter is done, it will not cut. Yet the smith does not therefore attempt to grind it while he is tempering it. The one process would spoil the other. So, the attempt to give thorough scholarship, and that to cultivate personal tact at the same time, have been found incompatible. A great deal has been said of the usefulness of green, awkward, impractical book-worms. Much of this is true; but I see no evidence that the awkwardness is produced or increased by the scholarship. The former defects are usually the consequences of natural traits of taste and temper, which thorough mental culture would rather correct than exaggerate. The rest of the cure must be effected, if at all, by the young minister's own experience

under the pressure of pastoral responsibilities.<sup>51</sup>

To Dabney's mind, pastoral experience, not the seminary, best cultivated pastoral skill.

Dabney therefore deplored any lessening of the theological and academic rigor of seminary education in favor of the inculcation of pastoral skills, believing that this ill-considered shift of emphasis forced young men to enter the ministry with a less honed, less useful blade. Asserting, "During the years which are intended for mental culture, this culture should be the main thing,"<sup>52</sup> Dabney urged the Church not to expect seminaries to produce men who possess mature pastoral skills, warning that such a course would necessarily produce men who possess immature theological opinions. Dabney rightly understood that men lose some part of their languages and theology after leaving seminary, that vocational ministry offers little time for theological or academic growth, and that a man naturally acquires pastoral skill over the course of his ministry. Seminaries ought then to stress theology, academic rigor, and mastery of the subjects of redemption, knowing that while pastoral skill will grow, theological memory will often fade.<sup>53</sup>

Dabney, moreover, noted that the Presbyterian Church serves an important and providentially ordained function among the churches of Christendom, writing:

Presbyterianism is providentially fashioned and employed to do for Christendom her own peculiar part. It is the conservative branch of the family of churches, checking the departures of all others from sound doctrine. It is the exemplar of scriptural organization. It is the sustainer of the more thorough education of both ministry and laity. And we assert that, constituted as poor human nature now is, it is entirely reasonable to expect that Presbyterianism cannot, in the nature of the case, both perform all these her peculiar functions, and also compete successfully for the largest and most promiscuous numbers.<sup>54</sup>

Arguing, "I assert that the strength, usefulness and respectability of the Presbyterian Church are chiefly due

46. Dabney, "Thoroughly Educated," p. 667.

47. Dabney, "Thoroughly Educated," p. 657.

48. Dabney, "Memorial."

49. Dabney, "Memorial," p. 66.

50. Dabney, "Memorial," p. 67.

51. Dabney, "Memorial," p. 67.

52. Dabney, "Memorial," p. 67.

53. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 264.

54. Dabney, "Thoroughly Educated," p. 656.

under God to her standard of education in her ministry,”<sup>55</sup> Dabney feared that any attempt to win greater numbers to the Presbyterian Church risked forfeiting the very strengths of Presbyterianism that made it so valuable to, and unique within, the visible Church on earth. Presbyterians must sacrifice strength of theology to gain strength of numbers, and Dabney assailed the madness of any such trade.<sup>56</sup>

For his own part, Dabney pressed upon the consciences of his seminary students their responsibility to redeem their seminary training by means of hard, focused work. Arguing that a preacher must possess “a real mastery of the theology of redemption,”<sup>57</sup> Dabney insisted, “It is the preacher’s business to be better informed than [the hearer] of sacred truth. If the religious teacher is not, he is unfit for his profession.”<sup>58</sup> Dabney did not require that every preacher display genius but only noted that “a fool has no business in the sacred office, whatever may be his zeal or his opportunities for training.” At the same time Dabney affirmed that “plain, manly good sense, inspired and dignified by true piety, will always come up to my standard.”<sup>59</sup>

To achieve this end, Dabney pressed seminarians to circumscribe their interests in service of their calling, contending, “In your own department, that of evangelical history and doctrine, you are sacredly bound to display such competency, such maturity of opinion, such faithful and honest research, as will make every fair-minded hearer respect your theological *dicta*.”<sup>60</sup> In a similar vein, James Waddell Alexander argued that each preacher must “heroically . . . determine to be ignorant of many things in which men take pride.”<sup>61</sup> While men of other vocations might enjoy the freedom to pursue a variety of interests, Dabney asserted that a preacher must proscribe ancillary interests, delving deeply into a narrow theological shaft:

55. Robert L. Dabney, “The Standard of Ordination,” in *Discussions, Volume 3: Philosophical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996), p. 562.

56. “What our church needs is a more faithful and strict execution of our rules by the presbyteries, instead of a degradation of them.” In Dabney, “Standard of Ordination,” p. 568.

57. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 264.

58. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 241.

59. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 265.

60. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 265 [emphasis original].

61. James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching: Classic Contributions to Homiletics* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009), p. 132.

62. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 265–66.

63. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 105.

64. 2 Timothy 2:15

65. The Westminster Confession of Faith attributes effectual calling

You need not pretend to talk agriculture, physics, politics, belles-lettres, fine arts, with the experts in the various branches of knowledge; but you may honestly avow, when they are the subject of conversation, that you have not judged it your business to master them, and may keep your mouth closed. Such an attitude is always respectable. But when the votaries of these arts and sciences approach the theology of redemption, show them that there you are master of them all. To do this, you need only constant and faithful study of your own department, and this, I repeat, it is your clear duty to bestow.<sup>62</sup>

Dabney expected preachers to wield a keen sword, and he saw no path toward it save the path of real theological mastery. A man prepared for the pulpit must possess weaponry fit for the task.

### Summary

Robert Dabney strove to fill Presbyterian pulpits with men thoroughly prepared to preach. He, therefore, required that every preacher display eminent personal piety, possess a true call from the Church to preach the gospel, and devote himself to the acquisition of theological weaponry fit for spiritual battle. To Dabney’s mind, no man bereft of these criteria stands prepared to preach.

## THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE

### Overview

Dabney nevertheless granted that thoroughly prepared men—pious men, called men, men owning real theological weaponry—can preach powerless sermons, and he therefore impressed on seminarians and preachers alike three foundational attributes he believed vital to every powerful message. Every sermon must demonstrate fidelity, eloquence, and ambition.

