

# Robert Lewis Dabney on The Spiritual Nature of the Church



*by Dick Jones*



*“The provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other. The State is a natural institute, founded in the constitution of man as moral and social, and designed to realize the idea of justice. It is the society of rights. The Church is a supernatural institute, founded in the facts of redemption, and is designed to realize the idea of grace. It is the society of the redeemed. The State aims at social order; the Church at spiritual holiness. The State looks to the visible and outward; the Church is concerned for the invisible and inward. The badge of the State’s authority is the sword, by which it becomes a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well. The badge of the Church’s authority is the keys, by which it opens and shuts the kingdom of Heaven, according as men are believing or impenitent. The power of Church is exclusively spiritual; that of the State includes the exercise of force. The Constitution of the Church is a Divine revelation; the Constitution of the State must be determined by human reason and the course of providential events...They are as planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track the consequences may be as disastrous in the moral world as the collision of different spheres in the world of matter.”*

“Address to All Churches” by James Henley Thornwell, 1861

## **Prologue**

Several years ago this writer had the opportunity to ask Dr. Michael Horton if he agreed that the late, great Francis Schaeffer had awakened a sleeping Church. He replied, “Yes, but he woke up an ignorant Church, and that’s dangerous!” Schaeffer was a modern day prophet who had galvanized Christians to speak out on issues like abortion and other concerns vital to Christians. In his

response, he cited a problem more significant than the Church's pietistic slumber—its ignorance.

Nowhere is this ignorance more apparent than in issues involving the separation of church and state and religious liberty. Christians have little knowledge of history, and, as one wag suggested, evangelicals tend to think that church history began with Billy Graham. This means they have almost no basis for dealing circumspectly with church and state related issues. It also makes it virtually impossible for evangelicals to exercise discernment when listening to demagogues who solicit their political support while posing as sincere believers.

Nineteenth century Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney anticipated this when he warned that religious liberty in America may be lost one day. He did not believe that the Church was adequately equipping its people with a Christian world-and-life view, though Dabney would probably not have used that particular phrase. He wrote that Christians were becoming “ignorant of”...the ...“true basis and conditions”... necessary for “religious liberty to survive.”<sup>1</sup> At the core of the “true basis” for

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<sup>1</sup> Dabney, R.L. *The Practical Philosophy*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1984:394.

religious liberty is the belief in the spiritual nature of the church. According to Dabney and most Old School Presbyterians (at least until the War Between the States), the spiritual nature of the church was the *sine qua non* of religious freedom in America. It is the proper understanding of the spiritual nature of the church that allows for the healthy separation of church and state, which is the basis for religious liberty.\*

Some have supposed that an emphasis on the doctrine of the spiritual nature of the church results in a disengagement from social and cultural concerns. Dabney's life and work clearly refute such a notion. He believed that "Christians should 'carry (their) citizenship in the kingdom of heaven everywhere, and make it dominate over every public act.'"<sup>2</sup> His conviction regarding the "nonsecular nature of the church did not prevent Dabney from having a public voice on social issues...", but his priority always remained the spiritual condition of men.<sup>3</sup> When he did speak out on social and cultural issues, he did not speak from ignorance but from erudition and sanctified common sense.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucas, Sean Michael. *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2005:100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

The ancient Greeks referred to a citizen who refused to be involved in political and civil issues as an idiot, from the Greek *idios*, meaning *one's own*. The idiot is concerned only with his own personal peace and affluence (to repeat Schaeffer's oft-used phrase). Christians ought not to be *idiots*, and Dabney serves as a much needed voice from the past in this regard. He teaches us how we might be salt and light in the world without losing our saltiness.

## Introduction

Robert Lewis Dabney left his beloved Virginia for Texas in 1883. He had accepted a position with the new University of Texas at Austin. Dabney would occupy the chair of Mental and Moral Philosophy and Political Economy, a position allowing him to employ the depth and breadth of learning he had acquired over many years.

