

**R. L. Dabney:**  
*Theologian of Revival*  
*and “Lost Cause Revivalist”*

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# **Introduction/Thesis: R. L. Dabney as Theologian of Revival and “Lost Cause Revivalist”**

The name Robert Lewis Dabney and the word revival do not necessarily associate easily together in one's imagination. Yet the great southern theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had experienced revival during his life and ministry, and has left some helpful teaching or theology of revival for Christians to appreciate and understand. My primary interests in writing on R. L. Dabney's theology of revival are to seek to demonstrate two important truths of Dabney's life: (1) Old School Southern Presbyterians do believe in and promote genuine and true revivals of God; (2) Dabney ironically changed from a theologian of true revival in Christ's Church to a unique revivalist of the Southern Civil Religion of the “Lost Cause”. It is fair to say that during Dabney's long and influential life, he taught and supported by word and deed, both genuine revivals and revivalism.

## **Revival and Revivalism**

A revival is a sovereign work of God's Spirit whereby God awakens His church both individually and corporately to experience a deeper understanding of who He is, what He has done for sinners in Christ, and how much sinners need His grace. A revival is always first and foremost a work of God upon His Church. Revival is not to be confused with revivalism.<sup>1</sup> Reformed historians and teachers have recently clearly defined a true and genuine revival as a time when the “presence of God's Spirit was experienced by His people in a particularly powerful way.... [It is] the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in which there is recovered a new awareness of the holiness of God among His people. This heightened knowledge brings in a new season of the conviction of sin, which, in turn, leads to heartrending repentance. This lowly humility ushers in an awakened love for Christ. Believers begin to pursue personal holiness. Love for other believers intensifies. The gospel spreads like wildfire. Sinners are brought to faith in Christ, and

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<sup>1</sup> Historian Ian Murray wrote concerning the shift in vocabulary between revival and revivalism in the time period of 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: “A shift in vocabulary was a pointer to the nature of the change. Seasons of revival became ‘revival meetings’. Instead of being ‘surprising’ they might now be announced in advance, and whereas no one in the previous century had known of ways to secure a revival, a system was now popularized by ‘revivalists’ which came near to guaranteeing results.” Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), xviii.

the church is enlarged and empowered".<sup>2</sup> For R. L. Dabney particularly, revival was also understood as an awakening, or what preceded a reformation of individuals or Christ's Church.

Genuine revivals marked Dabney's life from beginning to end, from his earliest days at school, to his first pastorate, to the time he served faithfully during the War between the States (also known as the American Civil War), and to some degree after the war. It is most important in considering this important 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian's life to note a change in outlook to some degree between Dr. Dabney's early years before the war, and his later years after the defeat of his beloved Southern States. In fact, his definition of what he considered to be a revival changed completely, because he seemed to change completely. As great and influential as Dabney was, he was affected by great bitterness after the Southern loss.<sup>3</sup> In fact, this loss and bitterness turned him into what historians have described as one of the most "fiery and unforgiving defenders of the Lost Cause",<sup>4</sup> and "an acidic Jeremiah".<sup>5</sup> Historians remember Dabney as not only at war with the North, or with theological Liberalism, but at war with much of his age in general,<sup>6</sup> and that his intellectual development took a more dogmatic and pessimistic turn after the war.<sup>7</sup>

## R. L. Dabney: A Life

R. L. Dabney is important for understanding revivals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because he is considered by many to be the most important and influential theologian in the Old School, Southern Presbyterian Church during 1861-1890.<sup>8</sup> So influential was Dabney that it has been written of him that after he retired from teaching and ministry "theological writing, for all practical purposes, came to an end in the Southern Presbyterian Church for two generations or

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<sup>2</sup> Smart, Robert Davis, Haykin Michael A. G., and Clary Ian Hugh, eds. *Pentecostal Outpourings: Revival and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), vii, from foreword by Steve Lawson; also Kindle Loc. 707.

<sup>3</sup> David Henry Overy, "Robert Lewis Dabney: Apostle of the Old South" (Univ. of Wisconsin, Ph.D. Diss, 1967), pgs. 188ff.

<sup>4</sup> Overy, pg. 319.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, eds. *Religion and the American Civil War* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), pg. 64. It is important to note that Dabney would have denied the language of a "Lost Cause", but as historian Sean Michael writes, he nevertheless, "demonstrated an intense Southern pride that sought to insulate his section from the rest of the country and that bore a great deal of similarity to the feeling of others who wrote for postbellum Southern journals." He thought that the Southern Presbyterians would "serve as the bulwark of Southern purity". *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), pg. 222.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South (1861-1890)* (John Knox Press, 1963), pg. 446.

