

Revivals And Church History :: Thomas Chalmers

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Thomas Chalmers was truly a giant in his own time! Mighty in Scotland, the land of his birth, he was widely acclaimed everywhere for his powers of acuity in discerning gospel truth, his tremendously powerful way of putting it across, and his remarkable zeal and energy on behalf of the poor. Read about his birth, quite humble but godly, his aspirations, his disappointments and achievements. Read - and marvel! Are men like that made today? Probably, but they are rejected as impractical and unrealistic. We'll not see his like again.

Thomas Chalmers

by Charles Walker

The nineteenth century saw a spiritual movement in Scotland which in its own way was comparable to the Puritan movement in seventeenth century England. B. B. Warfield noticed the similarity in the way in which the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was handled by the Puritans and their successors in Scotland. In both movements preaching was restored to its prominent place in the life of the Church, with the result that the Church was purified and increased in numbers. No one person gave more impetus to this movement and to the restoration of biblical preaching than Thomas Chalmers. He was the Perkins of nineteenth century Scotland.

Some of the lustre has worn away from the name of Chalmers over the intervening years. The works of his great successors at the Free Church College, Edinburgh - Cunningham, Smeaton, Buchanan are still read. Chalmers is not. To make any deductions about their respective merits, however, would be completely wrong. Comparing these men with Chalmers would not be comparing like with like. He had a work to do for which they had not the gifts, just as they had a work to do for which he would have been quite unsuited. Our own century has produced its successors to Cunningham, Smeaton and their illustrious colleagues: theologians whose work was directed mainly to other theologians and to the educated middle classes. It is a century, however, which has suffered greatly for the want of men like Chalmers: theologians who could speak to the man in the street and bring him face to face with the great verities of the Christian faith.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Thomas Chalmers was born in 1780 in Anstruther, a little fishing village in Fifeshire. He was the sixth child of a family of fourteen. Owing to the size of the family his parents were unable to give him a great deal of personal attention and his upbringing consequently suffered. At the age of two he was committed to the care of a nurse and was subjected by her to a great deal of cruelty not an uncommon feature of the domestic life of that time. He was glad to escape from her clutches and go to school at the age of three, but he soon found that he had not improved his position very much. The savage punishments, however, which in common with the other children he had to endure, drove him neither to depression nor to industry. Cheerfulness and idleness were his most noticeable features, during his years at school. Just before he was twelve years old he enrolled as a student at the University of St. Andrews. His first two years there, however, were of value only in getting him used to his surroundings. Even after his first session there he was unable to write a letter without the most glaring and repeated mistakes in spelling and grammar.

INTELLECTUAL AWAKENING

In the session of 1793-94 his intellectual powers suddenly sprang to life. Mathematics was the first subject to lay hold of his imagination and this was followed, although not quite to the same degree, by ethics and politics. In 1795 he enrolled as a theological student, following a decision made many years previously to become a minister. He was soon completely immersed in the study of Jonathan Edwards's treatise on "Free Will," but his study was not pursued in a way that would have met with Edwards's approval. Chalmers' interest in the subject was purely speculative and philosophical. Christianity had not yet left its mark on him.

He continued at St. Andrews until 1798 when he became for a few months a private tutor. In 1799, when he was still only nineteen, he was licensed by the presbytery as a preacher of the gospel. He was in no hurry, however, to take up the work of the ministry. The study of mathematics still attracted him greatly and he pursued it for two more years at Edinburgh University.

The call to the ministry of the Church of Scotland eventually came to Chalmers in November 1802. He was offered and a

accepted the living of the parish of Kilmany. The living was the gift of St. Andrews University and the parish was not too far away from the town. This was just as well because, in the same month, Chalmers embarked on another career which, at the time, seemed infinitely more interesting and exciting. He became assistant to the Professor of Mathematics at the University.

LECTURES IN MATHEMATICS

It was in this job that Chalmers first began to display his extraordinary eloquence and his powers for kindling enthusiasm in others. His own enthusiasm, however, the almost evangelistic fervour of the lectures, were looked upon with suspicion by the Professor. Mathematics was not considered a fit subject for fervour and the Professor distrusted his new assistant. He began to interfere in the running of the classes, and Chalmers made no secret of his resentment at the Professor's actions. Feelings ran high and Chalmers was probably not very surprised to find at the end of the session that he had been sacked. What concerned him more than the loss of the post was the fact that it was given out as the reason for his dismissal that he was an inefficient teacher. Such an allegation, unless refuted, would have put an end to his chances of achieving distinction through an academic career. Chalmers met the situation in a way that only he would have thought of, or having thought of, would have dared to put into practice. The following year he offered to students of St. Andrews a series of lectures as an alternative to the official University course. The classes were well-attended and although there was considerable ill-feeling from the Professor at the outset eventually a reconciliation was effected. Having made his point, Chalmers discontinued the lectures.

