The Legacy of Thomas Chalmers

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Parish minister, popular preacher, social reformer, lecturer in moral philosophy, economics, and theology: Thomas Chalmers was an outstanding Scottish evangelical spokesman in a golden age of intellectual and social development. He led his generation in giving theological expression to issues of ecclesiastical power, social responsibility, and the worldwide mission of the church. He is also remembered for vivid sayings such as “the Christian good of Scotland,” “the expulsive power of a new affection,” and “show me a people-going minister, and I will show you a church-going people.” His ideas on welfare and community responsibility are still debated. His name is invoked in causes from theories of creation to the prevention of cruelty to animals. A theology chair is named after him at the University of Edinburgh. As subsequent generations have asked questions about science, Calvinism, church and state relationship, they inevitably revisit his ideas.

Chalmers is remembered particularly for his role in the events leading to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843, though this event should not overshadow his integration of ideals from both parties involved in the so-called Disruption: the socially liberal Evangelicals, and the politically conservative Moderates. He contributed to changing theological attitudes. His preaching, social concern, parish experiments, and interest in Bible societies and missions made him famous in Britain, well known in North America, and respected in France. His holistic philosophy, as well as his enthusiastic, experimental approach to mission, was reproduced and expanded by his students who became missionaries, educators, and church leaders around the world.

Chalmers was born on March 17, 1780, the sixth child of John and Elizabeth Chalmers, in Anstruther Easter, a small fishing and coastal trading village on the southeast coast of Fife. His father had inherited a dye-and-thread works and general merchant’s business. Though the business was in decline, Thomas was brought up in a comfortable middle-class home. A precocious child, at the age of 11 he was sent to St. Andrews University with his older brother. In 1803 he became minister in the rural parish of Kilmany, not far from St. Andrews. He quickly became a controversial figure because he seemed to desert his parish during the week to teach mathematics and chemistry at the university.

In the months following his thirtieth birthday he experienced an evangelical conversion, and the change in his conversations and preaching attracted attention. He became an enthusiastic supporter of Bible societies and took an interest, at first guarded, in Baptist and Moravian missions. In 1812 he married Grace Pratt. It was a happy marriage, and their six daughters helped form a lively and hospitable household.

In 1815 Chalmers responded to a call to the Tron Church in central Glasgow. His reputation soared following a series of midweek sermons on astronomy and Christian faith, and in London and Edinburgh he drew crowds wherever he preached. At the same time, he felt distracted by civic responsibilities and was concerned that his middle-class congregation was not touched by urban poverty. When the Glasgow City Council erected the new parish of St John’s, he negotiated to take it on as a self-contained area in which he could demonstrate his social theories.

Chalmers believed that civic programs for the poor, supported by tax revenues, generated unrealistic expectations, and it was not difficult to collect evidence in support of his assertion. His answer to middle-class fears of an aggressive, immoral, and irreligious underclass was to re-create an idealized rural parish community in defiance of population growth, mobility, and structural unemployment. His ideas were vigorously defended long after it was clear that at best they required a Chalmers to make them work.

With a sense of urgency and a remarkable team, Chalmers energetically set about building schools, meeting with elders, putting social work in the hands of deacons, and introducing information on overseas mission in order to stimulate mission at home. His elders included people like William Collins, who established a publishing company financed with the profits of the Chalmers’s sermons on astronomy.

St. John’s Parish was divided into districts, and Chalmers, with his elders, deacons, and Sunday school teachers, systematically visited homes and set up Sunday schools. Determined to keep relief work among the poor within the funds available from church offerings, the deacons were careful with the aid they distributed. Each situation was investigated, and the possibilities of help from families and friends explored. Charity was held to be a neighborly obligation, before it was a church responsibility (never mind a city council responsibility).

By his church-based approach Chalmers believed he avoided the situation in which poor-relief became an impersonal right, rather than something based on relationships and charity. People who were able to give even small amounts to good causes such as missions and Bible societies were less likely to succumb to poverty through drink and dissipation. His vision was something many wanted to believe, whatever the evidence that it could not cope with the scale of the problems developing around them.