<sup>7</sup> *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), pg. 226.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South (1861-1890)*, II: 446.

more.<sup>9</sup> Dabney was the most powerful influence in the training of Southern Presbyterian ministers.<sup>10</sup> Historian of Presbyterians of the South, Ernest Trice Thompson, wrote of Dabney, “Through his teaching, his students, and his textbook [Systematic Theology], Dr. Dabney probably did more to mold theological thinking in the Southern Presbyterian Church than any other person.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Dabney was “one of the most efficient expounders of the Calvinistic system of theology that our country has ever known,” according to historian Henry Alexander White.<sup>12</sup>

Though not strictly opposed to revivals, Dabney was nevertheless, a faithful “Old School Presbyterian” who believed in a strict interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith; this is significant for considering Dabney’s theology of revival.<sup>13</sup> There had been separation and disagreement over revivals from the earliest of American Presbyterian history.<sup>14</sup> One historian noted that from the 1730s, the Old Side party opposed the practice of holding religious revivals, while the New Side party favored such a practice.<sup>15</sup> In fact, during the first Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, through the preaching of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John and Charles Wesley, there was a formal division of the Old and New Side parties in the Synod of 1741. This division would not be healed formally until later in the American Presbyterian General Assembly of 1789.<sup>16</sup> The Old Side, or what became known in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the Old School party was not supported of revivals because they primarily were concerned with two major things: (1) The undermining of the local congregation and ministry of Word and Sacrament, and thus an undermining of doctrine and the authority of the local session of elders, and (2) The excesses that would often occur in revivals, and in particular in revivalism.<sup>17</sup> For Dabney, consistent with his strict commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and his clear

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<sup>9</sup> E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, II: 489-90.

<sup>10</sup> E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, II: 446.

<sup>11</sup> E. T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, III: 208.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 36.

<sup>13</sup> E. T. Thompson, II: 446-47.

<sup>14</sup> D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 2013, pgs. 125-26. A distinction was made in the 1740s between the “Old Side” or anti-revivalists, and the “New Side” supporters of revivals.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pgs. 36-37; Hart, pg. 126.

<sup>16</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Cheeseman wrote in *Differences Between Old and New School Presbyterians*, published in 1848: “An impression prevails that Presbyterians of the Old School, do not believe in revivals of religion, **but this is erroneous**. The differences between them and the New School are not as to the fact of revivals, but as to **the evidences of their genuineness**” [my emphases]. Quoted in Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, pg. xv.

Reformed Systematic Theology, a revival is completely a work of God according to His own sovereign choice.

He experienced his first revival as a student at Hampden-Sidney College in the Autumn 1837. From his own recollection, about twelve students were converted by this “powerful and genuine awakening”, he wrote to his mother.<sup>18</sup> Though this revival did not last long, young Dabney was greatly affected by it, because it was also the time of his own reformation and awakening, whereby this young Presbyterian became a communicant member of Christ’s Church. In fact, as a result of this revival, Dabney formally joined Providence Presbyterian Church in Louisa County, Virginia.<sup>19</sup> Dabney wrote himself that “The most important event of the period to me was my profession of faith in Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

In the summer of 1850, Dabney experienced another true revival and sovereign work of God in his first calling as a pastor of a small congregation at Tinkling Spring in Augusta County, Virginia.<sup>21</sup> This revival “significantly increased the church’s membership and confirmed his pastoral gifts,” historian Sean Michael Lucas writes.<sup>22</sup> Dabney wrote to his mother in 1849, “My preaching seems to human eyes to be utterly without effect; bad for me and bad for them.” In fact, Dabney’s influence on the congregation was described as “apparent fruitlessness”, and the congregation was characterized by “dreadful lukewarmness...[a] drowsy congregation.”<sup>23</sup> Yet by the time that a new church building was constructed, Dabney and congregation experienced what he described as a “significant revival”. The congregation received 29 new members into the church as a result—most of them, Dabney wrote, of a “highly credible profession” of faith.<sup>24</sup> Dabney viewed this revival as a great blessing of God, specifically, “an answer to prayer for the pouring out of [God’s] grace”<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Cary Johnson. *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*. repr. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), pg. 43.

<sup>19</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 383.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Cary Johnson. *The Life and Letters*, pg. 43. Johnson wrote that Dabney’s conversion took place at the same time as the death of his niece that made him think more deeply of the reality of death as a young man.