A SPARE-TIME MINISTRY

It might be thought that, with all this activity, Chalmers was left with little time to devote to his parish duties and to preaching. Whoever else might have thought this, Chalmers did not. A few hours on a Saturday evening were, in his opinion, more than enough to equip him for the pulpit on Sunday. No one could complain that his sermons were lacking in eloquence, even although they might be altogether lacking in specifically Christian content. In the tradition of "moderate" clergymen in Scotland (as distinct from "enthusiasts"), Chalmers preached a high morality, but overlooked the fact that the law does not carry with it the power to perform. It took about nine years of preaching, a long and serious illness and much heart-breaking failure in his own hopeless struggle after perfection, to prepare him to receive the message of Wilberforce's "Practical View." This book brought him to look at the foundations of his theology and he found them to be unsound. He found, as he afterwards wrote, that "on the system of "Do this and live", no peace can be found and even no true and worthy obedience can ever be attained." It is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." When this belief enters the heart, joy and confidence enter along with it.

The change in the tone and in the effect of Chalmers ministry can best be described in his own words:

"I am not sensible that all the vehemence with which I urged the virtues and the properties of social life had the weight of a feather on the moral habits of my parishioners. And it was not till I got impressed by the utter alienation of the heart in all its desires and affections from God; it was not until reconciliation to Him became the distinct and the prominent object of my ministerial exertions; it was not till I took the scriptural way of laying the method of reconciliation before them... that I ever heard of any of these subordinate reformations which I aforesaid made the earnest and the zealous, but I am afraid at the same time the ultimate, object of my earlier ministrations".

REMOVAL TO GLASGOW

With Chalmers great eloquence now being used in the service of the Gospel, it was not long before he received a call to a much larger parish. He was at first rather hesitant about accepting but in 1815 he moved to Glasgow and became minister of the Tron Church. He was thirty-five when he went there and he remained in Glasgow for eight years first at The Tron and later at St. John's Church. As far as oratory was concerned, Chalmers was then at the height of his powers. The Tron church, with seating capacity of about fourteen hundred, had always many more standing in the aisles and sitting on the pulpit stairs with further crowds outside unable to gain admission. In a ministry of this kind it is always difficult to estimate how many came to hear the gospel and how many merely to hear Chalmers. Many who fell into the latter category came and were converted. Many others, however, doubtless remained merely as appreciative viewers of a spectacular performance. Popularity of this kind can be the ruination of a preacher, as it was with Chalmers' assistant, a man of similar gifts but with less distrust of himself. (Edward Irvine - Ed.) Chalmers came to his own conclusion about the value of popularity and had this to say about it:

"There is another, a high and a far-sounding popularity, which is indeed a most worthless article, felt by all who have it most to be greatly more oppressive than gratifying a popularity of stare, and pressure, and animal heat, and a whole tribe of other annoyances which it brings round the person of its unfortunate victim. Popularity which rifles home of its sweets, and by elevating man above his fellows places him in a region of desolation, where the intimacies of human fellowship are unfelt, and where he stands a conspicuous mark for the shafts of malice, and envy, and detraction, a popularity which

h, with its head among storms and its feet on the treacherous quicksands, has nothing to lull the agonies of its tottering existence but the hosannahs of a drivelling generation".

This opinion had a steadying effect on Chalmers, but from time to time it led him to be more depressed than he need have been about the effects of his preaching.

PARISH WORK

One of the first things that struck Chalmers when he went to Glasgow was the degraded condition of a large proportion of the population. They lived in squalor and for the most part would no more have thought of going into a church than a luxury hotel. In general there had been a tendency on the part of ministers to look upon the problem of the untouched masses as one which was incapable of solution, even although they might not say so in so many words. Chalmers from the start would accept no such view. About eleven thousand people lived in the parish and Chalmers was determined to visit each one of them during the first year or two of his ministry. His visits were of necessity short, but were long enough to enable him to make a fairly accurate assessment of the most pressing needs of the people. Ignorance was high on the list of urgent problems and to combat it he divided the parish into small districts and arranged for a Sunday School to be started in each of them. This was not enough, however, and he soon set about raising funds to start opening day-schools in the parish, with fees small enough for his parishioners (two shillings a quarter for reading, three shillings for writing, arithmetic and book-keeping). He was determined that it should be seen by all that the odious term charity school should not apply to these schools. "The first thing that I have to say of these schools", he told the parishioners at a meeting just before one of the schools was opened, "is that in no one sense of the term are they charity schools.. The education is not given - it is paid for. It is not given to a particular number, as in some schools, where so many poor scholars are admitted gratis, and marked out by this distinction from the rest of their play-fellows. We are anxious to keep any distinction of this kind away from our establishment. Each scholar comes upon the same equal and independent footing... There will be no other inequality known within the walls of our institution but such as arises from the diversity of talent and diligence and personal character. In every other respect it will be a little republic...".

