

Today visitors flock like seagulls to Anstruther in the East Neuk of Fife for its award-winning fish and chips, but all around the town there are signs of an older claim to fame. It was there in 1780 that Thomas Chalmers was born—a man who would become one of the most prominent Scotsmen of his generation. Accordingly the oldest church building in Anstruther is named after him. The site of his family home also bears a blue plaque. Or perhaps most strikingly, if you eat your fish and chips on the harbour pier then you will see there the lighthouse built to mark the centenary of the great man's birth.

In his day, Thomas Chalmers really was a figure of national importance. Thomas Carlyle called him, "the chief Scotsman of his age." William Wilberforce, the famous slave trade abolitionist stated that, "all the world is wild about him." Even Karl Marx, the German-born philosopher commented that he was the "supreme parson."

In his lifetime Chalmers was responsible for planting more than a thousand churches. As Scottish society was becoming more industrialised, he pioneered new methods of Christian work amongst the urban poor. Those he mentored took the Gospel around the world.

When he died in 1847 they buried him in the newly built Grange Cemetery in EH9. Grateful crowds lined the streets to pay their respects, queuing down what is now aptly called Chalmers Crescent. The city of Edinburgh commissioned a statue, which stands on George Street to this day.

So who was this great man? And what did he achieve that so affected the Scottish nation?

The story of his life began, as we have seen, in Anstruther towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Young Thomas was an intelligent child and started at St Andrews University when he was just twelve. Mathematics was his real passion and he longed for academic greatness. It was slightly surprising, therefore, that despite having no real interest in Christian things he became a Church of Scotland minister at the age of 22.

Looking back it can certainly be said that Chalmers was not committed to this role, and he certainly did not intend to let church duties stand in the way of his academic ambitions. Saturdays were for sermon-writing and Sundays were filled up with church, but that still left Monday to Friday to do with as he wished. When he was 25 he applied to be Professor of Mathematics at Edinburgh University in addition to his role as a minister. He didn't feel his church work would hinder him, writing in a letter that, "after the satisfactory discharge of his parish duties, a minister may enjoy five days in the week of uninterrupted leisure."

Fortunately for Chalmers, his congregation and Scotland as a whole, this bright young man did not remain a Sunday Christian.

It was personal tragedy that shook Chalmers out of this nominal faith. Two of his siblings died in quick succession and Chalmers himself was then very ill. Facing his own mortality he realised the inadequacy of anything but a personal trust in the Lord Jesus. Academic success was all well and good, but it was not a sufficient foundation for his life or his eternal future. In later years Chalmers' son-in-law commented that, "His superficial faith of former years could no longer satisfy him. It could not stand the scrutiny of the sick-room; it could not bear to be confronted with death."

After that Chalmers was a new man. Gone was pursuit of his own interests, academic success and the acclaim of his peers. In their place came a hard-working and committed desire to serve Jesus and his kingdom.

This change in his life wonderfully illustrates a principle which Chalmers would later write about with great power. Arguably his most famous single work was a sermon entitled, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." Chalmers took as his text 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." He then sets out to explain that the problem of sin in our hearts is not that we have passions, affections and appetites but rather that these are directed onto the wrong things. The way to pursue change, therefore, is not to try to stifle or remove these affections, but rather to redirect them onto Christ. "Misplaced affections need to be replaced by the far greater power of the affection of the Gospel."

In other words, it is not enough to see the inadequacy of things in the world that our hearts chase after; rather we need to see more clearly the beauty, the majesty, and the worthiness of Jesus and the astonishing truth of what he has done in rescuing us. As we do that our affections will change, we will love the things of this world less and we will love Jesus more.

Before his conversion, Chalmers himself commented that he treated the Bible with contempt. He rejected many of its central truths, dismissing totally that it is Jesus' death in our place that can make us right with God. This contempt for the Bible was seen in how he spent his time. One member of his congregation said to him, "I find you busy sir with one thing or another, but come when I may, I never find you at your studies for the Sabbath."

However, after his conversion there was a radical change that caused the same parishioner to comment, "I never come in now, sir, but I find you at your Bible!" To which Chalmers responded, "All too little, John, all too little."

