"THE MOST JOYFUL EVENT OF MY LIFE"

THOMAS CHALMERS' WEST PORT EXPERIMENT (1844-1847)

On April 27, 1847, just over a month before Thomas Chalmers died, he wrote to a good friend and supporter, "I wish to communicate what to me is the most joyful event of my life. I have been intent for thirty years on the completion of a territorial experiment, and I have now to bless God for the consummation of it." During those "thirty years," Chalmers had become Scotland's premier preacher, celebrated by such figures as William Wilberforce, who once exclaimed, "The world is wild about Chalmers." He rose to prominence in the Church of Scotland and taught a generation of divinity students at the University of St. Andrews and the University of Edinburgh. While in the latter post, he successfully spearheaded an effort to raise funds for 220 new church buildings in poor, working-class areas of Scotland. Having championed the spiritual independence of the Church against state intrusion, in 1843, he courageously led more than 400 ministers out of the establishment in what would be called "the Disruption." He then provided masterful administrative guidance of the new fledgling denomination, the Free Church of Scotland, setting it on a sound financial footing. It was not without reason, then, that Karl Marx dubbed him the "arch-Parson." But the opening quote above shows us where his great ambition lay, that is, to complete a "territorial experiment." This article retells the story of Chalmers' home missionary efforts in the slums of the West Port, Edinburgh; in the second part, we will share the principles behind his model.

The West Port Story

First, some backstory. This final chapter in Chalmers' evangelical career ends where it began. Having first rediscovered and practised the parish model in idyllic, rural Kilmany, Fifeshire, after his conversion to evangelicalism in 1812, and having dedicated many years promoting it, he returned once again to practising the parish as a means to Christianize the land. "Yet such do I hold to the efficacy of the method with the divine blessing that, perhaps as the concluding act of my public life, I shall make the effort to exemplify what as yet I have only expounded." At the age of 64, the renowned evangelical churchman threw himself into a final effort to transplant "Kilmany," that is, the communal parish ideal, into the slums of Industrial Britain. Or, to use a popular 19th century Isaianic metaphor, he went to make the desert "blossom as the rose."

In many respects, this experiment would be a reiteration of the same model he deployed in St. John's in Glasgow from 1819-1823 and in the Water of Leith of Edinburgh from 1833-1836. As before, Chalmers was not interested in conducting this missionary experiment in middle-class or upper-class communities of Scotland. Rather, his great concern was for the economically blighted and morally abandoned "wastes" of "home heathenism." And by the 1840s, the plight of urban industrial Scotland had gone from bad to worse. Both civil and ecclesiastical voices united to decry the lamentable state of the masses, economically, morally, and spiritually.

But this particular experiment of Chalmers would be somewhat different. From one angle, the Disruption severed the Kirk from all state support, a tremendous sacrifice he and his fellow evangelicals made in the cause of spiritual independence. Nevertheless, he could now pursue his project unhindered by the complexities of Church patronage and an uncooperative government bureaucracy.

Chalmers' final experiment formally began with a series of lectures in June and July of 1844, printed in the *The Witness,* managed by Free Churchman Hugh Miller. In them, he rebuked British Christendom's abandonment of its working-class poor, restated his cherished principles of territorialism, expressed his determination to create sixty-six new working-class churches, and summoned a band of volunteers to join the effort. Specifically, he proposed the formation of societies comprising twenty volunteers each. Each society would adopt a needy, working-class district. That district would in turn be divided into twenty sections or "proportions" of twenty "contiguous" households each, and each of the twenty society members would be as-

signed to one of the proportions. It would be that member's duty to pay weekly visits to its residents, familiarising himself with its families. His job would be to "ingratiate" himself with them so that he might effectually promote their spiritual and temporal well-being. Being an explicitly missionary endeavour, the emphasis was on spiritual care, and so the great aim of the visitor would be to get the people into church. Yet they would seek to raise the outward condition of the population through education. They would spearhead the formation of a school for its children, hire a school teacher, and recruit students who would receive a quality, heavily subsidised education. And they would, of course, facilitate the establishment of public "ordinances" on the Sabbath, hiring a full-time missionary.

While Chalmers himself would work to establish a Free Church of Scotland territorial church, this scheme was overtly ecumenical. Dissenters and Free Churchmen would collaborate; each society would work towards the formation of a congregation belonging to its respective denomination. On the one hand, this method would stifle petty jealousies and the acrimony of the Voluntary Controversy of the 1830s. And yet at the same time, the scheme would cultivate a healthy, fraternal competition–all would strive to outdo each other in love and good deeds for Scotland's poor and neglected. "Woe betide the hin'most! Let us all set forth,–let us strive to outrun each other in this good work,–see who will get congregations formed soonest, and who will form most."