Although he never interfered with the work of the teachers Chalmers took the greatest interest in the schools and visited one or other of them almost every day. Another great work, however, took up a great deal of his time and energy. This was the reorganisation and administration of the parish poor relief-system. He came to the parish with very definite views on how a relief system ought to work and spent a great deal of time and energy in putting them into operation. His system was used for the ensuing eighteen years, all expenses being met from church collections.

With all his energy and enthusiasm, Chalmers could not have carried out his parochial work in Glasgow if it had not been for his extraordinary ability to kindle a similar enthusiasm in others. He gathered round him a band of devoted workers, many of whom had been converted under his preaching, and the detailed work was carried out by them. The office of deacon had many years previously fallen into general disuse in Scotland and Chalmers revived it, appointing to the office the men who administered the poor relief system. He ordained as elders a group of young men, some of whom were in charge of the Sunday schools. These jobs were not sinecures but Chalmers seems never to have been short of men who were prepared to give much of their strength and energy to assist him in his schemes.

RETURN TO ST. ANDREWS

It came as a tremendous shock to his parishioners when in 1823 Chalmers decided to leave this sphere of exceptional usefulness and withdraw into a comparative back-water. In that year he was offered and accepted the chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. He was in no doubt whatever about accepting it. The office of a professor he regarded as being "a higher station in the vineyard, even of Christian usefulness, than the office of a single minister of a single congregation" mainly because all future ministers were to pass through the Universities and would fall under the influence of the professors. He gave a very high place to the study of moral philosophy. "Moral philosophy is not theology", he wrote to the elders and deacons in Glasgow, "but it stands at the entrance of it, and so, of all human sciences, is the most capable of being turned either for guiding aright, or for most grievously perverting the minds of those who are to be the religious instructors of the succeeding age".

In November, 1823, Chalmers preached his last sermon as minister of St. John's, Glasgow and left to start the second phase of his remarkable career.

When Chalmers left his busy parish in Glasgow for the seclusion of St. Andrews University he was not entirely motivated by the desire to "get away from it all." This was one of the factors which helped him to decide: the strain of his work was beginning to tell on his health. He considered, however, that although he was moving out of public life, in taking up this new work he was engaging in a higher calling than that of parish minister. He did not regard Moral Philosophy as an alternative to the Gospel, but as a study which stood "at the entrance" of theology. He saw his new position as one which would offer great opportunities of influencing the rising generation of ministers, and he hoped that he would be able to devote more time to writing, which he also regarded as part of his calling. By this time he had a number of publications to his

credit, mainly volumes of sermons and addresses. Some idea of the extent of his influence on the religious life and thought of Scotland can be gathered from the fact that in 1816 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity by the "unanimous voice" of Glasgow University a very rare occurrence at that time.

INCREASING INFLUENCE

Quite shortly after his arrival, Chalmers started his extra-curricular work. In characteristically methodical fashion he marked out a district and started to visit all the families in it. This led to the foundation of a small Sunday School, and there is evidence that Chalmers prepared the lessons for that small group of children with as much care as he did the lectures to his students. He also looked after the spiritual interests of a small group of students whom he invited to his house on Sunday evenings. Much against his inclinations, for he hated crowds, Chalmers yielded to pressing requests from ever-increasing numbers of students to join this circle. Before Chalmers arrival in St. Andrews the students had the reputation of being unusually godless, and in this respect the theological students were even more notorious than the others. The effect of his short stay there was to change the whole situation. No one could hear Chalmers and dismiss Evangelical Christianity as either anti-intellectual or sentimental. It became a subject not only for serious discussion but for earnest and urgent attention. The practical issues of Christianity soon took hold of the students minds and a society was formed amongst them to promote interest in the missionary movement. Of the three hundred pupils who passed through Chalmers hands at St. Andrews, six volunteered for the work of foreign missions, one of them being Alexander Duff, who became one of the greatest missionaries of the 19th century.

PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY

Chalmers work at St. Andrews was cut short by his call to a yet higher office and one even more to his taste. This was the chair of Divinity at Edinburgh University, in which he was installed in November, 1828. His first lecture was announced for eleven o' clock on Monday, the 10th November. It was a day of snow and hail-stones but this did not prevent a queue forming at nine o' clock and becoming so large that the police had to be called in to see that order was kept. This excitement was sustained throughout the whole of the first term. The students were delighted at the prospect of having Chalmers as a professor, but there was a little doubt in the minds of some of them about his suitability for the work. Evangelicals were not in the majority, and their opponents would be only too ready to seize on any over-emphasis or rash statements which Chalmers eloquence might lead him to make. William Cunningham, who later succeeded as Principal of the Free Church College, was a student at the time. He was obviously already a very competent student of theology, and shared both the delight and the fears of his fellow-students. We can sense the relief in this letter which he wrote after Chalmers first lectures:

"Chalmers first lecture lasted an hour and three-quarters. It was most decidedly successful - worthy of the man, the occasion, and the subject. It contained a general view of the subjects and divisions of theological science, and a view of the general principles of philosophic investigation, as applicable to theology. He concluded with a splendid pleading on behalf of men of imagination and feeling against the charge of being mere declaimers; and shewed with great strength of argument and force of illustration, that in theology, the feelings and emotions which the contemplation of truth is fitted to excite are the ultimate and terminating object of our labours ... "The most surprising, and at the same time the most valuable feature in all his lectures has been the singular soundness and correctness of the views and opinions which they brought before us. Upon all the difficult subjects of theology, and the connection between natural theology and the evidences of Christianity; and where, perhaps, he was more likely still to have failed, on the nature and importance of the relative objects and spheres of Biblical criticism and systematic theology, his views have been as judicious as if he had been one of those cold and heartless syllogisers whom he ridiculed in his first lecture as dealing only in the "osteology," the "technology" and the "mere nominalities of science.

The years at Edinburgh University (1828-1843) were very fruitful ones for Chalmers. More and more of the students who left him to become ministers of the Church of Scotland were in complete sympathy with his teaching and went out to preach the true Gospel with something of Chalmers' own urgency and authority. McCheyne and the Bonar brothers were the best known among his students but they were only some of the many who came under his influence. They were all needed, for a testing time was coming to the Church of Scotland. Chalmers influence, however, was not restricted to students. His writings were gaining increasing attention and he was publicly honoured in 1834 by being admitted as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and a Corresponding Member of the Royal Institute of France. The following year he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws by the University of Oxford. But most of all he was in the public eye because of the leading part he took in the struggle for the freedom of the Church to manage her own affairs without interference from the Civil Authority. This struggle, which lasted for almost ten years, culminated in the Disruption of 1843.

ECCLESIASTICAL DEBATES

The Established Church of Scotland had a patronage system similar to that of the Church of England. In 1834 the General Assembly of the Church passed the Veto Act by which patrons were forbidden to force upon a parish a minister to whom they had valid objections. It was not long before the right to veto was put into operation. The parish of Auchterarder, with three hundred voters, rejected a Mr. Young who had been presented by the patron, two hundred and eighty-seven of the parishioners voting against him and only two voting for him. Young, however, did not submit to his rejection and took action against the Presbytery in the Supreme Court. The action was heard in 1838. The Court found in favour of Young and its decision was confirmed the following year by the House of Lords. In the meantime another prospective minister by the name of Clarke was vested by a parish. The Presbytery refused to ordain Clarke to the charge and was about to ordain another man, Kessen, when Clarke obtained an injunction from the Supreme Court ordering them not to ordain Kessen. The Presbytery sought the advice of the General Assembly and received instructions to ordain Kessen on the ground that admission to the pastoral office was entirely an ecclesiastical act. The Presbytery obeyed the Assembly and ordained Kessen and were promptly summoned before the Court on a charge of contempt. By a narrow majority the judges decided to censure the members of the Presbytery and not to send them to prison.

A full-scale debate on this subject took place in the Assembly in 1838. Chalmers took a leading part and spoke with great power in support of the principle that a minister should not be intruded on a congregation against their will. At the end of the speech he was so exhausted that he had to leave the Chamber and was not able to return even to cast his vote. The "non-intrusion" party won, even in Chalmers absence, by 47 votes.