Shortly after arriving in Austin, Dr. Dabney purchased a lot “only two blocks from the University grounds and erected a commodious and tasteful cottage in which he (and Mrs. Dabney) lived” until 1895.<sup>4</sup> Today, this home, which Dabney gifted to the University of Texas, houses the office of the University of Texas Student Co-op. This writer visited the home a short while ago and found scant evidence that Dr. Dabney had ever lived there at all. On the mantle of an old fireplace there were, oddly placed, six or seven books that Dabney had authored. A young woman was seated at a desk nearby who, when questioned regarding why there were not plaques or memorials acknowledging the place as the former Dabney home, asked, “Who is Dabney?”

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<sup>4</sup> White, Henry Alexander. *Southern Presbyterian Leaders 1683-1911*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000:391.

Those few books, which had obviously never been used or read, were probably placed there to satisfy some bureaucratic stipulation that a semblance of evidence regarding the origin of the building had to be maintained. In any case, not one person in the building knew who Robert Lewis Dabney was. That would seem strange if it were not for the fact that, today, few Presbyterians and almost no evangelicals know much if anything regarding Dabney.

Dabney and his family lived in Austin for more than a decade. His work at the University of Texas was productive and their social lives were rich. “During this period, his great name and fame were among the chief assets at the Texas University.”<sup>5</sup> Among his closest friends during his time there were “Judge A.S. Walker, Governor Lubbock, ex-Governor Orin M. Roberts, Judges Gould and Clarke, Judge S. Taylor, and Dr. T. Wooten.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to his work at the University of Texas, he, along with Dr. R.K. Smoot, would found Austin Theological Seminary in 1884. Notwithstanding this, undoubtedly Dr. Dabney regarded his time in Texas as more or less a self-imposed exile. Late nineteenth century west Texas was still largely a frontier. To a man of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Lucas, *Dabney*, 14.

Dabney's educational attainments, it must have seemed even more so. Certainly Austin was not a cosmopolitan city such as might have been found in the East. Continuing dissatisfaction with the effects of Reconstruction on his beloved Virginia and disillusionment with Union Seminary had moved him to accept the teaching post at the University in Austin.

Robert Lewis Dabney was one of the foremost theologians of the nineteenth century. Much of his work had a prophetic orientation. He anticipated problems that would not become evident to many until almost a century after his death. One biographer wrote, "Dr. Dabney was a great man. We cannot tell how great yet...One hundred years from now, men will be able to see him better."<sup>7</sup> He was known for his absolute fidelity to Scripture and his ability to bring biblical truth and sanctified common sense to bear on cultural and social issues. It is difficult for most readers to objectively evaluate his body of work because his ideas continue to be provocative, especially in a day given over to political correctness. Nevertheless, those who seek to understand and deal with some of the most pressing societal

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

challenges of our day will find much of value in the life and work of Dr. Dabney. For example, in twenty-first century America there is a great deal of confusion over issues relating to religious liberty or freedom. Dabney wrote in this regard:

“You may deem it a strange prophecy, but I predict that the time will come in this once free America when the battle for religious liberty will have to be fought over again and will probably be lost, because the people are already ignorant of its true basis and conditions.”<sup>8</sup>

Evangelicals are apt to be just as ignorant in this regard as other Americans.

The old Southern Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the Church, which Dabney and others advocated, and which had been prominent in the Southern church until the middle of the twentieth century, established a basis for dealing with the tension between form and freedom so evident in church and state issues. In 1981, Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled *A Christian Manifesto*, in which he said, we “take our *form-freedom balance* in government for granted...there is form in acknowledging the

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<sup>8</sup> Dabney, *Practical Philosophy*, 394.

obligations in society, and there is freedom in acknowledging the rights of the individual.”<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer was writing to encourage Christians to recapture the consensus of the Northern European Reformation in contrast to a sub-biblical pietism that had come to predominate in evangelicalism. Dabney would have shared Schaeffer’s concern, but he would also have advocated that a clear distinction be made between the church and the state. This would ensure the balance between form and freedom of which Schaeffer wrote.