<sup>21</sup> White, pg. 384.

<sup>22</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, pgs. 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, pg. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, pg. 48.

Dabney's welcome response to this revival demonstrates that though he was characterized as an Old School Southern Presbyterian, he was nevertheless, never opposed to a true and genuine revival, a sovereign work of God's Spirit as an answer to prayer. Dabney understood that this revival was not something worked up by man's efforts, but one that could be described as "surprising" because it came as a gracious act of God's power upon the people through the basic and ordinary means of faithful preaching, administration of sacraments, worship, prayer, and fellowship of the people of God on the Lord's Day. Dabney accentuated God's power and man's inability in his preaching to heighten men's need of Christ. He underlined the two biblical truths of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, sovereignty of God and man's depravity, and through the use of means, God might be pleased to bring revival to His church.

## R. L. Dabney on Revival

R. L. Dabney's clearest articulation of his theology of revival is found in His *Discussions*, Volume I. Though Dabney would become a controversial figure, especially after the war, and some of his teachings would be inconsistently held by him, nevertheless, it is important to understand what he sought to believe and confess as a Christian man and minister.

From a later and mature sermon on 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 that Dabney preached, wrote passionately concerned with warning Christians, and especially ministers about "Let every man take heed how he buildeth" (1 Cor. 3:15). He writes "so strong is the tendency to self-deception and formalism in man's sinful soul, much of it will exist in spite of the most scriptural preaching and cautious management."<sup>26</sup> He interpreted this passage as teaching that the only foundation for preaching is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that the building that ministers are called to is to make true and genuine converts through the powerful working of God in the souls of men through the preaching of the word. His concern was for distinguishing a true and genuine work of God as opposed to a counterfeit work of revivalism. In fact, he emphasizes the ordinary means of grace, primarily through preaching to bring about God's change in the church and the world.

Dr. Dabney warns against ministers being eager or overly ambitious to count large numbers of converts and admitting folks within the visible church without making pains to apply

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Lewis, Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1. 1890, repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967, pg. 574.

discriminating tests as to whether there has indeed been a true conversion.<sup>27</sup> He wrote, “There is...scarcely a more solemn duty that a minister has to perform than that of trying and training young Christians before he admits them to profession [of their faith].”<sup>28</sup> He warned ministers against promoting any kind of religious excitement, or “enthusiasms”, or emotionalism contrary to God’s Word, and apart from the preaching of the Word. What he described as “...The habit of endeavoring to promote religious feeling by other means than the application of enlightening and saving truth to the soul...”<sup>29</sup>

Dr. Dabney was concerned with Charles Grandison Finney’s “New Measures” of revivalism where there was a “confounding [of] natural religious feelings with the supernatural and sanctifying”.<sup>30</sup> The concern was to allow the preaching of God’s Word, and the Holy Spirit to excite men truly, but to seek to recognize the difference between a genuine revival experience and one that is counterfeit. Dabney wrote, “...Grace is supernatural, while a multitude of religious emotions are very natural...It is not enough then to produce feeling about the soul; we must aim to produce right feeling.”<sup>31</sup> Right truth, doctrinal truth can produce “right feelings”. How? Dabney wrote, “by revealed truth intelligibly presented to the understanding, and applied by a supernatural agent”<sup>32</sup> stressing the importance of the truth of God’s Word and the Spirit who ultimately applies God’s Word to the sinner. Truths should be felt, but as of secondary importance. John Calvin is known famously today as the “Theologian of the Holy Spirit” and so should his followers, such as Dabney, be also known. For instance, Dabney wrote:

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*The Holy Spirit, the sole agent of sanctification, only works on reasonable souls by the instrumentality of truths intelligently comprehended. The understanding is the only channel through which the sanctifying means can reach the heart.<sup>33</sup>*

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For Dabney, the dangers of revivalism such as the “anxious seat” or “altar call” were to be avoided. These methods placed the emphasis on man’s response, a kind of “decisionism” over

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 557.

<sup>28</sup> Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 557.

<sup>29</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 557.

<sup>30</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 557.

<sup>31</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pgs. 558-59.

<sup>32</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 559.