The “St. John’s Experiment” had considerable merits. He did grow a church. He did help people educationally, spiritually, and socially. He did make the mission of the church much more than the activity of its minister, however much people were initially attracted by his fame as a preacher. His development of a casework approach became part of the history of social work. He inspired other churches to face the challenge of poverty out of a process of visitation and social investigation. He was no armchair theorist. At the same time, many of his claims were simply wrong. His notion of the economic independence of the city parish was never realistic. Parish boundaries were meaningless other than for determining areas of responsibility. The situation he negotiated where one parish could retain excess income, yet charge excess need to the city, reduced the pool of funding available to the city as a whole. Visiting deacons and their investigations were more personal than official handouts, but they were still not the relationships of an intimate rural

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Chalmers was hardly the last person to be carried away by his own rhetoric or to describe his church in terms of the vision in his heart more than the reality on the ground. In the case of the St. John’s Experiment, at least the theory and the reality are well documented, and the effort is still worthy of careful study.

In 1823 Chalmers suddenly left Glasgow to teach moral philosophy at St. Andrews University. Many were surprised he was deserting a project that still needed his direction. Others were alarmed that he was giving up his ministry to teach secular subjects. The university did not share his evangelical enthusiasms but hoped his popularity would attract students. It did.

They came from around Britain in one of the largest intakes the school experienced that century. Students not only were awed by his passionate reconciliation of economics, ethics, philosophy, and theology; they also stimulated one another in Christian vision and commitment to overseas mission. Visitors such as Joshua Marshman and Robert Morrison brought news and missionary experience fresh from India and China. The missionary theories and practices of the Moravians, Baptists, the London Missionary Society, and the Church Missionary Society were dissected and compared. From among Chalmers’s students came the first generation of Church of Scotland missionaries to India, particularly Alexander Duff.

From among his students came the first generation of Church of Scotland missionaries to India, particularly Alexander Duff. Not least of what they took with them was the conviction that all truth was God’s truth and the warm experience that Christian faith could and should be actively related to all of society.

Chalmers’s relationship with his students was deep, lifelong, and rewarding. But his relations with many of his colleagues soon soured. St. Andrews was in a measure corrupt. The prospect of moving to Edinburgh became attractive, and in 1828 he accepted the chair of divinity. By this time he had a better relationship with Edinburgh Moderates than with their counterparts in St. Andrews.

As a key leader among the Evangelicals in Edinburgh, he could only further enhance his national role. Quickly that role became political. Chalmers was moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1832 and soon took on the unofficial mantle of leadership of the Evangelical party. Scotland’s cities were expanding, and the church needed to respond. There was also a sense of competition. Independent or voluntary churches, Baptist and Congregationalist, as well as Catholic and Episcopalian, had been growing rapidly. Where these drew on newly prosperous classes, their independence was economic as well as ecclesiastical. Other groups of Presbyterians were also increasing. As an established church, the Church of Scotland expected government support to build and staff new churches. Changing attitudes to Catholics and Nonconformists, and the increase in the franchise from the Reform Act of 1832, however, made it difficult for the government to aid one church and not another. While old assumptions about government responsibilities for the established church had residual credibility, Chalmers was not alone in failing to take adequate account of the new political realities.

Since the beginning of the century the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland had increased in power, and in 1834 it gained a majority in the General Assembly. In a series of acts it gave greater authority to parishes over their choice of minister and gave votes in church courts to ministers in chapels, most of whom were Evangelical. A few Moderates noted that property rights were involved and doubted whether the General Assembly had the authority it claimed. As disputed cases went to court and worked their way by appeal to the House of Lords, the sequence of decisions portrayed the church as a creature of the state. By defying these decisions, the Evangelical leadership of the church, including Chalmers, was cast in the position of lawbreakers. Both sides claimed high moral ground, and those in the middle found it difficult to mount an alternative. Parliamentary action was needed, but members of Parliament sitting in England had little understanding of Scottish resistance to Erastian assumptions, and less still of how far Scots were capable of going on points of principle.

From 1834 Chalmers realized that the church would have to raise its own funds for church extension. Catching a mood and inspiring others as he had earlier at St. John’s and among his students at St. Andrews, in six years he and his committees financed over 200 hundred new churches. As they did, the clouds of dispute gathered with the courts, the government, and within the church.