Schaeffer was addressing the Church’s abdication of its responsibility to be salt and light in society. Dabney was convinced that the confusion of church and state always led to Erastianism.<sup>10</sup> In that regard, they were dealing with different problems. Notwithstanding this, the balance of form and freedom was the concern of both Schaeffer and Dabney. The latter admitted that the doctrine of the separation of church and state developed later in the West. He wrote:

“The Protestant Reformation did not at first evolve the doctrine of religious liberty or separation of church and

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<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer, Francis. *A Christian Manifesto*. Westchester, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1982:25.

<sup>10</sup> Dabney, Robert Lewis. *Discussions, Volume III*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982:124.

state. The former was taught by Milton and John Owen, and the latter by Jefferson and Madison. Virginia was the first commonwealth in the world which, having sovereign power to do otherwise, established full religious liberty, indeed of toleration, with independence of church and state...”<sup>11</sup>

Dabney was here employing the principles of Scottish Common Sense Realism in demonstrating how theological issues are applied and understood historically and contextually.

Noted historian Philip Schaff, speaking on the “Church and State in American History” in 1888 said:

“Religion and liberty are inseparable. Religion is voluntary, and cannot and ought not to be forced...Such liberty is impossible on the basis of a union of church and state, where the one of necessity restricts or controls the other. It requires a friendly separation, where each power is entirely independent in its own sphere. The church, as such, has nothing to do with the state except to obey its laws and to strengthen its moral foundations; the state has

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

nothing to do with the church except to protect her in her property and liberty; and the state must be equally just to all forms of belief and unbelief which do not endanger the public safety.”<sup>12</sup>

Here Schaff is speaking implicitly on the necessity of the proper balance of form and freedom in regard to religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell also believed a “strict separation of Church and State” was essential to religious liberty. Notwithstanding this, according to Morton H. Smith, he “believed...the American people were essentially a Christian people” and saw no contradiction of his principles in encouraging the Confederate States of America to acknowledge Jesus Christ as “King of kings and Lord of lords” in its Constitution. In so doing, Thornwell was arguing for the acknowledgment of Christ as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, in principle not unlike the Founding Fathers’ frequent references to the Providence of

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, John F. & Drakeman, Donald L., ed. *Church and State in American History, “The American Theory and System” by Philip Schaff*. New York, New York: MJF Books, 2003:147.

God. Nevertheless, he was especially protective of the work and mission of the church. He wrote:

“The Church is exclusively a spiritual organization, and possesses none but spiritual power. It is her mission to promote the glory of God and the salvation of men from the curse of the law...The Church deals with men *as men*, as fallen sinners standing in *need of salvation*...Her mission is to bring men to the Cross, to reconcile them to God through the Blood of the Lamb, to imbue them with the Spirit of the Divine Master, *and then send them forth to perform their social duties, to manage society, and perform the functions that pertain to their social and civil relations.*”<sup>13</sup>

Not only does Thornwell iterate the true spiritual nature and purpose of the Church, he also expresses clearly what effect the proper spiritual nurture of Christians within the Church will produce—spiritually mature believers who act as salt and light in their respective spheres of influence. This is exactly what Schaeffer was after in his book, *A Christian Manifesto*.

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, Morton H. *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987:177.

## A Brief Biographical Sketch

Robert Lewis Dabney was born in 1820 in Louisa County, Virginia. His father was a planter of relatively modest success who died when Robert was only thirteen years old. The youngster would do his best to oversee their plantation of about 550 acres. According to biographer Sean Lucas:

“The plantation’s chief cash crop was tobacco, but it also produced timber, wool, and cotton. With his father’s death and his older brother’s general inability to help, Dabney ran the farm with assistance from his mother, her hired overseer, and their slaves...he...did the best he could during the 1830’s to manage his mother’s affairs, restore the property...and oversee the education of his two younger siblings”...and...”he had to teach school from 1837 to 1839.”<sup>14</sup>

Dabney had attended Hampden-Sydney College during the years 1836 and 1837. He entered the University of Virginia in 1839 and graduated with a Master of Arts in 1842.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lucas, *Dabney*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Leaders*, 383.