### Fidelity

Returning again to his conviction that “the preacher is a herald,” Dabney stated that “the first quality of the good herald is the faithful delivery of the very mind of his king.”<sup>63</sup> Fidelity to Christ, not merely in terms of pious personal devotion but also by means of “rightly handling the word of truth,”<sup>64</sup> grounds preaching in the “Word and Spirit,” in which spiritual power reside.<sup>65</sup>

Dabney recognized that a faithful herald translates,

interprets, and explains his King's message. Far from simply repeating the bald words of the King, a faithful herald makes the hearer understand the King's will. The preacher must therefore stand before the congregation as "an intelligent medium of communication," for "he has brains as well as a tongue; and he is expected so to deliver and explain his master's mind, that the other party shall receive not only the mechanical sounds, but the true meaning of the message."<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, "[I]t wholly transcends his office to presume to correct the tenour of the propositions he conveys, by either additions or change,"<sup>67</sup> for "the herald does not invent his message; he merely transmits and explains it."<sup>68</sup> Dabney therefore contended:

The text must be adopted and discussed only in the very sense which it had in the mind of the Spirit as he uttered it. The preacher has no concern with, and no right to, any other. . . . The propriety of my law is plain from the fact that the preacher is a herald, and that it is God's word which is committed to him as his instrument for the redemption of men. If his task is to deliver and commend God's message, what right has he to change it or to represent it as other than it is?<sup>69</sup>

Dabney excoriated any preacher who played fast and loose with the Scripture, charging, "The falsehood of that man is full of impiety, who, avowedly standing up in a sacred place to declare God's message to perishing souls, says that the Holy Spirit has said what he has not said."<sup>70</sup> Arguing, "Our business with [Scripture] is to commend God's own meaning in it—nothing more, nothing less, to every man's conscience in his sight,"<sup>71</sup> he asked, "Would you teach [your congregation] to revere the authority of [the] word?" and he answers, "Show them that you yourself revere it."<sup>72</sup> Anything less represents infidelity to the King.

Congregants instinctively recognize fidelity when they hear it, and Dabney cautioned his students against misrepresenting or going beyond the teachings of the text, stating, "The people roughly but accurately express [textual fidelity] by the phrase 'sticking to one's text.'" It is simply a strict fidelity throughout the discussion to the subject and teachings of the text.<sup>73</sup> This recognition, coupled with the preacher's charge from Christ to care for souls,<sup>74</sup> ought, Dabney believed, to make every man "intensely honest and prayerful in his study."<sup>75</sup>

A sermon, moreover, publicly teaches the art of biblical interpretation. Noting that "[a] prime object of pastoral teaching is to teach the people how to read the

Bible for themselves,"<sup>76</sup> Dabney exhorted his students to set an exacting standard:

It is the preacher's business, in his public discourses, to give his people teaching by example, in the art of interpreting the Word; he should exhibit before them, in actual use, the methods by which the legitimate meaning is evolved. . . . The pastor must teach his flock how to expound for themselves, by frequent practice in company with them.<sup>77</sup>

The pastor who brings textual infidelity, interpretive laziness, or exegetical deficiencies into the pulpit will soon see these faults reflected in the pews.

As a crucial component of the fidelity he required, Dabney taught that the person and work of Christ offers the interpretive key to the Scripture.<sup>78</sup> He exhorted faithful preachers to proclaim the Scripture in light of Christ's redemptive work. While contemporary preachers often refer to this manner of interpretation and preaching as "Christ-centered," Dabney described it as preaching with an "evangelical tone," explaining:

We cannot describe it better than in the words of the apostles, when they so frequently speak of their work as "preaching Christ" or "preaching Christ crucified." We do not conceive that they mean to declare, the only facts they ever recited were those enacted on Calvary, or that

(WCF 10.1) and sanctification (WCF 13.1) to the "Word and Spirit" and confesses that "the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word" (WCF 14.1). So also, in justification the elect "receive and rest on [Christ] and his righteousness, by faith" (WCF 11.1). Effectual calling, saving faith, justification, and sanctification therefore proceed ordinarily from the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in and through the Word of God.

66. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 36–37. Dabney looked to Nehemiah 8:8 for his pattern: "They read from the Book of the Law, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." Of Nehemiah's description, Dabney wrote, "We shall seek in vain for a more apt and scriptural definition of the preacher's work than is contained in these words." Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 23.

67. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 37.

68. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 36.

69. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 97.

70. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 97.

71. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 105–106.

72. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 160.

73. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 105.

74. Hebrews 13:17

75. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 98.

76. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 81.

77. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 81.

78. See Luke 24:27; 45–47

they limited themselves exclusively to the one doctrine of vicarious satisfaction for sin. The abstracts of their sermons, recorded in the New Testament, show that this was not true. But we find that these facts and this doctrine were central to their teachings. They recurred perpetually with a prominence suitable to their importance. More than this, they were ever near at hand, as the *focus* to which every beam of divine truth must converge. The whole revealed system, with its doctrines and duties, was ever presented in gospel aspects. The law, when preached as a rule of conviction, led to the cross. The law, as a rule of obedience, drew its noblest sanctions from the cross. Such being the method of inspired men, I would willingly define evangelical preaching by the term scriptural.<sup>79</sup>

To preach any part of Scripture as though it stood outside the interpretive lens of Christ seemed to Dabney to distort the meaning of Scripture itself.

Dabney therefore taught that fidelity in preaching requires not merely that a preacher proclaim the mind of his King from the text but that he do so in the light of the redemptive work of his King. No preacher guilty of infidelity should expect the King to bless his sermon with a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, fidelity stands as the first attribute of a powerful sermon.

### Eloquence

When modern ears hear talk of “eloquence,” we tend to think of exactly that which Paul forbids preachers to employ. We think of “lofty speech or wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1), “plausible words of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4), the “peddl[ing] of God’s word” (2 Cor. 2:17), “disgraceful, underhanded ways,” “cunning,” and “tamper[ing] with God’s word” (2 Cor. 4:2). But Dabney meant none of these things. Rather, he defined eloquence as “[t]he emission of the soul’s energy through speech”<sup>81</sup> or as “the soul’s virtuous energy through speech.”<sup>82</sup> Dabney believed that the piety of the preacher—his love for Christ and his sincere yearning for the souls of men—under the ennobling and

empowering influence of the Holy Spirit bursts forth in the sermon, overflowing in eloquent speech.

