

# Chalmers: Pastor for the Poor

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## Abstract

Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) was a Scottish churchman known for his leadership of the evangelical movement in the Church of Scotland, which culminated in the formation of the Free Church of Scotland. While a pastor in rural Scotland and then in Glasgow, he developed a unique approach to caring for the poor. This article looks at the development of his thoughts, the implementation of his ideas, and his lasting legacy.

## Keywords

*Thomas Chalmers, Free Church of Scotland, poverty, Poor Laws, education, diaconal ministries*

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**T**homas Chalmers was born on March 17, 1780.<sup>1</sup> Over the next sixty-seven years, he would lead a very public life as pastor, university professor, visionary social reformer, and leader in the church. As well as being a churchman who spoke and wrote on theology and the Bible, he was a man of many interests who published works on subjects as diverse as the economy, sociology, and politics.

He was a man who cared deeply about the less fortunate in society, and there were aspects of his ministry that were focused on addressing the very

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in this article is drawn from my book *Chief Scottish Man: The Life and Ministry of Thomas Chalmers* (Leyland, England: Evangelical Press, 2021). Used with permission from Evangelical Press.

real social problems of his time. He had specific ideas about how to reduce the grinding poverty in Scotland's cities and improve access to education, and he sought to implement them during his pastorates in Glasgow.

Responses to his ideas have been mixed. Some see Chalmers as a person who wanted to mold the working population into his conception of what a moral citizen should be. Others see his attempts to improve the conditions of the working class through the charitable efforts of the church as laudable and something that the church should be emulating today.

Before we look at some of his specific ideas, it is important to understand the context in which he lived. At the time of his birth in 1780, Scotland's population was approximately 1.5 million. By the time of his death sixty-seven years later, the population had increased to nearly 2.8 million. To place this population growth in context, during the whole of the eighteenth century, Scotland's population had grown by less than six hundred thousand people.

Scotland was deeply impacted by the Industrial Revolution. It saw major growth in industry and a shift from a largely agrarian economy to one based on factory-based production. The population explosion, seen chiefly in Scotland's largest cities, brought with it major social problems. Unemployment, drunkenness, and crime were all too prevalent. John McCaffrey describes the prevailing conditions:

The growing specialization in agriculture and the advent of steam-powered machinery helped to localize labor in towns, creating physical problems in health, housing and sanitation. The economic problems of growth, cyclical fluctuation and structural unemployment ensured that the transformation would not be easy. The emergence of new social groupings in new locations led to divisions between classes which were not simply physical but moral and cultural too.<sup>2</sup>

Scotland had long recognized that provision needed to be made for the poor. Prior to the Reformation, the monasteries had provided some care for the poor; this then passed largely to the Church of Scotland. The Poor Law, which had been enacted by the Scottish Parliament, came into effect in 1574. It gave the provost and bailie of each town or burgh the power to levy taxes on the burgesses, provided that the town council agreed. In rural areas, the responsibility for providing relief was assigned to local parish churches. In 1672, another act was passed that required local landowners to provide funds, half from their own pockets and the other half from their tenants. While the system had been significantly stretched during times of

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<sup>2</sup> John F. McCaffrey, "Thomas Chalmers and Social Change," *Scottish Historical Review* 60.1, no. 169 (April 1981): 40.

crisis brought on by crop failures and the resulting famines, under normal circumstances, it had worked reasonably well.<sup>3</sup>

In Glasgow, where Chalmers would serve in two parish churches between 1815 and 1823, poor relief had been the responsibility of four different groups: the churches, where relief was managed by the minister and elders, the town council, the incorporated trades, and the Merchants' House. Eventually, these four groups began working together more closely. Under the direction of a board of management led by the Lord Provost, the Town's Hospital was planned with the stated purpose of providing medical care, food and clothing, work, and housing for those living in poverty. Planning began in 1730, and the hospital opened on November 15, 1733.<sup>4</sup> This hospital has been described as "an experiment bold and progressive, but in the end no answer to urban poverty as the local economy continued to expand."<sup>5</sup> Charity dispensed by churches and private citizens was also insufficient at a time when the population was growing and the number of the poor was increasing.<sup>6</sup>

Chalmers's approach to caring for the poor began to develop during his ministry in Kilmany, which lasted from 1803 to 1815. It is important to remember that when he began his ministry there, he was not a born-again Christian. Rather, he had entered the ministry because it was considered a respectable occupation, and he had hoped that it would also allow him to advance his reputation and become a prominent voice in Scotland and the rest of Great Britain.