Dabney had been received as a member of Providence Presbyterian Church of Louisa County in the fall of 1837. He would enter Union Seminary at Hampden-Sydney in November of 1844. This was the beginning of a long and illustrious career as both minister and theologian.<sup>16</sup>

In 1846, he graduated from Union Seminary. In 1847 he began a pastorate at Tinkling Spring Church in Augusta County, Virginia. He remained there until August of 1853, when he was called back to Union Seminary to teach “church history and church government.” In 1859 he began to teach systematic theology. One historian of the Southern church declared:

“He was soon to become one of the most efficient expounders of the Calvinistic system of theology that our country has ever known.”<sup>17</sup>

He also preached regularly at the College Church at Hampden-Sydney.<sup>18</sup>

When the War Between the States broke out, Dabney served as a “chaplain of a Confederate regiment, the Eighteenth Virginia.”

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 385.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

He continued as chaplain for some time after the Battle of First Manassas. It was during this time that he became friends with the renowned Stonewall Jackson. He was forced to leave the chaplaincy due to illness, but later he and his wife hosted Mrs. Jackson in their home at Hampden-Sydney, deepening the friendship between the Dabneys and the Jacksons. This would lead to General Jackson offering Dr. Dabney the position of Adjutant and Chief Staff Officer at the rank of Major. He continued in this position until July of 1862, at which time illness forced his resignation.<sup>19</sup>

Upon Dabney's return to Union Seminary and the pulpit of College Church, he continued to write, applying his considerable scholarship to an ever-widening circle of disciplines. It has been written of him that he possessed "...a rare combination of scholarship, philosophical insight, and the power of continuous (consistent) thought"...giving him..."a worthy place among the foremost theologians of our country."<sup>20</sup>

As a preacher, Dabney was noted for being "relentlessly didactic" and "sublimely eloquent." Sean Lucas writes that "in

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 387-388.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 389.

keeping with the logic of the spiritual nature of the church, Dabney's preaching stuck fairly close to the 'spiritual' as opposed to 'secular' matters." He goes on to describe Dabney's overriding concern in his sermons "to drive sinners from their self-confidence by showing them the depths of their depravity, and to point them to salvation provided in Jesus Christ."<sup>21</sup>

Dabney and his wife Lavinia had six sons. Tragically, three of the six died in childhood of diphtheria. Watching their sons die of a disease that literally robs their victims of air as "the throat and air passages" slowly close off must have been excruciatingly painful for the couple. This afflicting providence was dealt with as it would have been by any other loving parents of small children, with broken hearts and the passage of time. But, Dr. Dabney also comprehended these painful instances of God's providence as being explained through the incarnation and "cross-work" of Jesus. He declared that "the Messiah is our complete theodicy!" For him "divine providence was saved through the penal substitutionary activity of Jesus".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lucas, *Dabney*, 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

Of Dabney's three surviving sons, Charles would become president of the University of Tennessee and Samuel and Lewis would both become practicing attorneys in Texas. He and his wife would live with one of these sons in Victoria, Texas following his forced retirement from the University of Texas, due in part to Dabney's blindness. He would die in Victoria on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1898. His body was taken back to Virginia for burial in the Old Union Seminary Cemetery, where his three young sons had been buried many years before.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Church and State Relationship**

The nature and boundaries of the visible church were preeminent concerns for Dabney. He explained:

“...Jesus Christ, as King in his visible kingdom, the church, has positively fixed, by his divine authority, some general principles of church government, so that, with regard to those principles, no body of Christians under

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 96.

heaven ought to claim any discretion of their own, or any pretext of polity, to depart from Christ's legislation..."<sup>24</sup>