In the same way that a man can share emotional sympathy with another man, Dabney also noted that men share spiritual sympathy and that this sympathy of souls comprises the core eloquence. He clarified:

Eloquence is not the mere communication of a set of dry notions; it is a sympathy, a spiritual infection, a communion of life and action between two souls, a projection of the orator’s thought, conviction, emotion and will into the mind and heart of the audience. Nothing, therefore, is a true oration which is not a life, a spiritual action, transacted in the utterance.<sup>83</sup>

Note that Dabney insisted that eloquence takes place “in the utterance.” Because eloquence consists of a living communion between souls through the medium of *speech*, an elegantly written essay, no matter how spiritually rich, can never produce eloquence if read or recited to a congregation. Dabney’s peer, John Broadus, felt similarly, writing:

When a man who is apt in teaching, whose soul is on fire with the truth which he trusts has saved him and hopes will save others, speaks to his fellow-men face to face, eye to eye, and electric sympathies flash to and fro between him and his hearers, till they lift each other up, higher and higher, into the intensest thought, and the most impassioned emotion—higher and yet higher, till they are borne as on chariots of fire above the world,—there is a power to move men, to influence character, life, destiny, such as no printed page can ever possess.<sup>84</sup>

Dabney therefore derided those who preach from a manuscript, chiding, “Reading a manuscript to the people can never, with any justice, be termed preaching,”<sup>85</sup> and he referred to reading from the pulpit as an “indolent and slovenly practice.”<sup>86</sup> On the contrary, Dabney exhorted his students to speak face-to-face, soul-to-soul with God’s people:

The pastor should be recognized as one who affectionately hungers for the spiritual good of his charge. His admonitions should be received by them as the outpourings of a compassion which cannot be restrained. He sees the worth and danger of their souls in the light of eternity, and his eloquence is inflamed from the very altar of God.<sup>87</sup>

79. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 114–15 [emphasis original].

80. 1 Corinthians 2:4

81. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 32 [emphasis original].

82. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 33.

83. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 333.

84. John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York, NY: Sheldon & Co., 1871), p. 18.

85. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 328.

86. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 331.

87. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 266–67.

The man who cares deeply for his flock will speak eloquently to them, and his eloquence will heighten the mutual bonds of spiritual affection he shares with his hearers.

How then must a man prepare to preach? Far from suggesting that men "wing it," Dabney advocated for thorough preparation in the study, followed by extemporaneous speech in the pulpit. Dabney advised students who worried about forgetting crucial information while preaching, "Let not your minds concern themselves chiefly about the verbal dress of the thought, but about the thought itself. The clear and just conception will not fail to clothe itself in lucid words."<sup>88</sup> Teaching that "[l]anguage is only a medium for the transmission of ideas,"<sup>89</sup> he noted, "If you are truly masters of your thoughts, you will have no lack of correct words."<sup>90</sup> If you ask a man to tell you how he met his wife, he will not read from a manuscript, for he knows the story. If you ask him in six months' time to tell you again how he met his wife, he will use different words, but he will substantially repeat the same story. So also, when a preacher knows the *ideas* the text conveys, he will surely possess the right *words* to convey those ideas when the moment demands. Dabney therefore cautioned:

There is a most mischievous mistake as to the nature of good speaking. It is but unaffected, serious, perspicuous *talking*. That which is simplest is best. That language which presents the idea with the most transparent naturalness is in the best style. Who is there in his sense that cannot *talk* when he is interested? The man of plain good sense, whose mind is thoroughly informed with divine truth, and whose heart is instinct with divine love, will not fail to find words and utterance.<sup>91</sup>

Dabney thus encouraged his students to master their *ideas* before preaching and not to concern themselves with individual words or phrases, but to speak freely, soul-to-soul.

Illustrating the folly of the preacher who thinks about his speaking while he speaks, Dabney suggested that it is "as though the man who desired to rouse his sleeping neighbor from a burning house should bethink himself of the melody of his tones, while he cries fire."<sup>92</sup> Far from worrying about such melodies, Dabney taught his students that "[h]e who has the most numerous, just, and weighty ideas, in most natural order, and whose own soul is most fully possessed and penetrated with them, usually has the finest style."<sup>93</sup> The preacher who prepares well should not fear that he will speak well.

Dabney's counsel, then, bordered on simplistic: *Prepare thoroughly, then talk*. Noting that "[t]he truest art is that which is most natural,"<sup>94</sup> Dabney taught, "The more we can feel the love of Christ, and the nearer we can draw to the cross, the judgment, and the eternal world, the more we shall feel that all else than native simplicity and directness is out of place, and that all else is unnecessary."<sup>95</sup> Abhorring any attempt at verbal affectation or show or the false eloquence of mere rhetorical polish, Dabney insisted, "If we wish to strike a blow which shall be felt, we will not take up a bough laden with foliage. We will use a naked club."<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless, Dabney never set eloquence over against rhetorical training but instead taught that the latter serves the former.<sup>97</sup> John Broadus likewise noted that some men denigrate "rules" of rhetoric, speaking as if "they had been drawn up by would-be wise men, who undertook to tell, on general principles, how one *ought* to speak. But they simply result from much thoughtful observation of the way in which men *do* speak, when they really speak well."<sup>98</sup> Dabney agreed, stating that unless an objector to the use of rhetorical training "holds men's faculties [to] permit no employment of methods, and that their first untaught essays are necessarily their best, he must grant a legitimate art of sacred rhetoric."<sup>99</sup> Rhetorical training sharpens the tongue by sharpening the preacher's familiarity with words well-spoken.

Yet Dabney never conflated rhetorical skill with true eloquence, and he rejected any view of eloquence that amounted to the emotional manipulation of listeners. Instead, he exhorted his students to reach the emotions *only* through the intellect. Asking, "How shall the heart be reached except through the head?"<sup>100</sup> Dabney asserted that "no people can be formed into stable, consistent and righteous Christians without much doctrinal instruction."<sup>101</sup> He pointed to the example of the

88. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 280.

89. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 280.

90. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 337.

91. Dabney, "What is a Call," p. 37 [emphasis original].

92. Robert L. Dabney, "Simplicity of Pulpit Style," in *Discussions, Volume 3: Philosophical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996), p. 87.

93. Dabney, "Simplicity," p. 81.

94. Dabney, "Simplicity," p. 82.

95. Dabney, "Simplicity," p. 90.

96. Dabney, "Simplicity," p. 85.

97. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 16–17.

98. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, p. 25 [emphasis original].

99. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 17.

100. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 53.

101. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 55.

apostles, who were “always grounding their appeals to the heart on appeals to the mind.”<sup>102</sup> While men might respond emotionally to a passionate preacher as to any effective orator, Dabney cautioned that a preacher might “excite by the scintillations of his rhetoric” but “if he has not instructed them in divine truth, he has done nothing. A permanent religious effect is impossible.”<sup>103</sup> Sanctification only comes through truth,<sup>104</sup> and Dabney not only required preachers to employ eloquence in service of biblical truth but also cautioned that rhetorical skill itself offers no true eloquence but merely “scintillations.”<sup>105</sup>

No preacher whose rhetoric aims to serve truth rather than to supplant it and who shares an abiding spiritual sympathy with his flock, seeking their good through the Word, will fail of eloquence, for by his speech, he will commune soul-to-soul with those who hear him. For Dabney, this soul-to-soul eloquence represents the second attribute of every powerful sermon.