<sup>33</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 560.

the true work of the Holy Spirit. False awakenings would produce (1) shallow, merely emotional professing Christians, rather than those rooted in biblical, confessional theology; (2) flippancy, in the place of true fear of God and reverence, which is the spirit of true piety produced by the Spirit of God in a true revival; (3) the sin of “will-worship”, or the desire to employ human inventions, springing out of a mistrust in God’s plans; (4) Professing Christians who feel “safe within the visible church” who have been admitted because of a mere emotional experience, but have not truly been converted, or regenerated by the Spirit. This sets them up to be able to “hide in the light” and no longer concern themselves with being made right with God. Dabney wrote that “mistaken professions convert all the gracious promises [of salvation], which are the nutriment of the regenerate soul, into deadly poisons to them.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, revivalism makes true revival “trivial”.<sup>35</sup>

This demonstrates clearly that for Dabney revival was something to be expected, and promoted, by all praying and faithful Christians, even those who had more Old School Southern Presbyterian characteristics and emphases. The concern of Dabney and many in the Old School Presbyterian fellowship was to avoid the excesses of revivalism, not to prayerfully promote true revival. I think this is a caricature of Old School Presbyterians that should be done away with.

### **Dabney's Nine Pastoral Rules on Times of Revival**

Dabney clearly and helpfully lists 9 rules for pastors during times of revival (note he is not against revivals per se, but against the abuse of them)<sup>36</sup>:

1. Dabney believed doctrinal and confessional truth must be taught to God’s people. Revival will come when the Sovereign Spirit uses the Word to awaken the souls of His people through the Word of Truth. He wrote, “The chief use to be made of the juncture is to present important truth. Hence catechetical work should be then most active, preaching most doctrinal.”
2. Dabney had witnessed the emotionalism that can cling to revivals, and he desired for Christians to be discerning between true excitement that comes from the Holy Spirit, and that enthusiasm detached from the Word of God that might be worked up. He wrote, “Gently repress all excitement which the Holy Ghost does not make.”
3. Dabney understood the pastor and elders’ work in the local congregation was to teach Christians in general and new converts particularly with personal instruction to answer

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<sup>34</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 572.

<sup>35</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pgs. 569-72.

<sup>36</sup> *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, Vol. 1., pg. 574. This is the list as it appears at the end of his sermon. I have added his meaning to his list of 9 things.

any questions, and to get a sense of whether the work of God within them was true. He wrote, "Give personal instruction as much as possible *in private*."

4. Dabney knew that those seeking to be saved, could put their trust more in the pastor or preacher than in the Savior, and that pastors particularly were to be aware of this. Servants of God should not be made much of, but rather should "decrease" in the lives of Christians so that Christ could "increase". As 1 Corinthians taught, neither he who plants or he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He warned, "Beware of permitting anxious person to *lean on* the pastor, instead of the Saviour."
5. Dabney understood that revival was a sovereign work of God by His Spirit through the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word. Only God could open the heart; this was not man's work, but God's work alone. He counseled, "Keep John vi. 29 and Acts xvi. 31, *ever foremost*. Do not permit anxious persons to feel that anything is done, until this is done."
6. Dabney wrote, "Present Christ in his prophetic and kingly, as well as His priestly work." Here Dabney desired to emphasize the focus of believers on God's Word, and Christ the ultimate prophet who speaks by His Spirit through the Word. He stressed Christ's kingly work so that converts would understand that salvation is not merely freedom from sin, but freedom to serve and obey the risen Christ.
7. Dabney, ever the faithful pastor with a focus on the local congregation, taught pastors and elders to understand that Christ might use a revival minister to bring disciples to Himself, but it was the work of the local congregation to disciple, edify, mature, and discipline. He wrote concerning this important truth, "Don't allow *any one* to thrust you aside from your proper share in the work." Dabney did not want the revivals to turn into an end, but rather be seen as an extraordinary means to the end of converts joining the local congregation.
8. Again, concerning excitement and experience, Dabney sought to put the focus on the mind as it understands the truths of the Gospel, with a minimal focus primarily on feelings or excitement. People can be worked up into what seems to be the trusting of Christ, but ministers must "Minimize the recoil of excitement."
9. Finally, Dabney recommends William S. Plumer's (1802-1880) book *Hints on Pastoral Theology, Ch. XXI.* (particularly the section on "Religious Excitements"). Plumer was a profoundly influential pastor and theologian of the American Presbyterian Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

These 9 rules can help any pastor with distinguishing between genuine revivals and revivalism, particularly those pastors characterized by "Old School" Presbyterian concerns, who stress the importance of a confessional theology and the importance and authority of the visible church in its local congregation.

