

IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY

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IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY

Born, March 5th, 1820

Died, January 3rd, 1898

“Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good.”

The University of Tennessee Press
Knoxville,
1899

ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY—A SKETCH.

BY REV. DR. THOMAS C. JOHNSON.

[From Union Seminary Magazine, No. 3, Jan.-Feb., 1898, page 158.]

Robert Lewis Dabney was born in Louisa county in Virginia, on the 5th of March, 1820, of good old Hanover lineage. In June, 1836, he entered the Sophomore class, half advanced, of Hampden Sydney College. He completed the remaining part of the Sophomore, and the Junior course, and left the college in 1837. While at College he professed conversion and, after returning home in November, 1837, united with the Providence Presbyterian Church, James Wharey, pastor. He then taught a country school for two years. In December, 1839, he entered the University of Virginia, from which he graduated in July of 1842 with the degree of Master of Arts. He again taught a select private school for more than two years. In October, 1844, he entered Union Seminary in Virginia, took the full three years course in two years and was licensed to preach in May, 1846. He spent one year as a missionary in his native county, at the end of which time he was called to be the pastor of Tinkling Spring church in Augusta county. Here he performed for a considerable time the functions of the pastorate to a large church and those of the head teacher of a classical school. After a pastorate of over six years he was elected to the chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity in his *alma mater*, Union Theological Seminary, which he filled until 1870. Meanwhile, in 1869, he had been appointed Adjunct Professor of Theology, and he was made full Professor in this department in 1870. He continued to dignify this important chair until 1883, when owing to bronchial troubles he was warned by his physicians to seek a milder climate. Accordingly he accepted an invitation to the chair of Mental and Moral Philosophy in the University of Texas, at Austin, the capital of that state. This position he continued to fill with unflagging ability, notwithstanding the increasing infirmities of age and the total loss of his eyesight, till 1894. Since he retired from that position he has

given special courses of lectures at different institutions and has been active with his pen.

During his long term of service in Union Seminary he was for sixteen years co-pastor of the College church, with the Rev. Dr. B. M. Smith. During the same period he served Hampden Sydney College in a professorial capacity on occasions of need in that institution. In 1861, whenever his duties permitted his absence from the seminary, he was chaplain in the Confederate army, with the Virginia troops. In 1862 he was chief of the staff of the Second Corps under General Thomas J. Jackson. After the close of the war, during the period of utter poverty consequent on the great struggle, he rendered the people of his own section great service in taking effective measures for supplying bread. During his years at the University of Texas he taught with great ability a course on political economy every year, and practically founded and maintained for all those years the Austin Theological School. Throughout his whole ministerial life he gave valuable service to the church in her courts and on important committees.

He has been our most prolific writer. In 1855 he published the *Memoir of the Rev. Dr. Francis S. Sampson*; in 1857 he put forth, as editor, Dr. Sampson's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*; in 1866 he published his great *Life of General Thomas J. Jackson*; in 1867 his *Defense of Virginia and the South*; in 1870 his *Treatise on Sacred Rhetoric* (3rd ed. 1881); in 1871, *Theology, Dogmatic and Polemic* (4th ed. 1890); in 1875, *Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Examined* (new and enlarged ed. in 1887), *Practical Philosophy*, 1897.

We understand that there is to be at least one posthumous publication in book form. In addition, Dr. Dabney has been a constant contributor to our church papers and reviews. He has enriched by his contributions the publications of certain philosophical and literary societies. His *Discussions*, edited (and issued from the press in 1890 ff.) by his life-long and most intimate friend, the Rev. Dr. C. R. Vaughan, contain many of these fugitive productions in a more permanent form.

The last piece of literary work he did was the preparation of a brief sketch of the life of his teacher, colleague and friend, Dr. Sampson. He did this work on Monday the third of this month,

January. In the evening of that day he was seized with an acute illness and died, after four hours, at 11 P. M.

Hampden Sydney College conferred the degree of D. D. on him in 1853, and the degree of LL. D. in 1872. The General Assembly of the Southern Church made him its Moderator in 1870.