#### *Ambition*

Ambitions that deserve no place in the pulpit nevertheless churn in the heart of every preacher. Vainglory, the applause of men, fame, reputation, and the desire for a larger church, a more prominent pulpit, a book deal, or a place on the celebrity conference speaker circuit entice preachers’ souls. But as Dabney noted, a preacher “professes to stand between the living and the dead,”<sup>106</sup> and his ambitions must run in another direction:

He deals with the attributes of a jealous and majestic God, the destiny of souls to immortal bliss or woe, the tomb, the resurrection trump, the judgment-bar, the righteous Judge, the glories of heaven and the gloom of hell, the gospel’s cheering sound, the sacred tears of Gethsemane, the blood of Calvary and the sweet yet awful breathings of the Holy Ghost. The preacher’s mission

is to lay hold of perishing men, and by the love of the Redeemer drag them from the pit.<sup>107</sup>

What ambition, then, must animate the man who ascends a pulpit? He must strive to “drag [the perishing] from the pit.” Stating that the “object of preaching is the salvation of the soul,”<sup>108</sup> Dabney asserted:

The end, I repeat, of every oration is *to make men do*. But the things which the sermon would make men do, are only the things of God. Therefore it must apply to them the authority of God. If your discourse urges the hearer merely with excellent reasons and inducements, natural, ethical, social, legal, political, self-interested, philanthropic, if it does not end by bringing their wills under the direct grasp of a “thus saith the Lord,” it is not a sermon; it has degenerated into a speech.<sup>109</sup>

Preachers must not merely impart theological information, for a sermon must “make men do,” and Dabney insisted that “the aim of all rhetorical discourse is to produce a practical determination of the hearer’s will.”<sup>110</sup> Maintaining that “[t]he one ulterior end of preaching is the holiness of the hearer,”<sup>111</sup> Dabney noted that every sermon presses toward an end, either implicitly or explicitly, and he exhorted every preacher to cultivate a self-consciously holy ambition for his preaching, arguing, “The true minister must . . . have a desire to see souls snatched from hell fire, truth upheld, sin curbed, the happiness of true religion diffused, and the Holy Trinity glorified in the redemption of transgressors.”<sup>112</sup> This ambition *must* animate the sermon, for it animates the Holy Spirit, in whose power and by whose indwelling presence the preacher speaks. “Unless the preacher’s will is ardently directed toward this end, the salvation of the hearer, the main element of his power is lacking. But what is the direction of the will, save love for souls? And this is preeminently the spirit of Christ.”<sup>113</sup> Since the indwelling Spirit eagerly pursues the souls of men, the preacher through whom the Spirit would speak must likewise seek the fruit of salvation through Christ’s appointed means—preaching. Dabney thus challenged every preacher to conform his ambition to the ambition of the Holy Spirit.

Such ambition requires humility, for a preacher must set aside all self-oriented desires, and Dabney pleaded:

You must so hunger for the salvation of the souls before you, that you shall desire to make the effect of sacred truth fill them, to the exclusion of yourself. You must be willing to be nothing in their eyes, and to let your

102. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 55.

103. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 55.

104. John 17:17

105. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 55.

106. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 296.

107. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 296.

108. Robert L. Dabney, “The Gospel Idea of Preaching,” in *Discussions, Volume 1: Theological and Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1982), p. 595.

109. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 34 [emphasis original].

110. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 169.

111. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 238.

112. Dabney, “What is a Call,” p. 33.

113. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 40.

effect be everything. He is not the true preacher who sends his hearers home exclaiming, "How eloquent the minister today" ... But he is the true sacred orator, who dismisses them so possessed and overpowered by God, that they have forgotten the creature who was the channel of the truth.<sup>114</sup>

No preacher whose ambition for the sermon contradicts the Spirit's own desires should expect a "demonstration of the Spirit and of power"<sup>115</sup> to attend his sermon. Nor should any preacher expect the Spirit's blessing should he deviate from the spiritual purpose of preaching, and Dabney warned:

The appropriate mission for the minister is to preach the gospel for the salvation of souls. The servant who by diverging into some other project not especially enjoined on him, nor essential for him to perform, precludes himself from his allotted task, is clearly guilty of disobedience to his master, if not treason to his charge.<sup>116</sup>

On the importance of preaching the things of the Word and not of the world, Dabney stated, "God has reserved for our spiritual concerns one day from seven, and has appointed one place into which nothing shall enter, except the things of eternity, and has ordained an order of officers, whose sole charge is to remind their fellowmen of their duty to God."<sup>117</sup> But "when the world sees a portion or the whole of this sacred season abstracted from spiritual concerns, and given to secular agitations, and that by the appointed guardians of sacred things, it is the most emphatic possible disclosure of unbelief."<sup>118</sup> Surely "[t]he result of such a perversion of the pulpit is, uniformly, an outburst of corruption in the bosom of the nominal Christianity which is cursed by it."<sup>119</sup> And thus, Dabney noted, "[N]o wonder that when the appointed restraints of Gospel truth are withdrawn, and this ministrations of pride ... applied at the same time, the progress in depravity should be frightfully rapid."<sup>120</sup> Preachers must confine themselves to know nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified,"<sup>121</sup> protecting the pulpit from political, cultural, social, and "secular agitations."<sup>122</sup>

Dabney certainly understood the place of legitimate Christian concern for the course of nations and the public welfare. He conceded, "Christianity is designed to produce important collateral results on the social order of nations."<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, he argued that "these secular results are the minor, the eternal redemption of souls is the chief end of God in his Gospel."<sup>124</sup> He therefore advised:

[T]he only innocent way ... in which the minister of religion can further these secular results, is so to preach each man's own sins and redemption to him as to make him personally a holy man. When society is thus purified, by cleansing the integral individuals who compose it, then, and then only, will the social corruptions of commonwealths be effectively purged away.<sup>125</sup>

Preach Christ, and social transformation will follow. Preach social transformation, and progress in depravity will follow.

Dabney thus painted before the eyes of every preacher a picture of the work to which Christ calls and which must form the heart of the preacher's pulpit ambitions:

[Y]our work is far more than humanitarian: you are the messengers of that supreme and infinite God "of whom and through whom and unto whom are all things, to whom belongs glory forever and ever." You are the appointed instruments "to make known by the church the manifold wisdom of God unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places." To you is committed the honour, before men and angels, of that display made in redemption of the most sacred moral perfections of God. The sword of the spirit which you handle is two-edged: it kills where it does not make alive. The cordial which you offer to the lips of dying men is a "savour of death unto death" if it is not made a savour of "life unto life." The time and opportunity allowed you to rescue the perishing are both precarious and limited; for the objects of your zeal are "standing in slippery places," over the flames of perdition. The professed motive of your ministry is at once the most disinterested, tender, urgent and sacred by which a human soul can be swayed; for as the prospective woes which excite your compassion toward your fellow-men are the most frightful, the divine blood and grace which you exhibit are the most hallowed objects which man can conceive.<sup>126</sup>

114. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 260.