## R. L. Dabney, Revival, and the War between the States

As a Son of the South, R. L. Dabney was headed for a life-transforming change that would occur to his life and to many others as the War between the States loomed on the horizon. This

great conflict of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was initially opposed by Dabney. This watershed event defines to some degree the identity of many Evangelical Christians today. Dabney sought to preserve a state of peace, and was against any kind of secession of states from the union, and for any conflict that might occur over differences in practice between the North and South.<sup>37</sup> According to historian of religion in the Civil War, Mitchell Snay, religion was instrumental in the formation of a distinctive sectional identity of being Northern or Southern (even more prominent than "Christian") for almost three decades before the war. These distinctions invested the political conflict between North and South with profound religious significance.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Snay writes that "religion contributed to this moral consensus [of disunion] through the 'spiritualization of the sectional controversy over slavery'.<sup>39</sup> The controversy of about three decades concerning slavery shifted from the *morality* of slavery to the question of which section's religious faith was more *authentic* [my emphasis].<sup>40</sup>

One of the primary reasons for the War between the States was because of the influence of Abolitionists, primarily from the North, or associated with the Northern States, who were rallying the South and the Federal government for the immediate abolition of slavery. Many historians see abolitionism as a result of the true revival of Christian, and the cultural influence that a true revival can have on a people. However, for many of those living in the South, abolitionism was not Christian at all. In fact, for many Southern American Christians, abolitionism was a terrible result of "Yankee Puritanism", not evangelicalism.<sup>41</sup> Stout writes that "for the South, the dark side of revivalism was Puritanism".<sup>42</sup> This "dark side" of Puritanism was embodied in the zeal for the immediate abolishment of slavery. For Southerners such as Dabney, abolitionists were an "anti-Christian" movement. For him and many other Southerners, abolitionism was a liberalizing of true, biblical Christianity, a confusion of Christ's spiritual kingdom and the civil sphere of this present age.<sup>43</sup> Dabney truly thought that immediate freedom for the slaves would not be loving

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<sup>37</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 385.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pg. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 215.

<sup>40</sup> C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation* (Mercer Univ. Press, 1985), pg. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 291.

<sup>42</sup> Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 291.

<sup>43</sup> John R. McKivigan, Mitchell Snay, eds. *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Univ. of Georgia Press, 1998), pgs. 332, 335.

his neighbor as himself as he had been commanded to do.<sup>44</sup> Ironically, though Dabney was in support of revivals from God, and had been converted in a genuine revival, he nevertheless could not see the abolition of slavery as a result of revival. In fact, he wrote passionately in his opposition to abolitionism, and said that they were “meddling” as “mad fanatics” into the affairs of the South. He wrote in October 1840, “I do believe that if these mad fanatics had let us alone, in twenty years we should have made Virginia a free state”.<sup>45</sup>

## R. L. Dabney: Pro-Slavery Churchman

One cannot discuss the life and theology of R. L. Dabney without taking into consideration his influential and controversial writings on slavery.<sup>46</sup> Dabney was unashamedly pro-slavery. Before the War between the States, Dabney held to a theology described as “The Spirituality of the Church” that insisted that the Church of Jesus Christ focus on God’s kingdom, particularly that ministers would be committed primarily to issues of Christ’s Kingdom, through the ordinary means of grace, such as preaching, administration of the sacraments, prayer, and fellowship, and not to be involved in affairs of the state. Dabney and other Southern clergymen such as James Henley Thornwell and Benjamin Morgan Palmer, were “convicted that they acting ‘ministerially, publicly, or any way representatively of God’s people...should seem to have no politics’.”<sup>47</sup> This was an effort to understand the important distinction between the civil sphere of this present age, and the very important and specific spiritual sphere of God’s church that was part of His coming kingdom. This teaching was an effort to “give to Caesar what was his, and to give to God what was God’s”.<sup>48</sup> This would be synthesized unintentionally in Dabney’s mind later in his life, and particularly in the way it effected the way he thought of revival.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Cary Johnson. *The Life and Letters*, pg. 68.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Cary Johnson. *The Life and Letters*, pg. 67.

<sup>46</sup> One cannot really take into consideration Southern Presbyterians in general without considering the majority thinking on slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders (1683-1911)*, (1911, reprint. Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), pgs. 327ff.

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 11.

<sup>48</sup> For more on the Spirituality of the Church, see James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Mercer Univ. Press, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> In fact, according to historian of the Lost Cause, Charles Reagan Wilson, Antebellum Southern religious leaders such as Dabney, had proclaimed the “doctrine of the ‘Spirituality of the Church’ which meant that the church’s role was in religious affairs, not in political and societal matters...they never followed this idea strictly, and after the war the churches were never as other worldly as the Bible Belt stereotype might suggest.” Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (University of Georgia Press, 1980), pgs. 8-9.