Dabney was always a moderate in regard to the application of *jure divino* (divine law) as it pertained to any particular form of church government or polity. However, in regard to the purpose and parameters of the mission and work of the church, he was no moderate. He wrote that "the Bible contains guiding principles for church government of inspired authority; that it is the duty of all visible churches to follow these principles."<sup>25</sup>

The points above beg the question as to just what Dabney understood to be the purpose and parameters of the Church, especially as touching upon civil issues. He was consistent in his assertion regarding what ought to be the Christian's highest priority. He commented that "...man's spiritual interests are more priceless than his secular..." and that..."the church (is) the guardian of the former..."<sup>26</sup> As stated above, he maintained that the "church is exclusively a spiritual organization and possesses none but spiritual power...Her mission is to bring men to the Cross, to reconcile them to God through the Blood of the

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<sup>24</sup> Dabney, Robert Lewis. *Discussions, Volume II*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982: 121.

<sup>25</sup> Lucas, Dabney, 71.

<sup>26</sup> Dabney, *Discussions, Volume II*, 213.

Lamb...”<sup>27</sup> This is the essence of Dabney’s thought regarding the purpose of the Church.

Dabney was especially clear with respect to the parameters of the state, particularly in its relationship to the church. He wrote:

“The State is not, by its nature, either a spiritual or ecclesiastical institution, but a secular one...it is only a secular organism, appointed by God and Nature to realize secular order.”<sup>28</sup>

So his concern with the state was in its proclivity to usurp the prerogatives of the Church. He believed this could be seen in history, especially with regard “to church discipline.” He repudiated any semblance of Erastianism\*\* and believed that “any State establishment of religion must tend” toward this sort of usurpation. He cited Calvin’s Geneva as an example of this tendency.<sup>29</sup>

Another aspect of Dabney’s concern that the Church remain separate and distinct from the state involved its prophetic responsibility. He said:

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Studies*, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Dabney, *Practical Philosophy*, 398.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 400.

“When the State makes wicked laws contradicting the eternal principles of rectitude, the Church is at liberty to testify against them; and humbly to petition that they may be respected.”<sup>30</sup>

Insofar as absolute truth was concerned, or *true truth* (as Schaeffer would say), the church is obliged to hold the state accountable. In practical matters, the church must remain separate from the state. He encouraged church leaders to effectively instruct congregants in this regard, and that there is a “true line of separation and independence between the sphere which is spiritual (the church) and the sphere which is civil (the state),”<sup>31</sup> particularly in terms of functional and practical responsibilities.

Dr. Dabney did not believe the state held an authority which overrode that of other legitimate social entities, i.e. the church and family. He advocated the idea that the state had no authority which “God and nature” had not granted, just as He had to the Church and the family. All believers, indeed all men, were accountable ultimately to God for breaking God’s ordinances. In

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson, Ernest Trice Thompson. *Presbyterians in the South, Volume Two, 1861-1890*. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973:30.

<sup>31</sup> Dabney, Robert L. *Discussions, Volume V*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1999:278.

the instance of “erroneous beliefs...no human organization can justly usurp the individual’s responsibility to God...”<sup>32</sup>

The state, the church, and the family had very specific responsibilities and implicit, if not explicit, authority to carry out their responsibilities. Yet each entity ought to jealously guard its sphere of responsibility. This provides the wherewithal to maintain the distinctiveness of state, church, and family.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Church Spiritual—The State Secular**

In Dabney’s mind, it was not only prudent but absolutely vital that the Church be maintained as a separate and distinct entity from the State. The notion that the State ruled coterminously with the Church in the theocratic model was rejected by him out of hand. He wrote of the State:

“We discard the theocratic conception of civil government. The proper object of it is, in general, to secure to man his life, liberty, and property, i.e., his

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<sup>32</sup> Dabney, *Discussions, Volume III*, 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

secular rights. Man’s intellectual and spiritual concerns belong to different jurisdictions...”<sup>34</sup>