115. 1 Corinthians 2:4

116. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 41.

117. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 42.

118. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 42.

119. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 44.

120. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 44–45.

121. 1 Corinthians 2:2

122. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 42.

123. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 45.

124. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 45.

125. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 45–46.

126. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, pp. 23–64.

How can any preacher allow vainglorious ambitions to enter into a ministry such as this?

Holy ambition, to save souls and to “make men do,”<sup>127</sup> represents the third attribute of every powerful sermon.

### Summary

Fidelity, eloquence, and ambition—the preacher who possesses these Word-defined and Spirit-empowered attributes will not fail to preach powerful sermons. Dabney, therefore, exhorted his students to strive for a powerful preaching ministry, writing:

Let me impress you with the high responsibility of ascending the pulpit, and beseech you to form a lofty ideal. He who proposes to sway the souls of a multitude, to be their teacher, to lay his hands upon their heart-strings, to imbue them with his passion and will, makes an audacious attempt. But nothing less than this is true preaching.<sup>128</sup>

The preacher who cultivates fidelity to the King, eloquence as the communion of souls, and the very ambition of the Holy Spirit Himself to save the lost and sanctify the found will not fail to preach with divine power.

### CONCLUSION

Robert Dabney died in 1898, but one need not wonder what he would say to Presbyterians today. In the face of diminishing pastoral piety, lack of ecclesiastical clarity about the nature of calling, and the replacement of real theological mastery with soft “pastoral” skills, Dabney would surely insist, “What we most need is repentance, and not innovation.”<sup>129</sup> Without repentance, fidelity wanes, eloquence devolves into mere rhetorical flourish, and ambition wanders the path of worldly pursuits.

But repentance terminates in renewed zeal for Christ, and by *his* blessing, prepared men will proclaim powerful messages until Christ shall come again. ■

***In Brief: Scripture Prohibits Women Preachers, by Robert L. Dabney.***<sup>1</sup>

The argument, then, whether any woman may be a public preacher of the word should be prevalently one of Scripture. Does the Bible really prohibit it? We assert that it does. And first, the Old Testament, which contained, in germ, all the principles of the New, allowed no regular church office to any woman. When a few of that sex were employed as mouth-pieces of God, it was in an office purely extraordinary, and in which they could adduce a supernatural attestation of their commission. No woman ever ministered at the altar, as either priest or Levite. No female elder was ever seen in a Hebrew congregation. No woman ever sat on the throne of the theocracy, except the pagan usurper and murderess, Athaliah. Now, Presbyterians at least believe that the church order of the Old Testament church was imported into the New, with less modification than any other part of the old religion. The ritual of types was greatly modified; new sacramental symbols replaced the old; the temple of sacrifice was superseded, leaving no sanctuary beneath the heavenly one, save the synagogue, the house of prayer. But the primeval presbyterial order continued unchanged. The Christianized synagogue became the Christian congregation, with its eldership, teachers, and deacons, and its women invariably keeping silence in the assembly. The probability thus raised is strong.

Secondly, If human language can make anything plain, it is that the New Testament institutions do not suffer the woman to rule or “to usurp authority over the man” (See 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 11:3, 7–10; Ephesians 5:22, 23; 1 Peter 3:1, 5, 6). In ecclesiastical affairs, at least, the woman’s position in the church is subordinate to the man’s. But, according to New Testament precedent and doctrine, the call to public teaching and ruling in the church must go together. Every elder is not a public teacher, but every regular public teacher must be a ruling elder. It is clearly implied in 1 Timothy 5:17 that there were ruling elders who were not preachers, but never was the regular preacher heard of who was not *ex officio* a ruling elder. The scriptural qualifications for public teaching, the knowledge, piety, experience, authority, dignity, purity, moral weight, were *a fortiori* qualifications for ruling. “The greater includes the less.” Hence it is simply inconceivable that the qualified person could experience a true call to public teaching and

127. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 34.

128. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 344.

129. Dabney, “Thoroughly Educated,” p. 656.

1. Robert L. Dabney, “The Public Preaching of Women” (from *The Southern Presbyterian Review* [1879]:), *Discussions*, volume 2, pp. 102–114..



Briery Church in Briery, Prince Edward County, Virginia, was designed by Robert L. Dabney (then professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary) and built circa 1855. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston (1930–1939), Johnston Archives, Library of Congress.

not also be called to spiritual rule. Hence, if it is right for the woman to preach, she must also be a ruling elder. But God has expressly prohibited the latter, and assigned to woman a domestic and social place, in which her ecclesiastical rule would be anarchy.

This argument may be put in a most practical and *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) shape. Let it be granted, for argument's sake, that here is a woman whose gifts and graces, spiritual wisdom and experience, are so superior her friends feel with her that it is a blamable loss of power in the church to confine her to silence in the public assembly. She accordingly exercises her public gift rightfully and successfully. She becomes the spiritual parent of new-born souls. Is it not right that her spiritual progeny should look up to her for guidance?

How can she, from her position, justify herself in refusing this second service? She felt herself properly impelled, by the deficiency in the quantity or quality of the male preaching at this place, to break over the restraints of sex and contribute her superior gifts to the winning of souls. Now, if it appear that a similar deficiency of male supervision, either in quantity or quality, exists at the same place, the same impulse must, by the stronger reason, prompt her to assume the less public and obtrusive work of supervision. There is no sense in her straining out the gnat after she has swallowed the camel; she ought to act the ruling elder, and thus conserve the fruits she has planted. She ought to admonish, command, censure, and excommunicate her male converts, including, possibly, the husband she is

to obey at home, if the real welfare of the souls she has won requires.

The attempt may be made to escape this crushing demonstration by saying that these women consider themselves as preaching, not as presbyters, but as lay persons, that theirs is but a specimen of legitimate lay preaching. The answers are, that stated, public lay preaching is not legitimate, either for women or men, who remain without ordination (as was proved in this *Review*, April, 1876 [i.e., Dabney's "Lay-Preaching;" see *Discussions*, 2.76–95]); and that the terms of the inspired prohibition against the public preaching of women are such as to exclude this plea.