Dabney wrote in his book *A Defense of Virginia, and through Her the South*, that he thought that God had ordained slavery for good, though he admitted that there were abuses that should be reformed as Christians.<sup>50</sup> Though Dabney was insinuating the need for repentance, revival and reformation for sins committed against God, strangely enough, these “sins” excluded slavery as one that the South needed to confront. He wrote that “slavery was not the product of white man’s sins but of God’s providential opening up of a way to bring salvation to the Africans.”<sup>51</sup> Dabney wrote that “slavery brought with it some great evils, but it elevated with wonderful rapidity one of the weakest and most savage races...”<sup>52</sup> Historian Mitchell Snay wrote that the Southerners pro-slavery stance was because “they sanctified slavery through a scriptural justification of human bondage, a slaveholding ethic to guide the conduct of Christian masters, and efforts to bring the Gospel to the slaves”. Religion helped convince Southerners that “slavery and Southern civilization were best protected in a separate Southern nation.”<sup>53</sup>

## “Major Dabney”: R. L. Dabney and Stonewall Jackson

Eventually and inevitably, the North and the South went to war with one another over these issues. One of the highlights of Dabney’s life as a minister was to be invited during the War between the States by the great “Stonewall” Jackson to become “Major Dabney” as a Confederate Chaplain in his military unit as his important chief of staff and “right hand man”.<sup>54</sup> Stonewall Jackson was greatly admired both as a Christian and an officer in the War between the States,<sup>55</sup> and Dabney was very proud to serve on Jackson’s staff. Dabney described the man Jackson as humble, who sought gentleness as a warrior, loved God’s Sabbath, and did his work out of duty, never complaining.<sup>56</sup> Jackson as Christian warrior allowed and encouraged much preaching within his army, and he delighted in “the spiritual good of the men” according to Dabney’s

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted from R. L. Dabney, *A Defense of Virginia, and through Her the South*; David Henry Overy, “Robert Lewis Dabney: Apostle of the Old South” (Univ. of Wisconsin, Ph.D. Diss, 1967), pgs. 133-34. For Dabney, slavery could only be defended as a particularly “Christian institution”, see Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pgs. 78-79, also Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, pgs. 128-29.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 317.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters*, pg. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 215, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 195. What historian James I. Robertson described as “an amazing piece of short-sightedness” in his estimation. *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, the Soldier, the Legend* (New York, NY: Macmillan Pub., 1997), 360. Also, Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 387.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, eds. *Religion and the American Civil War* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), pgs. 187-95).

<sup>56</sup> R. L. Dabney, *Life and Campaigns of Lt. Gen. Thomas J. Jackson* (1866; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1983), 282-83.

testimony.<sup>57</sup> During these times of preaching, Dabney described genuine revival within the camp as many of the men receiving the word of God “drank in by eager ears....many a bearded cheek...was now wet with silent tears”.<sup>58</sup> In Dabney’s estimation, Jackson’s encouragement to preaching, and his own Christian example, were the means through which God brought great revival to the armies. Dabney wrote, “It may be added, once for all, that this religious reformation, which was destined to spread so widely through the army by General Jackson’s efforts, bore the fruits of a true work of God’s grace.... There was a glorious reformation in many souls to true holiness, diminishing permanently the wickedness in the camps, turning many finally away from their sins.”<sup>59</sup> One of the effects of these revivals (or reforms) was a deeper longing for heaven in Jackson’s heart—freed from the love of fame—and more deeply longing for joys of heaven. This made a considerable impact on Major Dabney.<sup>60</sup> Dabney was privileged to write Thomas J. Jackson’s memoir as a Christian man and soldier after his death in 1863. Dabney wrote, “Imitation of Jackson would make the South ‘invincible’ and this was God’s ‘practical lesson set forth’ in his death.<sup>61</sup> Dabney also interpreted Jackson’s death as a chastisement from God for the South’s sins, implying the need of repentance and a return to God.<sup>62</sup> He wrote, “A righteous God, for our sins toward Him, has permitted us to be overthrown by our enemies, and His.”<sup>63</sup>

Dr. Dabney believed that God had graciously brought revival or reform through the ordinary means of grace in preaching to the Confederate armies; it was a sovereign work of God. Dabney noted the men in the armies’ responses of deep repentance through tears, and a change, or fruits of righteousness that came forth in the behavior and lifestyle of these men, formerly described as “wickedness”. It may be helpful to note how Dabney used the language of “reformation” rather than “revival” sometimes in his letters and writings, perhaps to accentuate that genuine or true revival as opposed to “revival” that could have been so completely misunderstood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the unfortunate influence of Charles Grandison Finney.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Dabney, *Life and Campaigns*, pg. 584.