While in Kilmany, Chalmers spent some of his time working on a book entitled *An Enquiry into the Extent and Stability of National Resources*. He hoped that the book, which he paid to have published in 1808, would contribute to the relatively new field of political economy. In the book, he wrote that if British society were properly organized and regulated, then the economy could flourish based on internal production. His thesis assumed a largely agrarian population that could produce enough food and other materials to support basic human needs. As a result, it did not sufficiently come to grips with the forces of industrialization that were already

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the evolution of poor relief in Scotland, see Michael Fry, *A Higher World: Scotland, 1707–1815* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014), 157–88.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the development of the Town's Hospital, see Fiona MacDonald, "The Infirmary of the Glasgow Town's Hospital, 1733–1800: A Case for Voluntarism?," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73.1 (1999): 64–105, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44445195>.

<sup>5</sup> Fry, *A Higher World*, 166.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed statistics of the poor in Glasgow, see John Roxborough, *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for Mission, the Christian Good of Scotland and the Rise of the Missionary Movement*, Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 157–58.

beginning to change Great Britain permanently. The book attempted to make the case that a strengthened British economy would give the country confidence on the world stage. He further suggested that the government should not allow unfettered industrial growth, as that would be bad for the peace and stability of the population.

Note that Chalmers's book favorably cites the work of Thomas Robert Malthus and his work, *The Principles of Population*, published in 1804. Malthus argued in part that an "irresponsible increase in family size could lead to low incomes and misery all round."<sup>7</sup> Instead, people should marry later in life to reduce the size of their families. Further, there needed to be much better education so that people would "understand the benefits of supporting smaller families on their incomes and of increasing their wages by decreasing the labour supply."<sup>8</sup> Malthus also argued that civil poor relief, as stipulated in the Poor Laws, should be abolished because it caused people to be dependent on the government rather than being industrious.

The most crucial feature of Chalmers's book for our purposes was his argument that those who had great personal wealth and privilege should not be living their lives simply for their own pleasure or at the expense of the less fortunate. He was not arguing for the abolition of society's structures or even its hierarchy, but he did argue for much higher taxes to be leveled on those who could most afford to pay. He also argued that the individual worth or value of a person did not depend on how much money they had or how much property they owned but rather on their contribution to the nation's ideals and aims. The book was unsuccessful as a publishing venture, but it remains important for its indication of Chalmers's interest in socio-economic issues, and he would continue to adapt some of these ideas to his parochial model of pastoral care.

Chalmers's conversion to evangelical Christianity, which took place over a period of two years between 1809 and 1811, revolutionized his approach to his ministry. Instead of viewing the pastoral ministry as a way of gaining recognition and achieving wealth and status, he now saw that he was called to preach the gospel and serve his parishioners. In addition to his preaching and teaching, he turned his attention to the physical needs of the poor in the parish. It has been noted that

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Rutherford, "Malthus and Three Approaches to Solving the Population Problem," *Population* (English Edition, 2002-) 62.2 (2007): 215, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27645305>.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 117.

he employed his influence to secure medical assistance, food and clothing for the poor. ... He also personally donated substantial sums. On 21 February 1814 ... he noted in his diary his personal commitment to support two aged pensioners. ... On the same date, he vowed in the future to devote ten percent of his annual income "to the relief of the wants of others either spiritual or temporal."<sup>9</sup>

Chalmers moved from Kilmany to Glasgow in 1815 to become the minister of Tron parish church. The parish had been established in 1484 and, after the Reformation, had become Presbyterian in 1592. The church building itself had been rebuilt in 1794 and seated about thirteen hundred people. It was located just outside the official parish boundary, which was not unheard of, but it does indicate that the original concept of the parish system had broken down. Funding for the work of the parish, including payment of the minister's stipend, came largely from pew rents, which were moneys paid for the privilege of having an assigned seat in the church. At the time of Chalmers's installation, the total population of the parish was approximately eleven thousand people, but nearly half of those were not members of the Church of Scotland. Some of these people attended other churches, while others did not go to church at all because they either could not afford the pew rents or were not interested in attending. The parish was a very poor one, and it would not be long before the new minister would begin to realize just how big the task that lay before him was. As he began to come to grips with the spiritual and temporal problems in the parish, he developed a threefold approach: meeting physical needs, providing for better education, and proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

His first step was to begin systematic parish visitation. Beginning in November 1815, Chalmers, along with elders from the church, began visiting the residents of the parish. He spent whole days visiting as many as seventy families a day, and over the course of two years, he was able to meet most of his parishioners. He knew that he would not get to know the people intimately, but he did take care to keep statistics on each family and made careful notes of the specific needs that he discovered.

He soon recognized that the needs of the parish were so great that he could not make a difference on his own. As a result, he began to actively seek help from within his congregation. Tron parish was divided into twenty-five districts or proportions, and each of these districts was supposed to have an elder who was responsible for pastoral oversight and care. However, when Chalmers was installed as minister, there were only eight elders. Eight men could not properly care for the thirteen hundred who

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 77.

regularly attended the church or the eleven thousand outside the church. So, during his first year as minister, Chalmers began to look for suitable candidates for the eldership.