Let us now look at these laws themselves; we shall find them peculiarly, even surprisingly, explicit. First, we have 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, where the apostle discusses the relation and deportment of the sexes in the public Christian assemblages; and he assures the Corinthians, verses 2 and 16, that the rules he here announces were universally accepted by all the churches. The reader will not be wearied by details of exposition; a careful reading of the passage will give to him the best evidence for our interpretation, in its complete coherence and consistency. Two principles, then, are laid down: first, verse 4, that the man should preach (or pray) in public with head uncovered, because he then stands forth as God's herald and representative; and to assume at that time the emblem of subordination, a covered head, is a dishonor to the office and the God it represents; secondly, verses 5, 13, that, on the contrary, for a woman to appear or to perform any public religious function in the Christian assembly, unveiled, is a glaring impropriety, because it is contrary to the subordination of the position assigned her by her Maker, and to the modesty and reserve suitable to her sex; and even nature settles the point by giving her her long hair as her natural veil. Even as good taste and a natural sense of propriety would protest against a woman's going in public shorn of that beautiful badge and adornment of her sex, like a rough soldier or a laborer, even so clearly does nature herself sustain God's law in requiring the woman to appear always modestly covered in the sanctuary. The holy angels who are present as invisible spectators, hovering over the Christian assemblies, would be shocked by seeing women professing godliness publicly throw off this appropriate badge of their position (verse 10). The woman, then, has a right to the privileges of public worship and the sacraments; she may join audibly in the praises and prayers of the public assembly, where the usages of the body encourage responsive prayer; but she must always do this veiled

or covered. The apostle does not in this chapter pause to draw the deduction, that if every public herald of God must be unveiled, and the woman must never be unveiled in public, then she can never be a public herald. But let us wait. He has not done with these questions of order in public worship; he steadily continues the discussion of them through the fourteenth chapter, and he there at length reaches the conclusion he had been preparing, and in verses 34, 35, expressly prohibits women to preach publicly. "Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak" (in that public place), "but to be in subordination, as also the law saith. And if they wish to learn something"—about some doctrine which they there hear discussed but do not comprehend—"let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for women to speak in church." And in verse 37 he shuts up the whole discussion by declaring that if anybody pretends to have the Spirit, or the inspiration of prophecy, so as to be entitled to contest Paul's rules, *the rules are the commandments of the Lord* (Christ), not Paul's mere personal conclusions, so that to contest them on such pretensions of spiritual impulse is inevitably wrong and presumptuous. For the immutable Lord does not legislate in contradictory ways.

The next passage is 1 Timothy 2:11–15. In the eighth verse the apostle, having taught what should be the tenor of the public prayers and why, says: "I ordain therefore that the males pray in every place" (in which the two sexes prayed publicly together). He then, according to the tenor of the passage in 1 Corinthians 11, commands Christian women to frequent the Christian assemblies in raiment at once removed from untidiness and luxury, and so fashioned as to express the retiring modesty of their sex. He then adds: "Let the woman learn in quiet in all subordination. But I do not permit woman to teach" (in public) "nor to play the ruler over man, but to be in quietude. For Adam was first fashioned; then Eve. Again, Adam was not deceived" (by Satan), "but the woman, having been deceived, came to be in transgression" (first). "However, she shall be saved by the child-bearing, if they abide, with modest discretion, in faith and love and sanctity." In 1 Timothy 5:9–15, a sphere of church labor is evidently defined for *aged single women*, and for them only, who are widows or celibates without near kindred. So specific is the apostle that he categorically fixes the limit below which the church may not go in accepting even such laborers at sixty years. What was this sphere of labor? It was evidently some form of diaconal work, and not preaching, because the age, qualifications and connections all point

to these private charitable tasks, and the uninspired history confirms it. To all younger women the apostle then assigns their express sphere in these words (verse 14), "I ordain accordingly that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give no start to the adversary to revile" (Christians and Christianity). Here is at least strong negative evidence that Paul assigned no public preaching function to women. In Titus 2:4, 5, women who have not reached old age are to be "affectionate to their husbands, fond of their children, prudent, pure, *keepers at home*, benevolent, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled." And the only teaching function hinted even for the aged women is, verse 4, that they should teach these private domestic virtues to their younger sisters. Does not the apostle here assign the *home* as the proper sphere of the Christian woman? That is her kingdom, and neither the secular nor the ecclesiastical commonwealth. Her duties in her home are to detain her away from the public functions. She is not to be a ruler of men, but a loving subject to her husband.

The grounds on which the apostle rests the divine legislation against the preaching of women make it clear that we have construed it aright. Collating 1 Corinthians 11 with 1 Timothy 2, we find them to be the following: The male was the first creation of God, the female a subsequent one. Then, the female was made from the substance of the male, being taken from his side. The end of the woman's creation and existence is to be a helpmeet for man, in a sense in which the man was not originally designed as a helpmeet for the woman. Hence God, from the beginning of man's existence as a sinner, put the wife under the kindly authority of the husband, making him the head and her the subordinate in domestic society. The Lord said (Gen. 3:16), "Thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." Then last, the agency of the woman in yielding first to Satanic temptation and aiding to seduce her husband into sin was punished by this subjection, and the sentence on the first woman has been extended, by imputation, to all her daughters. These are the grounds on which the apostle says the Lord enacted that in the church assemblies the woman shall be pupil, and not public teacher, ruled, and not ruler. The reasons bear upon all women, of all ages and civilizations alike. Hence the honest expositor must conclude that the enactments are of universal force. Such reasons are, indeed, in strong opposition to the radical theories of individual human rights and equality now in vogue with many. Instead of allowing to all human beings a specific equality and an absolute natural independence, these Scripture doctrines assume

that there are orders of human beings naturally unequal in their inherited rights, as in their bodily and mental qualities; that God has not ordained any human being to this proud independence, but placed all in subordination under authority, the child under its mother, the mother under her husband, the husband under the ecclesiastical and civil magistrates, and these under the law, whose guardian and avenger is God himself. And so far from flouting the doctrine of imputation as an antiquated barbarism, these Scriptures represent it as a living and just ruling principle, this very day determining, by the guilt of a woman who sinned six thousand years ago, when combining with the natural qualities of sex propagated in her race, a subordinate social state and a rigid disqualification for certain actions, for half the human race. Between the popular theories of individual human right and this sort of political philosophy there is indeed an irreconcilable opposition. But this is inspired. The only solution is that the other, despite all its confidence and arrogance, is false and hollow. "He that replieth against God, let him answer it."