But Chalmers himself would lead by example. To make his experiment truly worthwhile, he picked arguably the worst cesspool of Industrialised Scotland that he could find–the West Port of Edinburgh. This was the district that had not long before been the scene of the horrific butchery of Burke and Hare, a cesspool of almost unimaginable squalor, disease, illiteracy, and crime. There seemed no better place to demonstrate the viability of the urban parish without an establishment. By late July, he had recruited ten volunteers, seven of whom were

middle-class men from outside the West Port and three from within it. Together with James Ewan, a Dissenting missionary with the Edinburgh City Mission, Chalmers divided the district into twenty proportions of one hundred contiguous households each. By January, he had finally enlisted the services of more than twenty workers, thus giving each proportion at least one if not two devoted labourers.

A survey his "agents" conducted that September in the West Port only confirmed the dire need. Of 411 families and a gross population of 2000, only 45 families belonged to a Protestant church–a tenth of the population; and 70 families were Roman Catholics. Consequently, 296 households had absolutely no church connection whatsoever, while most could hear the church bells of several services. A quarter of the entire population were paupers (those on the public roll for poor relief), and a full quarter were given to thievery and prostitution. There were more than

400 children in the West Port, yet only 122 attended school.

But these agents witnessed more than disturbing statistics in a ledger. William Hanna wrote that it was "no uncommon thing" for William Tasker, the eventual minister of the West Port, when first making his rounds,

> ... to find from twenty to thirty men, women, and children, huddled together in one putrid dwelling, lying indiscriminately on the floor, waiting the return of the bearer of some well-concocted begging letter, or the coming on of that darkness under which they might sally out, to earn by fair means or by foul, the purchase-money of renewed debauchery. Upon one occasion he entered a tenement with from twelve to twenty apartments, where every human being, man and woman, were so drunk they could not hear their own squalid infants crying in vain to them for food. He purchased some bread for the children, and entering a few minutes afterwards a neighbouring dram-shop [tavern], he found a half-drunk mother driving a bargain for more whiskey with the very bread which her famishing children should have been eating. He went once to a funeral, and found the assembled company all so drunk around the corpse, that he had to go and beg some sober neighbours to come and carry the coffin to the grave.

The bottom had evidently fallen out in the West Port. Every week, this small band of volunteer philanthropists walked through their proportions, dealing mainly in the "one thing needful." As Chalmers advised, they read Scripture, distributed religious literature, prayed with the inhabitants, and

urged them to attend the services on the Sabbath. Then they would convene on Saturday evenings to compare notes.

Having strongly dissuaded them from offering financial assistance on their visits, he yet encouraged them to be sensitive to real-life living conditions and needs. They could certainly assist those unemployed in finding work, and they could advocate for them with local authorities to clamp down on public nuisances that fostered waste and vice. And while distributing the "bread of life," they sought to arouse interest and commitment in the coming district school. They would make education available to the poorest of the poor, because all children have the innate potential for academic achievement given the opportunity.

The minutes of the West Port Local Society capture the reports of the district visitors in the opening years of its operation and provide a window into their weekly efforts. Frequently, the visitors would share about prayer meetings they had established and how they fared. Often, they would convey something of their spiritual instructions. "In going round one Sabbath, [Mr. Wilson] found one family incivil, but proceeded to read the Bible, spoke pointedly & in prayer alluded to their spiritual condition, which he believes to have been the cause of their dryness. The next family he saw were quite the opposite." A later report was more uplifting:

> Mr. Wilson had many encouragements in his district. In one family there are evident marks of a work of grace, especially in the case of the mother, concerning whom he is entitled to speak in a decided manner & though he cannot say the same of the father, there are considerable hopes of him also. They both attend the Sabbath services regularly, & the husband seems much affected with the anxious state of his wife. The children attend school & are doing remarkably well. He might also mention the case of a man, Alexander, who has made a decided sacrifice rather than accept of employment which though very advantageous in a pecuniary point of view, required him to violate the Sabbath.

They often noted their interactions with Romanists, and frequently the comments were positive, "Tracts are cheerfully received & perused by Roman Catholics; & in some instances they do not dislike or discourage religious conversations founded on a passage of Scripture–they even come to the district prayer meetings & the Sabbath public service." But they did at times meet resistance, such as one fellow that claimed that he, like many others, "though formerly in the practice of attending church on Sabbath, yet having imbibed infidel principles from books which he perused, no longer frequented the house of God." They also lamented their encounters with drunkenness and its collateral damage and deliberated as to the best methods to attack the vice. Yet, ultimately, they knew "the only effectual remedy against [it] seemed to be the more diligent & prayerful use of the means of grace."

Soon, the West Port Local Society secured a schoolroom. It was a fitting emblem of the district it would serve. Hanna again writes,

OLD HOUSES IN THE WEST PORT, NEAR THE HAUNTS OF BURKE AND HARE, 1869.
(From a Drawing by Mrs. J. Stewart Smith.)

> It lay at the end of the very close down which Burke and Hare and his associates decoyed their unconscious victims. Fronting the den in which those horrid murders were committed stood an old deserted tannery, whose upper storeloft, approached from without by a flight of projecting wooden stairs, was selected as affording the best accommodation which the neighbourhood could supply. Low-roofed and roughly floored, its raw unplastered walls pierced at irregular intervals with windows in unshapely form, it had little either of the scholastic or the ecclesiastical in its aspect.