The struggle between the Civil and Ecclesiastical Courts soon took an even more serious turn. In the parish of Marnoch a prospective minister was vetoed, took the usual course of applying to the Civil Courts, and obtained an order directing the Presbytery to proceed with his settlement in the parish. The Presbytery eventually declared in 1841 that it was their intention to obey the order. This declaration, of course, was an act of rebellion against the Church's authority in that it contravened the provisions of the Veto Act. The Assembly decided to act firmly and it suspended from office the seven ministers who formed the majority of the Presbytery. Their case, however, would be reviewed if they signed an undertaking to submit to the Church in accordance with their ordination vows. The suspended ministers resolved to disown the authority of the Church and applied to the Civil Court for protection. The Civil Court ordered that in the churches and other parochial buildings in the Presbytery only these seven ministers should be allowed to speak. The Church submitted to this decision, sending other ministers to preach within the Presbytery in the open air and in barns. When the Court became aware of this it issued a further order banning all preaching except by these seven ministers in any part of the Presbytery. To an order such as this the Church could not consent. It was in direct conflict with the Great Commission. Chalmers and a number of other ministers of some standing in the Church went to preach in the various parishes of the Presbytery in defiance of the Court and in danger of imprisonment. The Court, however, had not the courage of its convictions and took no steps to enforce its own order. The struggle was now not merely about patronage but about the basic fundamentals of religion. Who was to be Lord of the Church? The Evangelicals in the Church had no doubts about it. After trying every way open to them to get the Government to guarantee the Church's freedom, the Evangelical group decided that the only course open to them was to withdraw from the Establishment. At the Assembly of 1843 the Moderator, Dr. Welsh, handed a protest to the Lord High Commissioner and took his leave. It was the moment the whole country was waiting for. How many would forsake an assured living for a point of principle? It was confidently expected by the Government and the opponents of the Evangelicals that it would be less than a hundred, probably far less. The crowd lining the streets outside soon saw how far wrong these cynical estimates had been. No less than 470 ministers giving up a revenue of more than £100,000 a year, had displayed to the world that faith and a good conscience were of more value than any worldly form of security. All the missionaries of the Church of Scotland joined the Disruption forces.

The Free Church of Scotland was then formed with Chalmers as the Moderator of the first General Assembly. Dr. Welsh nominated him, saying that "the eyes of every individual in this Assembly the eyes of the whole country the eyes of all Christendom are directed to one individual. The ministers present may have lost much, but they had gained much too. "You would have been struck," writes Chalmers to his sister, "with the contrast presented by our outgoing clergy, between their anxious and wo-begone aspect before they had taken their decision and their perfect relief and light-heartedness after it. Never was there a happier Assembly, with a happier collection of faces than in our Free Church with consciences disburdened, and casting themselves without care, and with all the confidence of children, on the providence of that God who never forsakes the families of the faithful." Chalmers was ready to meet some of the new situations caused by the Disruption. In more than two hundred cases the ministers who left the Establishment did not have a sufficient number of adherents to support them. The new Church had promised to supply Christian ordinances to all adherents, but it was only as the result of Chalmers management of the finances that the promise could be redeemed. It was estimated that the Free Church owed half of her numerical strength to him and to the Sustentation Fund which he evolved, providing a central pool for payment of ministers stipends. The liberality of the people was overwhelmingly more than could ever have been expected. Pulpits all over England were opened to Free Church ministers to preach sermons, explain their testimony an

to gain financial support for the young Church. A deputation went to America and gained much support there. Chalmers was urged to go to London and give some lectures, but he refused. What he was intent on seeing was that the people of Scotland took steps to help themselves. They did. Within a year nearly five hundred churches had been built and more than one hundred new ministers ordained. Much of the money required was provided by contributions of £300,000 from within Scotland itself.

In addition to preaching and organising the Church's finances, Chalmers gave lectures in systematic theology to students studying for the Free Church ministry. About this time he started work on two books: Institutes of Theology and Daily Scripture Readings. These were large undertakings for a man of his age, but neither his energy nor his enthusiasm for the work of the Gospel ever seemed to diminish. He seemed to be in good health right up to the end of his life, complaining in the last day or two only of tiredness. On the night of the 30th May, 1847, he died in his sleep.

Chalmers' gifts were extraordinary. His oratory appears from its effects to have been different in kind from anything heard in our day. Spurgeon did not put himself in the same class. Bishops and Cabinet ministers jostled each other in the aisles as they went to hear him lecture on the Establishment Principle. Who else could command packed audiences on such a subject? But Chalmers cannot be wholly explained in terms of oratory or of intellect. He did not use his oratory to attract crowds; he hated crowds. Nor to sway them emotionally. All his powers of intellect and imagination were used to bring home the Gospel to the consciences of those who heard him. To do this, he spent much time in bringing it first to his own conscience. His diaries suggest that this was his hardest labour, and it was a labour he kept up to the end. Whatever demands his other work made on his time, he always made sure that he had time left for secret prayer. And God, who sees in secret, rewarded him openly.