The inspired legislation is explicit to every candid reader as human language can well make it. Yet modern ingenuity has essayed to explain it away. One is not surprised to find these expositions, even when advanced by those who profess to accept the Scriptures, tinged with no small savor of infidelity. For a true and honest reverence for the inspiration of Scripture would scarcely try so hopeless a task as the sophisticating of so plain a law. Thus, sometimes we hear these remarks uttered almost as a sneer, "Oh, this is the opinion of Paul, a crusty old bachelor, an oriental, with his head stuffed with those ideas of woman which were current when society made her an ignoramus, a plaything, and a slave." Or, we are referred to the fable of the paintings of the man dominating the lion, in which the man was always the painter, and it is said, "Paul was a man; he is jealous for the usurped dominion of his sex. The law would be different if it were uttered through woman." What is all this except open unbelief and resistance, when the apostle says expressly that this legislation was the enactment of that Christ who condescended to be born of woman?

Again, one would have us read the prohibition of 1 Cor. 14:34, οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτέτραπται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν; "it is not permitted to females to babble." Some pretended usage is cited to show that the verb, λαλεῖν is here used in a bad sense only, and that the prohibition to a woman to talk nonsense in public address does not exclude, but rather implies, her right to preach, provided she preaches well and solidly. No expositor will need a reply

to criticism so wretchedly absurd as this. But it may not be amiss to point out in refutation that the opposite of this *λαλεῖν* in Paul's own mind and statement is "to be silent." The implied distinction, then, is not here between solid speech and babbling, but between speaking publicly at all and keeping silence. Again, in the parallel declaration (1 Tim. 2:12), the apostle says, *Γυναῖκι δὲ διδάσκειν οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω*, where he uses the word *διδάσκειν*; concerning whose regular meaning no such cavil can be invented. And the apostle's whole logic in the contexts is directed, not against silly teachings by women, but against women's teaching in public at all.

Another evasion is to say that the law is indeed explicit, but it was temporary. When woman was what paganism and the oriental harem had made her, she was indeed unfit for ruling and public teaching; she was but a grown-up child, ignorant, capricious and rash, like other children; and while she remained so the apostle's exclusion was wise and just. But the law was not meant to apply to the modern Christian woman, lifted by better institutions into an intellectual, moral and literary equality with the man. Doubtless were the apostle here, he would himself avow it.

This is at least more decent. But as an exegesis it is as unfair and untenable as the other. For, first, it is false that the conception of female character Christianized, which was before the apostle's mind when enacting this exclusion from the pulpit, was the conception of an ignorant grown-up child from the harem. The harem was not a legitimate Hebrew institution. Polygamy was not the rule, but the exception, in reputable Hebrew families; nor were devout Jews, such as Paul had been, ignorant of the unlawfulness of such domestic abuses. Jewish manners and laws were not oriental, but a glorious exception to orientalism, in the place they assigned woman; and God's word of the Old Testament had doubtless done among the Jews the same ennobling work for woman which we now claim Christianity does. To the competent archeologist it is known that it has ever been the trait of Judaism to assign an honorable place to woman; and the Jewish race has ever been as rare an exception as Tacitus says the German race was to the pagan depression of the sex common in ancient days. Accordingly, we never find the apostle drawing a depreciated picture of woman; every allusion of his to the believing woman is full of reverent respect and honor. Among the Christian women who come into Paul's history there is not one who is portrayed after this imagined pattern of childish ignorance and weakness. The Lydia, the Lois, the Eunice, the Phoebe, the Priscilla, the Damaris, the Roman Mary, the Junia, the

Tryphena, the Tryphosa, the "beloved Persis" of the Pauline history, and the "elect lady" who was honored with the friendship of the aged John, all appear in the narrative as bright examples of Christian intelligence, activity, dignity, and nobleness. It was not left for the pretentious Christianity of the nineteenth century to begin the emancipation of woman. As soon as the primitive doctrine conquered a household, it did its blessed work in lifting up the feebler and oppressed sex; and it is evident that Paul's habitual conception of female Christian character in the churches in which he ministered was at least as favorable as his estimate of the male members. Thus the state of facts on which this gloss rests had no existence for Paul's mind; he did not consider himself as legislating temporarily in view of the inferiority of the female Christian character of his day, for he did not think it inferior. When this invasion is inspected it unmask itself simply into an instance of quiet egotism. Says the Christian "woman of the period" virtually, "I am so elevated and enlightened that I am above the law, which was well enough for those old fogies, Priscilla, Persis, Eunice, and the elect lady." Indeed! This is modesty with a vengeance! Was Paul only legislating temporarily when he termed modesty one of the brightest jewels in the Christian woman's crown?

A second answer is seen to this plea in the nature of the apostle's grounds for the law. Not one of them is personal, local, or temporary. Nor does he say that woman must not preach in public because he regards her as less pious, less zealous, less eloquent, less learned, less brave, or less intellectual, than man. In the advocates of woman's right to this function there is a continual tendency to a confusion of thought, as though the apostle, when he says that woman must not do what man does, meant to disparage her sex. This is a sheer mistake. His reasoning will be searched in vain for any disparagement of the qualities and virtues of that sex; and we may at this place properly disclaim all such intention also. Woman is excluded from this masculine task of public preaching by Paul, not because she is inferior to man, but simply because her Maker has ordained for her another work which is incompatible with this. So he might have pronounced, as nature does, that she shall not sing bass, not because he thought the bass chords the more beautiful—perhaps he thought the pure *alto* of the feminine throat far the sweeter—but because her very constitution fits her for the latter part in the concert of human existence, and therefore unfits her for the other, the coarser and less melodious part.

But that the scriptural law was not meant to be temporary, and had no exclusive reference to the ignorant

and childish woman of the Eastern harem, is plain from this, that every ground assigned for the exclusion is of universal and perpetual application. They apply to the modern, educated woman exactly as they applied to Phæbe, Priscilla, Damaris and Eunice. They lose not a grain of force by any change of social usages or feminine culture, being found in the facts of woman's origin and nature and the designed end of her existence. Thus this second evasion is totally closed. And the argument finds its final completion in such passages as 2 Timothy 2:9 and verse 14. A few aged women of peculiar circumstances are admitted as assistants in the diaconal labors. The rest of the body of Christian women the apostle then assigns to the domestic sphere, intimating clearly that their attempts to go beyond it would minister to adversaries a pretext to revile. Here, then, we have the clearest proof, in a negative form, that he did not design women in [the] future to break over; for it is *for woman as elevated and enlightened by the gospel he preached* that he laid down the limit.