Dabney believed that the theocratic form of government mandated to Israel under the Old Testament administration of the Covenant of Grace had expired. He unequivocally declared, “theocratic institutions are done away.”<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Dabney understood the civil magistrate’s authority and power to be realized in “regulating and adjudicating all secular rights, and protecting all members of civil society in their enjoyment of their”...rights. He went so far as to enumerate three in particular—“taxation, penal sanctions and punishments, and defensive war.” He did not advocate absolute authority for the civil magistrate, but that “if the thing commanded by the civil magistrate is positively sinful, then the Christian citizen must refuse obedience...”<sup>36</sup> The “Church and State are distinct institutions...” and...“have distinct objects...,” Dabney maintained. He continued:

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<sup>34</sup> Dabney, R.L. *Systematic Theology*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985:869.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 874.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 869-870.

“The Church is to teach men the way to heaven, and to help them thither. The State is to protect each citizen in the enjoyment of temporal rights. The Church has no civil pains and penalties at command; because Christ has given her none; and because they have no relevancy whatever to produce her object—the hearty belief of saving truth...The Church bearing penal power, and being armed with civil pains, is utterly inconsistent with her spiritual character, her objects, and the law of Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

He could not have been clearer in his circumscription of the church and the state. He summarized his points with the explicit warning that any confusion of church and state was dangerous. He wrote:

“The ends of the State are for time and earth; those of the Church are for eternity. The weapons of the State are corporeal, that of the Church is spiritual. *The two cannot be combined, without confounding heaven and earth.*”<sup>38</sup>

Dabney believed God Himself ordained the clear delineation of church and state and that sanctified common sense required it. Yet Dabney’s understanding of church and state in no way

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 874-875.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 879.

encouraged believers to abandon their political and cultural responsibilities. Rather, the separation of church from the state provided the opportunity for the Church to gather its prophetic voice and speak to the issues of the day. The individual believer must exercise his particular calling, as God provides the opportunity. The Church would speak as one to all political and societal leaders, but as the people of God and not as a political entity. Each believer would be especially responsible to utilize the gifts, abilities, and insight that God had provided to him in order to initiate or sustain conformity with the eternal principles of God's kingdom.

Dabney was a prophet, teacher, and a preacher of the whole counsel of God. Those who ignore his sound teaching, especially in regard to issues relating to religious liberty and the spiritual nature of the Church, do so to their own detriment and to the diminution of the effectiveness of the witness of the Church to a dark and hurting world.

## Scottish Realism

Dabney's view of the spiritual nature of the Church and the separation of church and state were based first of all, upon his understanding of the clear teaching of Scripture. Notwithstanding this, he also believed that both were comprehended within the context of sanctified common sense. In fact, according to one historian, he believed "Scriptural revelation presupposed 'the authority of our rational, fundamental laws of thought.'" He posited the view that Scripture was the only infallible epistemological basis for knowledge, but that "the laws of reason" were, or at least ought to be complimentary to Scripture.<sup>39</sup>

In Dr. Dabney's *Syllabus and Notes of The Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, he wrote:

"I need only add, that I hold the Scripture to be, in all its parts, of plenary inspiration..."<sup>40</sup>

His high view of Scripture did not conflict with his Scottish Common Sense Realism but rather served to reinforce it. He and others within the Scottish Realist school of thought believed that

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<sup>39</sup> Holifield, E. Brooks. *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1978:87.

<sup>40</sup> Lucas, Dabney, 87.

“truth was one” or, as others have asserted, all truth is God’s truth. Sean Lucas explained that Scottish Realism formed “the furniture for his theological understanding and development.” It was “the commonsense assumptions of this school”...which provided the tools for his thoughtful defense of “the inspiration of Scripture.”<sup>41</sup> He and other “Scottish moral philosophers” believed that “truth was unitary” and consequently asserted that:

Natural and biblical revelation were ‘two books’ that pointed to the one true God.”<sup>42</sup>

For Dabney, Scripture and reason were not necessarily at odds; but in the instance of an apparent conflict between the two, reason was subordinate to Scripture.