<sup>58</sup> Dabney, *Life and Campaigns*, pg. 585.

<sup>59</sup> Dabney, *Life and Campaigns*, pg. 586,

<sup>60</sup> Dabney, *Life and Campaigns*, pgs. 588-89.

<sup>61</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 194.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 201.

<sup>63</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 201; quoted from *A Defense of Virginia*, pg. 356.

<sup>64</sup> Historian Erskine Clark wrote that revivals in the South tended to stress God’s sovereignty in election and application. Contrasted to this, Finney and revivalists followed ‘the lead of their own experiences,

During the terrible conflict of the War between the States, God in his sovereignty was at work through revivals. During the war, revival sermons were preached to encourage and edify the soldiers. According to historian Harry S. Stout, these revival sermons were augmented by religious tracts to promote revivals in the army. Prayer meetings were also common because of a deep desire to see those fighting within this conflict to have Christian hope.<sup>65</sup> Revivals also convinced Confederates that they had God's favor, and that "God was still truly on their side".<sup>66</sup> The surrender at Appomattox in 1865 formally ended the revivals in the Confederate army, but not the continuing of revivals in the South in general.<sup>67</sup>

After the war, revivals were still experienced by R. L. Dabney, J. William Jones, and other Southern Presbyterians. But the revivals took on a different emphasis. After the war in the South, there seemed to be a fusion of religion, evangelicalism and what was then known as the Lost Cause.<sup>68</sup> War and defeat for the American South was a providence of God that influenced many men during the armies to seek God and become Christians. After the war in the years following 1865 and the surrender of the South to the Federal armies at Appomattox Courthouse, the Religion of the Lost Cause was born,<sup>69</sup> and this would have implications and influence on the South's thinking about revival, and particularly on R. L. Dabney. The revivals during the war produced true converts, but also division from other Christians due the Religion of the Lost Cause for those who identified themselves particularly as "Christian" and as "Southerners".<sup>70</sup>

## R. L. Dabney's Post-War Religion of the Lost Cause and His "Iron Soul"

Historian Henry Alexander White notes that after the War between the States, when the surrender of the Confederate army took place at Appomattox, and Federal bayonets became dominant in the South, the *iron* entered Dr. Dabney's soul [emphasis original].<sup>71</sup> Throughout the remainder of Dabney's life, he contended strongly against any organic union of Northern and

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called on people...to make a decision for Christ." Erskine Clark, *Our Southern Zion* (Univ. of Alabama Press, 1996), 172-73.

<sup>65</sup> Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (New York: Viking Press), 2006, pgs. 291-92.

<sup>66</sup> Stout, *Upon the Altar*, pg. 409.

<sup>67</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 348.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, pg. 348-49.

<sup>69</sup> Stout, *Upon the Altar*, pg. 292.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pgs. 288-92.

<sup>71</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 389.

Southern Churches.<sup>72</sup> In fact, because of Dabney's deep disillusionment, and even temptations to bitterness, he promoted the emigration of Southerners to Australia and Brazil.<sup>73</sup> For Dabney and the majority of Southerners, there was a temptation to think that the devil through abolitionism and the Federal government was triumphant. There was after the war in the South and in the souls of many Christian Southerners such as Dabney a "darkness".<sup>74</sup> In fact, Dabney was described after the war as "one of the most *bitter advocates* of the old ways [my emphasis]".<sup>75</sup>

After the War between the States, there was still a tremendously bloody war of ideas. What has become known as the "Religion of the Lost Cause" was a war of ideas to preserve a particularly Southern identity after the American Civil War. Historian Charles Reagan Wilson wrote that this is defined in terms of "morality and religion...Southerners were the chosen people, peculiarly blessed by God".<sup>76</sup> Historians of the Lost Cause have noted that for Dabney the Lost Cause represented the only hope for preserving Southern virtue.<sup>77</sup> After the war, Dabney began preaching a kind of "New South Materialism".<sup>78</sup> He taught that the real problem was that Southerners now had "to learn...how to combine the possession of great wealth with the personal practice of simplicity, hardihood, and self-sacrifice, that people which makes selfish, material good its God, is doomed".<sup>79</sup> R. L. Dabney became a prophet to remind all that God is Judge and will avenge.<sup>80</sup> Where was the Christian forgiveness, and hope for the other world, the New Heavens and New Earth that should characterize the truly revived Christian and is the most important concern for the Christian minister? Perhaps there might have been more revivals from God if Dabney had possessed a bit more humility and self-criticism, this could have prevented him as an influential minister from confusing the church and the world as it was ideologically embedded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century South?<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, pg. 390.