Twelve younger men were elected to the office of elder, and, by December of 1816, Chalmers had trained and was ready to install the new elders. All of them were well educated and had both the money and the time necessary to devote themselves to the work of the church. At their ordination, Chalmers told them that under God it would be up to them to see that the parish system could be made to work in the context of a large city. While he conceded that the parish system had broken down in the cities of Scotland, it did not have to remain that way.

He then went on to give them a threefold charge. First, it was their duty to teach the good news about Jesus through regular visitation. Second, they were to look proactively for those who truly needed material assistance from the church. They should encourage families to help themselves and, wherever possible, care for their own, but the elders were to make sure that people who genuinely needed it would be provided with support. Third, they were to encourage others who regularly attended Tron parish church to become actively involved in parish life. His hope was to mobilize the resources of a middle-class congregation to give of their time, talent, and treasure to care for the less fortunate.

Increasing the level of education was a key component of Chalmers's vision. A Sunday school society was established in December 1816 with only four teachers. By the time Chalmers left the parish three years later, there were over forty teachers and forty-seven schools, almost half the total number of schools in all of Glasgow. In addition to providing both literacy and religious education for many young people, Chalmers's Sunday school scheme had another major benefit: some of the teachers, who had previously been unaware of the difficult living situations of many Glasgow citizens, learned of the state of the inner city and were moved to devote significant efforts to improving the conditions.

As Chalmers continued his work at Tron parish, he was especially frustrated by the way in which the relief money for the poor was administered. Pew rents covered church expenses, including ministerial stipends, and separate collections were taken for the relief of the poor. These were controlled by the General Session, which was made up of ministers from each of the parishes. Money was then sent back to individual parishes based on the size of the poor population in the parish. If the needs outweighed the distributed funds, then those cases were referred to Town's Hospital, which was funded out of a local assessment.

Chalmers came to view this system as overly complicated and began to campaign to keep all collections for the poor within the parish for the exclusive use of the parish. During 1818 and 1819, he increasingly advocated for the abolition of the system itself. In so doing, he clashed with other evangelicals in the Church of Scotland who believed that while the current system was not perfect, it was better than what Chalmers was advocating. One of Chalmers's failings was that he held his views with considerable tenacity, and he was not always gracious when debating with others. So now, his views on poor relief and his personal manner placed him at odds with those who should have been his natural allies in the Church of Scotland.

The Glasgow Town Council had been planning to create a new parish in the east end of Glasgow for some time. They had not planned on creating a new parish for Chalmers, but he seized upon the plans as a means of moving forward his vision for parish ministry in Scotland's cities. As he thought about implementing a fuller vision in a new parish, he was careful to ensure that wealthy pew holders at Tron parish church would be given the opportunity to move to the new parish if they chose. He also secured an agreement that he could take some of the elders from Tron parish to the new parish. This meant that he would be starting with a core congregation who could provide him with the manpower and financial resources necessary to make the experiment work.

As Chalmers began work in the new parish of Saint John's, he quickly saw that a robust diaconal ministry would need to be established to carry out the work of caring for the poor in the east end of Glasgow. To the deacons, he gave these instructions:

When one applies for admittance through his deacon upon our funds, the first thing to be inquired into is, if there be any kind of work that he can yet do so as either to keep him altogether off, or as to make a partial allowance serve for his necessities; the second, what his relatives and friends are willing to do for him; the third, whether he is a hearer in any dissenting place of worship, and whether its session will contribute to his relief, and if after these previous inquiries it be found that further relief is necessary, then there must be a strict ascertainment of his term of residence in Glasgow, and whether he be yet on the funds of the Town Hospital, or is obtaining relief from any other parish. If upon all these points being ascertained the deacon of the proportion where he resides still conceives him an object for our assistance, he will inquire whether a small temporary aid will meet the occasion, and state this to the first ordinary meeting. But if instead of this he conceives him a fit subject for a regular allowance, he will receive the assistance of another deacon to complete and confirm his inquiries by the next ordinary meeting thereafter, at which time the applicant if they still think him a fit object, is brought before us, and received upon the fund at such a rate of allowance as upon all the circumstances of the case the meeting of deacons shall judge proper. Of course, pending these examinations the

deacon is empowered to grant the same sort of discretionary aid that is customary in other parishes.<sup>10</sup>

There was a clear intent in these guidelines that deacons should seek to help people help themselves. It was hoped that deacons could help the poor find work or encourage their families to help them if funds permitted. While some have argued that Chalmers was trying to reduce the funds used for poor relief as an end in itself, this was not the case. Rather, as Michael Fry has noted, Chalmers was seeking “the reformation of individuals who, through self-help, could lessen their own degree of dependency. At the same time, the rich were called on for greater charity.”<sup>11</sup>