Every true believer should regard the scriptural argument as first, as sufficient, and as conclusive by itself. But as the apostle said in one place, that his task was "to commend himself to every man's conscience in God's sight," so it is proper to gather the teachings of sound human prudence and experience which support God's wise law. The justification is not found in any disparagement of woman as man's natural inferior, but in the primeval fact: "Male and female made he them." In order to ground human society God saw it necessary to fashion for man's mate, not his exact image, but his counterpart. Identity would have utterly marred their companionship, and would have been an equal curse to both. But out of this unlikeness in resemblance it must obviously follow that each is fitted for works and duties unsuitable for the other. And it is no more a degradation to the woman that the man can best do some things which she cannot do so well, than to the man that woman has her natural superiority in other things. But it will be cried: "Your Bible doctrine makes man the ruler, woman the ruled." True. It was absolutely necessary, especially after sin had entered the race, that a foundation for social order should be laid in a family government. This government could not be made consistent, peaceful or orderly by being made double-headed, for human finitude, and especially sin, would ensure collision, at least at some times, between any two human wills. It was essential to the welfare of both husband and wife and of the offspring that there must be an ultimate human head somewhere.

Now let reason decide, was it meet that the man be

head over the woman, or the woman over the man? Was it right that he for whom woman was created should be subjected to her who was created for him that he who was stronger physically should be subjected to the weaker; that the natural protector should be the servant of the *protégée*; that the divinely ordained bread-winner should be controlled by the bread-dispenser? Every candid woman admits that this would have been unnatural and unjust. Hence God, acting, so to speak, under an unavoidable moral necessity, assigned to the male the domestic government, regulated and tempered, indeed, by the strict laws of God, by self-interest and by the tenderest affection; and to the female the obedience of love. On this order all other social order depends. It was not the design of Christianity to subvert it, but only to perfect and refine it. Doubtless that spirit of willfulness, which is a feature of our native carnality in both man and woman, tempts us to him; feel that any subordination is a hardship, so that it is felt while God has been a Father to the man, he has been but a stepfather to the woman. Self-will resents this natural subordination as a natural injustice. But self-will forgets that "order is heaven's first law;" that subordination is the inexorable condition of peace and happiness, and this as much in heaven as on earth; that this subjection was not imposed on woman only as a penalty, but as for her and her offspring's good; and that to be governed under the wise conditions of nature is often a more privileged state than to govern. God has conformed his works of creation and providence to these principles. In creating man he has endued him with the natural attributes which qualify him to labor abroad, to subdue dangers, to protect, to govern. He has given these qualities in less degree to woman, and in their place has adorned her with the less hardy, but equally admirable, attributes of body, mind, and heart which qualify her to yield, to be protected, and to "guide the home." This order is founded, then, in the unchangeable laws of nature. Hence all attempts to reverse it must fail, and must result only in confusion.

Now, a wise God designs no clashing between his domestic and political and his ecclesiastical arrangements. He has ordained that the man shall be head in the family and the commonwealth; it would be a confusion full of mischief to make the woman head in the ecclesiastical sphere. But we have seen that the right of public teaching must involve the right of spiritual rule. The woman who has a right to preach, if there be any such, ought also claim to be a ruling elder. How would it work to have husband and wife, ruler and subject, change places as often as they passed from the dwelling

or the court-room and senate chamber to the church? When we remember how universally the religious principles, which it is the prerogative of the presbyter to enforce, interpenetrate and regulate man's secular duties, we see that this amount of overturning would result in little short of absolute anarchy.

Again, the duties which natural affection, natural constitution, and imperious considerations of convenience distribute between the man and the woman make it practicable for him and impracticable for her to pursue, without their neglect, the additional tasks of the public preacher and evangelist. Let an instance be taken from the nurture of children. The bishop must be "husband of one wife." Both the parents owe duties to their children; but the appropriate duties of the mother, especially towards little children, are such that she could not leave them as the pastor must for his public tasks without criminal neglect and their probable ruin. It may be said that this argument has no application to unmarried women. The answers are, that God contemplates marriage as the proper condition of woman, while he does not make celibacy a crime, and that the sphere he assigns to the unmarried woman is also private and domestic.

Some minds doubtless imagine a degree of force in this statement, that God has bestowed on some women gifts and graces eminently qualifying them to edify his churches, and as he commits no waste he thereby shows that he designs such women at least to preach. Enough has been already said to show how utterly unsafe such pretended reasonings are. "God giveth no account of his matters to any man." Does he not often give most splendid endowments for usefulness to young men whom he then removes by what we call a premature death from the threshold of the pastoral career? Yet "God commits no waste." It is not for us to surmise how he will utilize those seemingly abortive endowments. He knows how and where to do it. We must bow to his dispensation, whether explicable or not. The case is the same in this respect with his ordinance restraining the most gifted woman from publicity. But there is a more obvious answer. God has assigned to her a private sphere sufficiently important and honorable to justify the whole expenditure of angelic endowments—the formation of the character of children. This is the noblest and most momentous work done on earth. Add to it the efforts of friendship, the duties of the daughter, sister, wife and charitable almoner, and the labors of authorship suitable for woman, and we see a field wide enough for the highest talents and the most sanctified ambition. Does self-will feel that somehow the sphere of the

pulpit orator is more splendid still? Wherein? Only in that it has features which gratify carnal ambition and the lust for carnal applause of men. But let it be noted that *Christians are forbidden to have these desires!* Let, then, the Christian comply with God's law requiring him to crucify ambition, and the only features which made any difference between the private and the public spheres of soul-culture are gone. The Christian who, in the performance of the public work of rearing souls for heaven, fosters the ambitious motive, has deformed his worthiness in the task with a defilement which sinks it far below that of the humblest peasant mother who is training her child for God. Does the objector return to the charge with the cavil that, while the faithful mother rears six, or possibly twice six, children for God, the gifted evangelist may convert thousands? But that man would not have been the gifted evangelist had he not enjoyed the blessing of the modest Christian mother's training. Had he been reared in the disorderly home of the clerical Mrs. Jellyby, instead of being the spiritual father of thousands, he would have been an ignorant rowdy or a disgusting pharisee. So that the worthiness of his public success belongs fully as much to the modest mother as to himself. Again, the instrumentality of the mother's training in the salvation of her children is mighty and decisive; the influence of the minister over his hundreds is slight and nonessential. If he contributes a few grains, in numerous cases, to turn the scales for heaven, the mother contributes tons to the right scales in her few cases. The one works more widely on the surface, the other more deeply; so that the real amount of soil moved by the two workmen is not usually in favor of the preacher. The woman of sanctified ambition has nothing to regret as to the dignity of her sphere. She does the noblest work that is done on earth. Its *public* recognition is usually more through the children and beneficiaries she ennobles than through her own person. True; and that is precisely the feature of her work which makes it most Christ-like. It is precisely the feature at which a sinful and selfish ambition takes offence. ■