So far, a brief and most imperfect sketch of Dr. Dabney's life. To give an adequate account of his life it would be necessary to enter into a discussion of the general current of theological thought during the last forty years and portray him in relation to these currents. It would also be necessary to give an exposition of many contemporary philosophical systems and show how he stood toward those systems. It would be no less needful to refer to many material, political and sociological changes which have occurred in our country during the last fifty years. For Dr. Dabney, while a minister of the gospel, was also a citizen of his commonwealth, and a great christian statesman. He took a burning interest in all that vitally concerned the welfare of his country. He held profound views on political economy and statecraft, and set them forth with tremendous vigor. The lives even of most great preachers pass in such quiet that the historian finds little to dwell upon. What he says of one day's labor and achievements may be said of almost every other day. Such was not the life of Dr. Dabney. His life touched so many points in the common history of church and state and touched them in a way so unusual that it is impossible to give an adequate sketch in a few pages.

Hence we propose a much more possible task in the remaining portion of this paper, viz.: to name and illustrate briefly some of his more important mental and moral characteristics.

1. *Mental Characteristics.* He had acute and accurate and untiring powers of perception; a memory which held the gist of all he had perceived like a vise; a superb constructive imagination, and an active, subtle, profound, powerful and sagacious intellect.

His powers of observation, coupled with his interest in topographical studies, gave him a more minute and correct knowledge of a larger portion of the earth's surface than any other man with whom it has ever been our privilege to converse. This power was, we suppose, one of the reasons why General Jackson made

Dr. Dabney his chief of staff. And it perhaps saved one important battle to the Confederacy. For on one occasion when Dr. Dabney had been ordered off duty on account of sickness, he observed that one of the orderlies who had been entrusted with an important message by his general did not comprehend the order. He rode down the line after the orderly, ascertained that he had not given the message correctly, repeated it properly and so was instrumental in bringing up at a critical moment the men that were needed in order to turn the tide of battle. His accuracy and strength of memory for the gist of an event or a place and even for the more important details was a power that impressed itself on all about him. His natural gift was such that by a little cultivation he could have displayed a most luxurious and riotous fancy. He did not care, however, to quicken his powers of fanciful description, usually dignified with the name of imagination. But the power of the constructive imagination, the power which the inventor and the discoverer must possess, the power without which no man can be a real poet or a great literary artist, or even a framer of a great philosophical or theological system, that power he valued, and he was richly endowed with it. Evidences of it are seen to a greater or less extent in every work he ever wrote and they abounded in his oral teaching. The activity, profundity, subtlety and sagacity of his intellect is proven, not only by his voluminous writings, but by his whole history.

In point of intellectual energy and power we not only regard him as superior to every other man we have ever seen, but as having had no equal so far as history has had anything to say, in the whole history of christianity in this country. Thornwell was a genius; Charles Hodge was very learned and possessed a strong and massive mind. Archibald Alexander Hodge is supposed by many to have been his father's mental superior. Old Dr. Archibald Alexander has, by some of his admirers, been called the Immanuel Kant of North America. But for sheer mental might we suppose that old Jonathan Edwards was more nearly Dr. Dabney's equal. He founded a theology. He made a great name. He won a numerous following. But this was due in part to his peculiar teachings—his doctrine of identity, his doctrine of ability, and his theory of virtue. He changed too, some-

what, the theological system which he wished to defend. Dr. Dabney shows his great power while walking in old paths. He supports the system of the Westminster Standards without resort to such doubtful and ultimately insufficient, even if profound looking, shifts as those to which the great New Englander resorted. He cuts up Edwardsism by the roots. He shows that the shifts were untrue and to be repudiated. He again defends fearlessly our standards received from the great assembly at Westminster. And he gives new illustrations of his profundity and mental might by stating objections to certain doctrines more overwhelming than had before been stated; and by giving arguments of greater weight in behalf of the truth.