The epistemological consequence of the Scottish Realist School was the belief that “ordinary people may gain accurate knowledge of the real world through responsible use of their senses.”<sup>43</sup> The “principles of common sense”...were... “universally knowable and in practice impossible to reject.”<sup>44</sup>

Dabney reflected a philosophical and theological perspective that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>43</sup> “Scottish Realism.” *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990:1061.

<sup>44</sup> “Common sense philosophy.” C. Stephan Evans. *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002:25.

had become predominant in conservative Presbyterianism in America during the eighteenth century. This dominance continued in Old School Presbyterian thought throughout the nineteenth century.

It was the Scottish Realist approach to understanding the world in which he lived that provided Dabney with the wherewithal to argue for constitutional principles. He would marshal ideas from various sacred and secular sources to be applied within the parameters of Scripture. For example, he cited “the teaching of John Hampden, Lord Fairfax, Algernon Sidney, Lord Somers, and the revolutionists of 1688,” indeed all of the old British Whigs, as formative of his thinking regarding the Constitution.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, Milton, John Owen, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had profoundly influenced his understanding of religious liberty. He was also aware of the ascendant Jacobinism in his day, especially in the Lincolnian interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. He wrote:

“We need not be surprised to find the Jacobin party claiming it (the phrase ‘all men are created equal’) in their

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<sup>45</sup> Dabney, *Discussions*, 112.

sense, that every sane human being has a moral right to a *mechanical equality* with every other in every specific privilege and franchise...”<sup>46</sup>

Yet it was his commitment to Scripture that provided him with the discernment to distinguish between truth and error. Jacobinism was incompatible with the immutable truths of Christianity. For Dabney, this was a matter of sanctified common sense.

Regarding the proper understanding of the state, he would cite various sources in addition to Scripture to support his contention that it was exclusively a civil rather than ecclesiastical entity. He explained:

“The state is not by its nature either a spiritual or ecclesiastical institution but a secular one”... “such men”...as...“Bishop Warburton, Dr. Chalmers, Macauley, (and) Patrick Henry”...“repudiate the (absurd) prelatial theory of the state, and hold that it is only a secular organization, appointed by God and nature to realize secular order.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 122.

Further, Dabney believed that “church establishment” hindered rather than facilitated the effective proclamation of the gospel. He wrote:

“Experience shows free and voluntary effort of the denominations, all wisely and equitably protected by the government, but left independent, will come nearer evangelizing the whole society than any other plan”...“the voluntary efforts of the denominations have done relatively more than any churches enjoying state aid in other lands.”<sup>48</sup>

His reference to “experience” clearly reflects his Scottish Realist epistemology.

### **Old School Presbyterians Split**

The secession of the Southern States in 1861 brought the issue of the spiritual nature of the Church to the fore. Dabney had expressed his opposition to secession in a letter to Dr. Moses D. Hoge in which he said:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 122

“...I consider Lincoln’s election no proper *casus belli*, least of all for immediate separate secession...”

He believed that:

“ministers, when acting ministerially, publicly, or any way representatively of God’s people as such should seem to have no politics”...and...”to act as peacemakers and mediators...”<sup>49</sup>

It was his intention to encourage his Southern brethren to continue to work toward reconciliation. But Dabney, along with other Southerners who were more or less pro-union, would have a change of disposition with Lincoln’s call of 75,000 troops to invade the South in response to Sumter.<sup>50</sup>

Old School Presbyterians of the North and South had been unequivocal about the spiritual nature of the Church to this point. Now, a split would occur, largely but not completely along geographic lines. At the General Assembly meeting in Philadelphia in May of 1861, a resolution was presented that

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume I*, 558.

<sup>50</sup> Monroe, Haskell M., Jr. “The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.” A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Rice University. Houston, Texas, 1961:102

would violate the principle of the spiritual nature of the Church and violate the consciences of those who continued to uphold it.