In the 1830s the unity of the Church of Scotland came from its historic role as the national church, its commitment to mission at home and overseas, and the need to respond to the threat of independent groups. By 1840 it was a question how much longer these factors could resist the forces of fragmentation. Early in the decade there was an eerie mixture of cooperation and conflict. Evangelicals and Moderates frequently functioned like political parties in mutual opposition. For a time they were surprisingly united in church extension at home and mission overseas, both means of proving their spiritual viability to the independent churches. At the same time, court cases pitted Evangelical and Moderate against each other. The populist base of the Evangelicals, and the tradition of being a government party remembered by the Moderates, meant they were divided over the role of the state. Questions of power and of principle were intertwined, and Evangelicals saw their dreams of an evangelical established church being compromised by Moderate betrayal, court interference, and state indifference. Moderates saw their compact with the state being destroyed by lawless “wildmen.” Propaganda from both sides stereotyped the weaknesses and failures of the other and still provides entertaining if sad and unreliable reading. In this situation Chalmers was brilliant as an organizer and a preacher but unreliable as a negotiator. Dealing with successive governments, he lost the confidence of both Whigs and Tories at Westminster, but he was not wrong in his perceptions that Whigs could no longer help the church, and the Tories would only do so at the price of political interference in church affairs.

Reading of the Convenanters and about the Scottish Reformation, Chalmers gained a heightened sense of the cost and necessity of taking a stand on matters of principle. At the same time his sense of the value of a national church was tempered by his appreciation for what other churches were doing. In the end his commitments to mission and principle were stronger than his commitment to any particular church, national or free. Despite a passionate, if ironic, belief in the benefits of established churches (poor relief was better without civic aid, but spiritual needs
required positive state assistance), Christian mission could survive without the support he believed was their right.

By early 1843, despite a number of attempts, successive governments in England had failed to resolve the Scottish church issue. English incomprehension was almost total, and Scots themselves were divided. Moderates and the government believed a split was unlikely to be serious. For their part Evangelicals thought they had the numbers to enact a voluntary disestablishment. A court decision against the legality of chapel ministers voting in church courts removed this possibility. Despite some conservative political instincts, Chalmers had long shown himself capable of defying authority. On May 18, 1843, he was the leading figure in the Disruption, as over a third of the ministers and people resigned from the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church. If the Disruption was not the only major event of the period, it is appropriately seen as a watershed in Scottish history and in the history of Presbyterianism worldwide.

After the Disruption, Chalmers maintained his belief in the value of a national church empowered to evangelize the whole nation, and he strove to make the Free Church of Scotland that church in all but government support. He welcomed the possibility of cooperation and even incorporation with other like-minded churches. His fund-raising skills, oratory, and personal stature were essential to the remarkable success of the Free Church, but his vision was broader and his theology more flexible than that of its initial leadership. In his retirement he put his energies into the West Port Church in an impoverished area of Edinburgh, as well as keeping up his traveling, speaking, and correspondence. He died at home in Edinburgh, May 30, 1847. His funeral was a national event, drawing thousands from across the divisions of Scottish life.

**Chalmers's Legacy**

The legacy of Chalmers is considerable. His papers, the majority of them now in New College Edinburgh, include some 16,000 items, and are a major archival source for British church and social life in his lifetime. The churches built by his fund-raising in the 1830s and by the Free Church from 1843 number in the hundreds. He is remembered in institutions wherever Scots migrants have taken themselves. His name remains big enough to conjure with, even if it is sometimes used in ways that do not do justice to the context and balance of his original concerns.

Chalmers's popularity transcended divisions that, if he did not cause, he had at least failed to prevent. People who saw through his social analysis acknowledged him as the greatest preacher of his time. His efforts were often admired when his conclusions were not followed. Then and now, people have not argued about whether he was a significant person but whether he made the contribution they would have liked him to have made. Some see him as the evil genius who failed to save the church from the tragedy of the Disruption. For many he is the hero who saved it from a fatal spiritual compromise. Others again would say that he was a flawed hero but a hero nonetheless. In 1929 the majority of the Free Church was reunited with the Church of Scotland, and many of the principles of independence for which Chalmers fought were vindicated.

The legacy of buildings, however, was something later generations did not need. Closing redundant churches requires almost as much effort as establishing them, and it cannot be surprising that some hold him to blame.

Some of Chalmers's dreams were crippled by the Disruption, but this point should not be overstated. Evangelism and social concern did not stop simply because Presbyterianism in Scotland was fragmented, or even because the national church had less of an official role in society. Overseas mission was disturbed by conflicts back home, but its momentum hardly faltered. Since his conversion Chalmers had related to a wide range of mission groups and independent churches. This involvement is not unrelated to his vision of churches working together, which still has power to surprise those who assume that his interests must have been limited to those of the Free Church.