Nor are men of our own church alone in this judgment as to Dr. Dabney's abilities as a thinker on theological and philosophical subjects. We have it on good testimony that Dr. A. A. Hodge, when about to introduce one of his middle classes to the study of Systematic theology, pronounced the same judgment substantially concerning the ability of Dr. Dabney. Our informant told us that on the day that Dr. Hodge gave his opening lecture in the course on systematic theology to his class he took up most of the hour in talking about text-books and other literature which might be read as collateral during the course, and that when about to conclude his remarks concerning the literature he spoke as follows: "Gentlemen, before concluding this list of theological treatises which may be read as we pursue our studies together, I wish to call your attention to one other work. This is a single large octavo volume. It is by the profoundest thinker and writer on theological subjects, in my judgment, that America has produced. Remember, I say the *profoundest thinker and writer*. You may not find the style of his book agreeable or the reading easy. But you will find a profundity of thought that you cannot find elsewhere. It is stimulating too, and I beg you to read it. The work I refer to is by the Rev. R. L. Dabney of the Southern Presbyterian Church." We have heard from still another source that Dr. Hodge was accustomed to say substantially the same thing to all his classes as they began with him the study of theology.

Other testimonies from abroad might be given—some from

across the Atlantic. But we know of no more competent judge than Dr. A. A. Hodge.

Young men who read this paper, let us remember that Dr. Dabney *grew*. Of course all admit that he was born with great and noble parts; but wise old men in the church tell us that, in their judgment, Dr. George A. Baxter was the greater man of the two by natural endowment, and yet affirm that Dr. Dabney developed himself into a vastly bigger man. Dr. Dabney's mental history ought to be an inspiration to us, and *that* whether we can render half so noble a service as he, or not.

2. *Moral Traits.* His endowments in the way of active and practical powers were of a noble order; and as we knew him they had been sanctified to an unusually high degree by divine grace.

His sensibilities were duly subordinated. He was remarkably free from base affections. He loved not low things. He delighted in high things. He loved devotedly, and was a good hater, as every good lover must be. He loved passionately the good and hated passionately the evil. His affectional nature was a great fire; it drove him at times almost furiously against what seemed wrong, and in support of what seemed right. His logic, and all his mental workings, like the Apostle Paul's, were often aflame with feeling. No man can understand the products of his mind who does not keep this fact before him.

While he had a general love for mankind, and a much warmer love for all his Christian brethren, he gave a peculiar love to a few friends. Few men are capable of an affection so intense and loyal. When he admired a brother and trusted him as thoroughly honest, open and sincere, intimate association was alone needed to call forth from him a wealth of affection which no other could give save one equally great. But the ruling passion of his life was his love to God.

Men who sat under his teaching before he had reached his prime have given expression in our presence, to their conviction that Dr. Dabney was even then the most godly man whom they had ever met. His students in his old age at Austin, were wont to speak of him as St. John. One proof of his practical godliness is found in the fact that he was a man to whom people in trouble

and need were wont to go in order to find comfort and help. We have seen no one whose life was more governed by principle—by what he thought to be the teaching of God's Word. He tried to regard himself, and all he possessed as God's property. Accordingly, while he naturally loved soft raiment, and beautiful pictures, and a luxurious home, he subordinated sensuous and æsthetical tastes to moral and spiritual considerations. His sense of stewardship was so high that he was at times subjected to harsh criticisms by those not similarly governed by Biblical principles. He gave himself all he thought he needed in order to his becoming the most efficient servant of the Lord who had bought him. His religion similarly pervaded his whole life. He was *determined* to make it so. And no man had more vigor of will, or did more resolutely what he believed to be right. He could hardly be stopped in a course which he believed right. He lived this life without a trace of Phariseism.