Dr. Gardiner Spring, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, recommended that a committee be established “to inquire into the expediency of the Assembly making some expression of their devotion to the Union and of their loyalty to the government.” This resulted in what came to be known as the Gardiner Spring Resolution. By a vote of 156 to 66 the General Assembly resolved:

“That in view of the present agitated and unhappy condition of this country, the first day of July next be hereby set apart as a day of prayer throughout our bounds...That this General Assembly...do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligations to promote and perpetuate, as far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage, the Federal Government in the exercise of all its function under our noble Constitution: and to this Constitution in

all its provisions, requirements, and principles, we profess our undivided loyalty...”<sup>51</sup>

Southern churchmen, including Dabney, could never accede to the resolution. It effectively required the repudiation of the Old School principle of the spiritual nature of the church. Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton understood this as well and, along with fifty-seven other Northern churchmen, submitted a formal protest of the resolution.<sup>52</sup>

This action at the General Assembly in Philadelphia led to strong reactions on the part of many prominent Southern churchmen. Renowned preacher Benjamin Palmer declared in regard to the Spring Resolution, “Never was there a clearer usurpation by the Church of the prerogative and function of the State.” Dabney said the “whole affair” was “the essence of popery.” No southern Presbyterian leader publicly supported the resolutions, and most charged that “religious men”...were...”delving into political matters.”<sup>53</sup> The consequence was the establishment of the Presbyterian Church of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 504.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Monroe, 108.

Confederate States of America. The Old School Presbyterians had split, and the precipitating cause was the North's repudiation of a core principle that had united them in the past.

### **Epilogue**

Robert Lewis Dabney was a man of God. He was an unapologetic Calvinist. He was a man of conviction who would never allow himself to be influenced by the *zeitgeist* of the moment, for he was wholly committed to the immutable truths of Scripture. Yet he was also a man who relied on sanctified common sense. This led him toward true conservatism in matters of ecclesiology, theology, philosophy, and political economy. Further, he was committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the reformed faith which it explained.

Notwithstanding the importance of the characteristics listed above, perhaps the most important doctrine Dabney offers contemporary believers is the spiritual nature of the Church. In a time in which believers and churches are tossed to and fro by the

exigencies of the moment, Dabney offers *gravitas* and ballast. A proper view of the spiritual nature of the church leads to a reasonable basis for the separation of church and state. Moreover, it provides an informed rationale for religious liberty. It is religious liberty which Dabney predicted would one day be lost in America due to the ignorance of Americans.

Following the War Between the States, Dabney often spoke prophetically regarding the challenges Americans would face in the future. His predictions and warnings were not the result of a miraculous *word of knowledge* but rather were the consequence of his commitment to and embrace of sound, reformed theology as understood and applied through the lens of Scottish Common Sense Realism. It is that same Scottish Realism that offers sanctified common sense today.

Robert Lewis Dabney was buried in a Confederate uniform. The headstone placed at his grave reads:

“Robert Lewis Dabney, Minister of the Gospel, Professor of Theology in Union Seminary, and of Philosophy in the University of Texas, Major in the Confederate Army, and Chief of Staff to Stonewall Jackson. “Prove all things,

hold fast that which is good.” In unshaken loyalty of devotion to his friends, his country, and his religion, firm in misfortune, ever active in earnest endeavor, he labored all his life for what he loved with a faith in good causes, that was ever one with his faith in God.”<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, “prove all things, (and) hold fast that which is good.”

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<sup>54</sup> Lucas, *Dabney*, 215.

## END NOTES:

\*Though the doctrine of the spiritual nature of the Church is not necessarily the same as the separation of church and state, it is the only firm and healthy framework in which a proper understanding of the relationship of church and state may thrive. Religious liberty is the consequence of the proper understanding of church and state relations. For the purposes of this study, the spiritual nature of the church will be more or less synonymous with the principles that conduce to religious liberty and the practical separation of church and state.

\*\*According to Elwell's *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, "Erastianism takes its name from Thomas Erastus (1524-85)." He "emphasized strongly the right of the state to intervene in ecclesiastical matters"...effectively giving the "civil magistrate" the authority to discipline church members for spiritual offenses.

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