With two possible exceptions, Chalmers continues to attract scholarship and popular interest in topics as diverse as his own broad range of concerns. The first exception is economics. Although he wrote extensively on political economy and taught it at St. Andrews University, his place in the history of the subject is not that of a person who is remembered for some notable achievement. Even so, his role is mentioned, and his works have recently been republished as a record of the thinking of his era. The second exception concerns his theology. Far from being reprinted, Chalmers has been written out of the story of Scottish theology.

The latter situation is in some ways understandable. There is so much else to be said about Chalmers. He had prayed to be delivered from systematic theology. (He also prayed to be delivered from mathematics, a unique temptation in the history of spirituality, unless it is shared by Pascal!) It was obvious to his colleagues and students that his passions were less about the content of theology than about the application of what he believed the Christian message to be. Someone who told students never to preach Calvinism (by which he meant predestination) was not in the process of rethinking its finer points. What marked him out was his social concern and his leadership.

Yet there was not a lot wrong with his well-documented theological reading, nor with his mind, though his mind was often on other things. When an American visitor began discussing Calvin, Chalmers could not lay his hands on a copy of the *Institutes*, neither are they listed in the catalog of his library. Chalmers left others to keep up with what was happening to theology in Germany. He had devoted philosophy in his youth, and there was nothing lightweight about his study. Yet it is perhaps not surprising that James McCosh's sympathetic analysis saw him reconciling the theology and philosophy of Scotland but did not see him contributing much to either. How one judges this issue may depend on whether one thinks that Chalmers solved the difficulties, or just regarded them as of lesser importance. Perhaps he read the needs of his times fairly well.

There is more than a little irony in the situation. The theological history of nineteenth-century Scotland is one in which the dominant theme appears to be the weakening of traditional Calvinism, along with the study of people judged to be heretics in their own time, if harbingers of future trends. This is not a complement that is extended to Chalmers. In the categories of traditional theology, people on the fringe such as Erskine of Linlathen, Edward Irving, and John McLeod Campbell are seen to be the representatives of the future. All these, helped amazingly by D. L. Moody, are noted for their contribution to the breakdown of the old Calvinism. This development can be seen in the rise of liberalism and idealism, in the heresy trial of William Robertson Smith, and in the passing of the Declaratory Acts, which distanced churches from narrower interpretations of the Westminster Confession. Whatever Evangelicals said about Moderates, the heretics of the later part of the century are from the Free Church, not the Church of Scotland. The heretics of the
first half of the century also counted themselves Evangelicals, and they all had close associations with Chalmers. Irving had been Chalmers’s assistant at St. John’s, Chalmers corresponded with Campbell and was a good friend of Erskine. A more liberal attitude toward the confession is clear enough in Chalmers’s writing, teaching, and preaching.

Perhaps because it was known that his heart concerns lay elsewhere and his sympathies lay in dangerous directions, this theological legacy has been left out of the story. It would be too much for the Free Church to admit that their hero might be soft on Calvinism. Whether explicable or not, the omission is not justified by the evidence of what Chalmers actually did to shape Christian faith and action in his lifetime. His beliefs and values proved more enduring than those both more and less conservative, and in the large-heartedness of his spirit to which many referred, he contributed to a change of theological temper.

His immediate successor as professor of divinity in the Free Church was of the old school, but after him came Robert Rainy. Rainy’s actions in dealing with William Robertson Smith in 1880 and in supporting the Declaratory Act of 1892 indicate someone whose theological attitudes pointed to the future, for good or ill. That they have very traceable roots in Chalmers’s teaching and example is not often stated.

It is important for the evangelical tradition that it can own Chalmers as a model of what a key stream of that tradition is about. He believed in a free Gospel. He believed in education. He was excited by science. His sense of the foundational importance of the Bible included an awareness that its inspiration related “not to the thing recorded, but the truth of it.” Church order was something for people to decide. He saw theology as historically conditioned. He thought in terms of general principles as well as concrete details. He had an eye for the important questions of his time. He was impatient of creeds and tolerant of Catholics. He was influenced by Methodists and Moravians and was a friend of Anglicans, agnostics, Baptists, the first British charismatics, Quakers, a good number of Moderates, and not a few judged to be heretics. If Scots and others find they cannot study the nineteenth century and the mission of the church without studying Chalmers, it is not a bad situation to be in.

Selected Bibliography

Works by Thomas Chalmers

Chalmers Papers, New College Library, University of Edinburgh.

Works About Thomas Chalmers


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