Springing out of the foregoing mental, moral and religious traits were certain other remarkable characteristics, among which was

3. *A very marked humility of mind before God, and generosity in judging his fellowmen.*

In a man of such mental power one might, at the first moment, expect an attempt at daring and rationalistic speculation—an attempt to solve the insoluble, or in event of failure, to deny the inscrutable as to fact. But no man of our acquaintance has recognized the limitations of the finite mind more steadily than Dr. Dabney. He stands in this respect in distinguished contrast to some other great and even conservative men of his age. The venerable Dr. Wm. G. T. Shedd, for example, appears to many of his readers just as confident when he is setting forth the results of his own philosophical speculations as when he has in the plain declarations of Scripture the immediate support of his teaching. Somewhat of the same confidence as to results reached by a long process of reasoning and a good deal of assumption is found in other of our great standard writers. If there is any of this in Dr. Dabney's works it occupies a relatively small space. How often does the reader of his work on Theology remark the author deploring "over-refinements" and "undue subtlety" on the part of

theologians. He does not like the distinction between *Mediate* and *Immediate imputation*. He declares that the question between the *Supra-lapsarianism* and the *Sub-lapsarianism* "never ought to have been raised," that either answer is illogical. And when discussing the origin of the human soul, he will not commit himself either to the theory of creationism or to that of traducianism. He presents the arguments for each with great force. He presents the objections to each more strongly than we have found them stated elsewhere, and then says: "With such difficulties besetting both sides, it will be best perhaps to leave the subject as an absolute mystery. What an opprobrium to the pride of human philosophy, that it should be unable to answer the very first and nearest question as to its own origin." He planted himself on Scripture teaching as upon a rock. No man has shown a more devoted allegiance to the Word of God. He is ever going to "the Law and to the Testimony." Where the Bible asserts, he asserts with all positiveness. But in cases where the teaching of the Word is not clear and where human speculation dares intrude, he at once throws out emphatic *carveats*. Until the results of philosophical speculation had been thoroughly tried he was distrustful. Like a few of the very greatest men he had a true sense of the littleness in grasp and power of the greatest finite intelligence in the presence of the being and mystery of an infinite God and his ways.

Coupled with this humility before God was an unwonted generosity in judging of the characters of his fellowmen. Severe in his condemnation of evil conduct and vicious principles, he had a profound regard for God's handiwork wherever seen. He seemed free—entirely free, from envy. He knew what slander was and despised it. Except for the purpose of subserving the interest of truth he rarely related anything of any man that was discreditable to that man. And we doubt whether any minister of our Church showed day by day more of genuine and considerate regard for his brethren in the ministry. We know that he never spoke save in kind terms of many who criticized him roughly. We knew him very intimately as a student knows an indulgent master at whose table he sits; and we know whereof we have spoken. We know that few men in the church have habitually

spoken more generously of his brethren than he did. It used to surprise us while it drew us to the blind old man, showing as it did his forbearing moral greatness.

And he thought so generously of his friends and favorite pupils that they were sometimes in positive danger therefrom. He projected his own great powers upon them and sometimes represented them as quite different and much greater than they really were.

4. Another trait of Dr. Dabney, as we knew him, was his perpetual youth—his young interest in everything going on in the world. Some old men, even old men of power and talents, seem to lose interest in movements contemporary to their old age. They were once interested in all the new isms, movements in church or state, for good or evil, but it is no longer so. They are willing for young men to study the new departures; but they did their studying of the like thirty years ago. Dr. Dabney's interest in the things about him and in events in the great world at large never seemed to wane. He remained a learner as long as he lived. He sought new information with avidity. No wide awake young man distanced him in this. He wished to know about every movement which was likely to effect for weal or woe the fortunes of any considerable number of people. Think of Dr. Dabney when seventy years old and stone blind calling on an Apostle of the Christian Science who chanced to be creating a great commotion among a certain class in Austin! Of course he found nothing to approve in that mixture of allegorizing mysticism, rationalistic pantheism and infidelity. But he was enabled the better to do some quiet polemic work in a quarter where it was needed. Think of his sending a young friend not only to meetings of Salvation Army people, but to the performances of a peripatetic phrenologist that he might get a more trustworthy report than he could secure through other means. Other old men may say: "Oh it is well enough for you young men to be interested in such movements. You have your battles to fight but I have fought mine. I care nothing about these." Dr. Dabney never felt that way. He kept young to the last. He was, on this account, exceedingly attractive to young men. They

found him ever putting himself on the same plane with them—ready to learn what interested them with all zest.