The moral reformation that Chalmers sought could only be achieved through the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. This can best be summed up in his words from a sermon based on Ecclesiastes 4:13, in which Chalmers makes this powerful statement about the power of the Christian gospel to change the world. The gospel, he said, is

the great instrument for ... elevating the poor. ... Let the testimony of God be simply taken in, that on his own Son he has laid the iniquities of us all. ... Jesus Christ died, the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God. This is a truth, which, when all the world shall receive it, all the world will be renovated. Many do not see how a principle, so mighty in operation, should be enveloped in a proposition so simple of utterance. But let a man, by his faith in this utterance, come to know that God is his friend, and that heaven is the home of his fondest expectation; and in contact with such new elements as these, he will evince the reach, and the habit, and the desire of a new creature. It is this doctrine which is the alone instrument of God for the moral transformation of our species.<sup>12</sup>

Chalmers’s methodology, a mix of gospel preaching, education, and monetary support, showed promising results within the parish. The population of Saint John’s parish continued to increase during his tenure there, while the number of those considered paupers decreased. What did not work as well was his expectation that this “godly commonwealth” would be replicated throughout Scotland.

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<sup>10</sup> William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., L.L.D.* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable & Co., 1852), 2:299.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Fry, *A New Race of Men: Scotland, 1815–1914* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013), 176.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Chalmers, “On the Advantages of Christian Knowledge to the Lower Orders of Society,” in *Sermons and Discourses of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D., Now Completed by the Introduction of His Posthumous Sermons* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), 2:343–44.

In 1823, Chalmers left Saint John's for an academic position at Saint Andrew's University. Subsequently, he would take up positions at the University of Edinburgh and then, following the Disruption in 1843, New College. Although he was no longer actively involved in pastoral ministry, he remained very concerned about the needs of the poor.

Widespread famines in 1845 and 1846 placed considerable strain upon both church and state as they struggled to meet a very real need. First, in 1845, the potato crop failed in Ireland, and then, in 1846, the failure was even more widespread. In the autumn of 1846, Chalmers was instrumental in raising more than fifteen thousand pounds from within the Free Church for famine relief, which placed the Free Church at the forefront of relief efforts. By early 1847, the situation was made even worse by the outbreak of typhoid. It was clear that private philanthropy, either from individuals or churches, could not meet this need. There were calls among some to let the epidemic run its course. This appalling lack of concern was based on the bizarre idea that moral failure of the inhabitants of the affected areas of Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland had brought on the famine and the plague. Chalmers angrily denounced this unfeeling attitude in a letter published in *The Witness* on March 6, 1847. He bluntly called these attitudes unchristian. Rather than spending time blaming the poor for this terrible situation, he argued, Christians should be doing all that they could to alleviate the distress.

Then, in what can only be seen as a major change in his views, Chalmers argued in an article for the May 1847 issue of *The North British Review* that a crisis of the proportions that was currently being faced could only be dealt with direct government intervention.

What may suffice in ordinary [situations], clearly will not suffice for the present overwhelming visitation. There is an imperious call for the Government to come forward—and this not to supersede the liberalities of the public, but to ... add thereto the allowances of the State; or rather, for the State to be the principal almoner in such a dire emergency, and its distributions supplemented to the uttermost by the charities of the benevolent.<sup>13</sup>

He also argued that if this meant increased taxation on the wealthier in society, then the government should take this action. It has been argued that this is evidence that Chalmers was completely abandoning his ideal of the godly commonwealth. This is an overstatement. It is better to see his

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Chalmers, "Political Economy of a Famine," *North British Review* 7 (May–August 1847): 261–62.

views as an adaptation to a moment of crisis in Ireland and Scotland and a recognition that the church could not herself deal with the crisis without assistance.

As we seek to assess his legacy, although some have argued that Chalmers's vision of society was outmoded and oppressive to the poor, he cannot be accused of not caring for the spiritual and physical needs of those outside the walls of his church. Not all needs were met, but the mobilized and reinvigorated eldership and diaconate did make a difference. There were people who still remained in great need, but in both the parishes that Chalmers served and the city of Glasgow as a whole, there was improvement as a result of these initiatives.

While he saw care of the poor as central to the mission of the church, he was not afraid to adapt his views to meet changing needs in society. It has been rightly noted that in "his own time he was much admired for his depth of commitment to his work and his decision to go and live among the poor."<sup>14</sup> In the twenty-first century, his understanding that the gospel must be clearly preached and that there is an obligation laid upon the church and the society as a whole to care for the needs of the poor and disadvantaged is still true. It is still a message that needs to be heard.

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<sup>14</sup> Fry, *A New Race of Men*, 176.