Chalmers' love for the Scriptures was humble and profound. He trusted and lived out the truth of 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." He knew that it is not up to us to pick and choose the parts of the Bible we will listen to. He said, "Nothing can be more distinct or satisfactory in the way of guidance than simply to be told that the Word of God is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. But, should the affirmation be made that this applies only to *part* of these Scriptures, and we are left without any test by which to fix and identify that part—then the light wanes back again into darkness; and an extinguisher is put upon the Bible."

It wasn't just in his Sunday preaching that the Bible took centre stage. Personal devotion and family devotions were also encouraged and it was a special aim of Chalmers to have at least one Bible in every home.

Chalmers' love for the Bible also sprang from the fact that his great aim was to win souls. He knew that faith comes by hearing the Word and so he willingly threw himself into whatever work would enable people to be taught the Bible. Over the course of his life he became involved in the work of the Bible Society, both in London and Edinburgh. He founded Sunday schools and he trained the leaders—many of whom went on to become ministers. He was happy to work with people from different denominations and to try out new things—whatever might lead to more people hearing about Jesus.

But all of this was obviously very time-consuming and so he deliberately distanced himself from things that would not meet this end, even if they were things a minister then was expected to do. Chalmers famously refused to sit on a town council to decide whether pig broth or ox broth was better for people's health. He said, "I am gradually separating myself from all this trash... and long that my entire time be disposable to the ministry of the Word and prayer."

Chalmers' reputation as a preacher grew and aged 35 he was invited to become minister of a wealthy parish in Glasgow. But it wasn't long until he was confronted with the massive social inequalities in that city. The industrialisation of Glasgow was well under way and many in the city lived in terrible poverty. Chalmers gave up his wealthy parish to become minister of St John's, then the poorest parish in Glasgow. He wanted to reach those people with the saving news of Jesus, commenting that, "Those to whom Christ is precious will long that others should taste of that preciousness."

One of the first things he did was divide his parish of 10,000 people into smaller areas. And he appointed elders and deacons to visit families, taking a genuine interest in their welfare—both practically and spiritually. At that time people would rent their seats in church and so he lowered the rents to make sure that people were not excluded on the basis of poverty. He also started a mid-week service to allow those who still couldn't afford to come on a Sunday to come for free at another point in the week.

Even after sub-dividing his parish and reducing seat rents, simple proximity to church buildings remained an obstacle to many people hearing the Gospel. Chalmers' constant question was, "What is the most effectual method of making Christianity so to bear upon a population as that it shall reach every door and be brought into contact with all families?"

His solution was smaller parishes, no larger than 2,000 people, to enable people to be reached, taught and disciplined.

By this point Chalmers had left parish ministry and become Chair of Divinity at Edinburgh. He was appointed to lead a new Church Extension Committee and he set about planting churches. He raised funds which, in modern terms, would have amounted to more than £20 million. With this he was able to plant 220 churches in just seven years.

Sadly, however, things did not go smoothly with the churches Chalmers planted. The government continued to interfere with the appointment of new ministers, even appointing non-Christians to positions of church leadership. This led to a period of internal conflict within the Church of Scotland, with 'Moderates' and 'Evangelicals' disagreeing over how to respond.

Eventually this became too much for Chalmers and his fellow Evangelicals. In 1843 he led a third of the clergy and congregations into a new denomination, the Free Church of Scotland. That event is commonly known as 'The Disruption'. The Free Church then went on to plant a further 800 churches and start 500 schools, all with the express purpose of, "making Christianity so to bear upon a population as that it shall reach every door and be brought into contact with all families."

Chalmers died in 1847, four years after The Disruption. He kept loving Jesus, and he kept loving the lost, right to the end. In his 70s he started new work amongst the urban poor in Edinburgh. One of his contemporaries commented, "When so many of us are wringing our hands in hopeless despair over the vileness and wretchedness of the large towns, there goes the old man, shovel in hand, down into the dirtiest puddles of the West Port of Edinburgh, cleans them out, and fills the sewers with living waters. It is a beautiful sight."

The whole life of Thomas Chalmers had been driven by a love for Christ and a desire to expand the blessings of his kingdom:

"I long to see the day, nor do I despair of seeing it, when every parish shall have a Christian society—when not a district shall be left uncultivated, but shall yield a produce to the cause of the Saviour—when these lesser streams shall form into a mighty torrent to carry richness and fertility into the dry and desolate regions of the world—and when Britain, high in arms and political influence, shall earn a more permanent glory by being the dispenser of light and power, and the message of Heaven to the remotest nations."