While he was so interested in every new movement, he by no means regarded all the new as good. This brings us to the last trait of which we shall speak in this paper.

5. He was conservative in theology, philosophy and statesmanship. He was always and everywhere applying the inspired precept, "Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good." He was consequently at war with much in his age—with the atheistic and infidel theories of physical science which have so largely prevailed, with the various forms of evolution, anti-Biblical in their essence, with false psychologies and false philosophies, whether pantheistic or materialistic, with jacobinism, and "mobocracy" in politics, with Pelagianism in every form and Unitarianism in every shade, in theology. He knew that man was never evolved from an ape, that there is a radical, fundamental and essential difference between a man's consciousness when suffering for sin and a dog's when chastised by his master for a fault in his behavior. He knew that God created the world *ex nihilo*; for God has told us so in His Word. He knew that the several forms of the sensualistic psychology were lies, at least in considerable part; that Pantheism degrades and dishonors God, robs man of his personality and is utterly false; that materialism, Herbert Spencerism, and agnosticism are equally false. He knew that the Jacobinical assumption "All men are of right free and equal" never has been true, never will be true, and never can be true in the sense of its assertors, because God has not made men that way. Though Calvinism pure and simple has been on the wane in his day, he knew that Augustinianism once waned, died and was buried for a thousand years, but was resurrected at the Reformation, because it was largely God's truth. He expected confidently in God's own time the revindication of Calvinism. In short, satisfied as to the correctness of the Westminster System of doctrinal teaching, and satisfied as to the substantial truth of the common sense philosophy of the Scotch School, he has given the ablest, though not the simplest exposition and defence of this theology, and has enlarged, deepened and ennobled the Scottish philosophy, showing

clearly that it is the philosophy of common sense—the only philosophy worthy of acceptance—and the philosophy of the Bible as well. He has never been ashamed either of this philosophy or of the Westminster Theology. He has boldly and confidently maintained both, and has opposed everything in current history in opposition thereto.

Dr. Dabney has received much criticism as ultra-conservative. Perhaps in some minor matters he was too antagonistic to change; but we confidently await the verdict of history on his conservatism. We do not believe that he was too conservative in most matters and we feel sure that had he been less conservative he would not have served the Church in his generation so well. The Church needed guidance by a man who could and would look before he leaped—before he abandoned the tried old for the untried new. Our age is so impressed with its own greatness; it is so intoxicated by its brilliant achievements in amassing material wealth and making physical discoveries, that it esteems itself too highly. It tends to despise all that it has not itself discovered. It is too ready to receive the new because it is new and to throw away the old because it is old. Every age runs toward godlessness. Much of the new in our age is godless. Hence, also, we are in danger of repudiating the best of our inheritance from the past. Hence, also, our need of some man with penetration and insight to discern between good and evil and with heroic boldness to warn us against an evil course, and with the thunderbolt of Thor to demolish the ramparts of error.

Dr. Dabney was a great man. We cannot tell just how great yet. One cannot see how great Mt. Blanc is while standing at its foot. One hundred years from now men will be able to see him better.

It may be interesting to some who have not seen Dr. Dabney to be told that he was in personal appearance *commanding*. He was about six feet in height, in his youth slender, but in middle age of excellent proportions. He had a noble brow, well shaped and capacious, piercing black eyes set in deep sockets, a large well formed nose, thin lips, mouth and lower face expressive of great firmness; in his old days a patriarchal beard and abundant hair, both very white—an imperial looking man, a man apparently

capable of great things. His movements were always quick, nervous, forceful, though not graceful. His manner and bearing were in no wise unworthy of his great character.

He leaves behind him his beloved and most devoted wife and three sons, viz.: Charles William Dabney, President of the University of Tennessee; Samuel Brown Dabney, attorney of Victoria, Texas, and Lewis Merewether Dabney, attorney of Dallas, Texas.

Hampden Sydney, Va., January 18, 1898.