<sup>73</sup> Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, pg. 201.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (University of Georgia Press, 1980), pg. 66.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 85.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 86.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 86.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 86.

<sup>80</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 92.

<sup>81</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney*, pgs. 244-45.

Ironically, though Dabney remained a conservative Christian, a strict subscriptionist to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and a faithful Southern Presbyterian, his later understanding of the work of God became confused with what might be termed revivalism. A true and genuine revival is a work of the Sovereign God, and is poured out from heaven upon His Church. Later in Dabney's life, a more focused, man-centered, Southern kind of revivalism seemed to occupy his heart, mind and concerns. Dabney became committed to the "Religion of the Lost Cause". For Dabney, the Religion of the Lost Cause became something he cared about very deeply and vehemently. The teaching of the Religion of the Lost Cause focused on virtue rather than the Gospel, emphasized distinctions between regions, rather than concentrating on forgiveness and the unity of Christ's people. Further, it had the audacity to use noble and "moral Confederates" (such as Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and those many who had experienced revival during the war) as exemplars of the Christian faith. Some even became legendary such as Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson in Dabney's treatment of his life.<sup>82</sup> For those committed to the Religion of the Lost Cause, the "ecumenical nature of the Lost Cause, and the education of it added an evangelical angle to be preached.<sup>83</sup>

Rather than focusing on the Sovereignty of God, it seems that Dabney confused his work as a minister in Christ's Church, and his identity as a Southerner in this present age. After the War between the States, there seems to have been a profound confusion between being Southern, what it meant to be a confessional Presbyterian, and a commitment to the Lost Cause.<sup>84</sup> Evangelicalism and the religion of the Lost Cause would now coexist in a "symbiotic union".<sup>85</sup> In fact, revivals and "sentimentalized history" provided an ongoing "sense of Southern identity for the white South."<sup>86</sup> The attitude of many white Southerners that they were the truly "chosen of God" wedded the Southern churches to Southern culture. Charles Reagan Wilson wrote that this "deficiency" has "led to the greatest evils of the religion-culture link in the South."<sup>87</sup> "The religious

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<sup>82</sup> See Dabney's own *Life and Campaigns of Lieut. Gen. T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson*. 1866, repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1983, as well as J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp, or Religion in the Confederate Army*. 1877, repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1986.

<sup>83</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pgs. 119-20.

<sup>84</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, eds. *Religion and the American Civil War*, pg. 349.

<sup>85</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, eds. pg. 349.

<sup>86</sup> Miller, Stout, Wilson, eds. pg. 349.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pg. 7.

culture of the South evolved into a Southern civil religion, based on Christianity and regional history.”<sup>88</sup>

At his death, friend and Southern brother in Christ, the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Morgan Palmer described R. L. Dabney as “a pillar of strength in the house of our God”.<sup>89</sup> As an Old School Southern Presbyterian, Dabney did not despise the “surprising work of God” in genuine revivals. In fact, he taught very helpfully to ministers how to distinguish between genuine revival and revivalism. However, as he was also formed and shaped by circumstances of his life, particularly as a Southerner, Dabney’s life, practice, and commitment to the Southern Lost Cause betrayed his biblical and theological and confessional teaching as a Christian and minister. Though Dabney could differentiate intellectually between a genuine and false revival, practically his own life was a fusion and confusion of both. Dabney taught that revival happened primarily through preaching the Gospel of Christ, and through prayer. His commitment to the Lost Cause sidetracked him from this primary concern. Though he might have been a “pillar of strength in the house of our God”, Dabney became an advocate of a civil commitment that was beyond his own articulation of the spirituality of Christ’s kingdom. During his life, Dabney was committed both to genuine revival, but also was committed to “Lost Cause Revivalism” due to providential circumstances apparently beyond his understanding.

**Charles R. Biggs**

**June 2017**

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, pgs. 7-8.

<sup>89</sup> White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders*, 393.

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