Into this dingy hovel of a schoolhouse Chalmers called the inhabitants of the West Port to an opening public informational meeting on November 6, 1844. In it, he shared that the society offered each genuinely West Port family a subsidised, quality education for their children. Yet he made clear that each family must contribute a certain amount towards the cost of the schooling. Indeed, the society's whole experiment would fail in proportion to the degree in which residents did not respond to these volunteer efforts, cooperate, and become eventual net contributors to the success of their own community. The school then opened the following week, on November 11, with 121 students between day and evening classes. The students pursued the subjects of reading, writing, natural science, geography, and the Bible, while the more proficient could further pursue English grammar, Latin, and mathematics.

Sabbath services commenced in the tan-loft on December 12. Initially, there was a sense of anti-climax. Only twelve from the

community were in attendance, and most of them were older ladies. Yet they persevered with three services each Sabbath, until Mr. William Tasker, a particularly gifted and coveted Free Church student, responded to Chalmers' personal invitation to serve as the congregation's missionary–and eventual minister. Tasker began in April of 1845 and immediately joined Chalmers' side at the head of the West Port experiment. The two became close comrades-in-arms, and Chalmers found himself enthused once again to be among the working-class.

As time progressed, there were most encouraging signs of success. Within a year, the number of day school students had nearly quadrupled to 250. By March of 1846, the Sabbath schools had increased to 150 students. On August 6, 1845, the West Port Local Society held a public exhibition in the tannery for a number of prominent Edinburgh citizens, where they toured the facilities and enjoyed a display of the children's academic proficiency. Stewart Brown writes, "The day went beautifully. The children performed well, and afterwards Chalmers joined them for strawberries and cream–a look of benign contentment upon his face as he sat amid the noise and confusion of the excited youngsters." Hugh Miller wrote in *The Witness* the following week, "Smile as one might, there is no mistaking the fact that the minds of these children, which save for this school, would in all probability have slept on for life, were fully awakened."

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And in spiritual terms, things were brightening as well. By November of 1845, William Tasker reported that in one section comprising 27 families, 22 of which had lived without any church connection, church attendance at their services sharply increased to seven families, approaching a third of that population. And yet a still more "gladdening" index of success follows, as Tasker reported:

> ... that of these 32 individuals, there are a number who give evidence that they have been born again, and are now, upon the strength of that conviction, in communion with the visible church, and living epistles of Christ, giving light in the darkness. Besides these seven families, there are six or seven occasional hearers, giving good reason to hope that they will by and by become regular attendants. Thus one half of the moral desert here has been made to blossom; fruit, we trust, well pleasing to God, is brought forth; and, reasoning from analogy, the remaining half will not be so difficult, seeing that coadjutors in such a goodly proportion are now raised up in the midst of themselves.

In January of 1846, Chalmers began fundraising in earnest for a building that would adequately accommodate the congregation, school, and the other social programs already underway. The building would be a kind of multi-purpose facility, the fountainhead of ministry to the community and its social centre of gravity. Finally, on Friday, February 19, 1847, the completed building was opened for its first service of worship. He wrote to Tasker that next Monday, "I have got now the desire of my heart–the church is finished, the schools are flourishing, our ecclesiastical machinery is about complete, and all in good working order.

God has indeed heard my prayer, and I could now lay down my head in peace and die." On April 25, the church observed its first communion. It was two days later when he wrote to James Lenox about this "most joyful event of [his] life."

Our church was opened on the 19th of February, and in one month my anxieties respecting an attendance have been set at rest. Five-sixth of the sittings have been let; but the best part of it is, that three-fourths of these are from the West Port, a locality which, two years ago, had not one in ten church-goers from the whole population. I presided myself, on Sabbath last, over its first sacrament. There were 132 communicants, and 100 of them from the West Port.

Chalmers felt vindicated. But what is more, he was completely satisfied; for as he saw it, the Kilmany ideal had been transplanted into the worst 'moral desert' of Edinburgh's slums.

As he had anticipated, the West Port experiment was indeed Chalmers' last great tribute to the parish ideal. The very next month, on May 31, 1847, he was found in bed having passed in his sleep, his face showing signs only of complacency and peace. A nation, forever changed, mourned the passing of their loyal son.

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PURITAN REFORMED DOCTORAL DEFENSE OF
PASTOR IAN MACLEOD

On Thursday, May 2, 2024, at 10:00 am, Dr. Stephen Myers led Pastor Ian Macleod and a procession of professors into the Puritan Reformed Chapel for Macleod's defense of his doctoral dissertation. After a prayer, he was given opportunity to present a summary of his dissertation entitled "'My Father and Your Father': The Nature and Privilege of Sonship." To summarize in his own (condensed) words:

> The nature of the believer's sonship in Christ is a theme that reaches the pinnacle of redemptive grace. Recent treatments have not only addressed the perceived neglect of this marvelous subject but have also answered the call for a *biblical-theological* approach in so doing. In considering sonship, an increasingly well-worn path has subsequently emerged; namely, the develop-