

Desert Rose: Thomas Chalmers' West Port Experiment (1844–1847)

By Michael J. Ives

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.”¹ 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.”² 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.”³ But the opening quote above shows us where his great ambition lay, that is, to complete a “territorial experiment.” This essay retells the story of Chalmers’ home missionary efforts in the slums of the West Port, Edinburgh, and then turns to explain how he advocated his territorial model.

THE WEST PORT STORY

First, some back-story. This final chapter in Chalmers’ evangelical career ends where it began. Having first rediscovered and practiced 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 practicing 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 have only expounded.”⁴ 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.”⁵ And by the 1840s, the plight of urban industrial Scotland had gone from bad to worse. In May of 1844, the British Parliament’s Royal Commission of Inquiry into Scottish poor relief shocked the public conscience with reports of unthinkable working-class living conditions. The public soon demanded that Scotland

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1. Thomas Chalmers to James Lenox, August 9, 1844, James Lenox Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. Lenox was a wealthy New York philanthropist and fellow Presbyterian.

2. *The Life of William Wilberforce*, ed. Robert Wilberforce, Isaac Wilberforce, and Samuel Wilberforce (London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1843), 4:324.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 1:617.

4. Chalmers to Lenox, July 26, 1844, James Lenox Papers.

5. Thomas Chalmers, *The Collected Works of Thomas Chalmers* (Glasgow: W. Collins, 1836–42), 10:377, 18:73.

remedy the situation by adopting its version of the English poor laws, that is, legalized poor relief by taxation. In June, Adam Black, Lord Provost of Edinburgh, further responded to this outcry by appealing to churches to throw themselves into the fight against this plague wasting its population.⁶ Further, this grim assessment only mirrored the religious condition of the poor. Parliament had also instituted the Royal Commission on Religious Instruction in the previous decade, which revealed that one third of the entire population of Edinburgh was wholly unchurched, while in the working-class areas that number rose to three-fourths. Nor was Edinburgh alone—these numbers basically matched those of London.⁷

Religious and social needs cried all the more loudly for intervention. And yet, this experiment of Chalmers would be 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. Moreover, while he ended up losing the battle against the poor laws—a battle he had vigorously fought—he could certainly now absolve himself from any burden of dispensing any monetary aid.⁸ Finally, a new avenue now seemed opened for greater ecumenical partnership. There had been bitter rivalries between Dissenters and Church of Scotland evangelicals in the 1830s over whether there should be church establishments at all. But now Free Churchmen were *de facto*

Dissenters, having left the state church. Chalmers was now hopeful that previous hostility could be put aside and all could join together to fight the monster of irreligion and debilitating poverty.

Chalmers' final experiment formally began with a series of lectures in June and July of 1844, printed in *The Witness*, a popular periodical managed by Free Churchman Hugh Miller. In them, he decried British Christendom's abandonment of its working-class poor, restated his cherished principles of territorialism as the best solution for their religious and social ills, expressed his determination to spearhead the creation of sixty-six new working-class churches, and summoned a band of volunteers to join the effort.⁹ 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 assigned to one of the proportions. It would be that member's duty to pay weekly visits to its residents, familiarizing himself with its families. His job would be to "ingratiate" himself with them that he might effectually promote their spiritual and temporal well-being. Being an explicitly missionary endeavor, 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 subsidized education. And they would, of course, facilitate the establishment of public "ordinances" on the Sabbath, hiring a full-time missionary.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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'moost! 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." He even explicitly expressed his hopes that this endeavor would result in the blurring and eventual elimination of denominational lines.¹²

6. Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 350.

7. William Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LL.D.* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1849–52), 4:391.

8. This alternative was arguably more viable during Chalmers' earlier ministry, when Scotland was in the earlier stages of moving from a voluntary and communal to a statutory system of poor relief. During his St. John's experiment in Glasgow, he secured from the city a special exemption from their obligatory contribution to its centralized poor fund. The deacons of the St. John's parish would then in turn manage its own resources according to Chalmers' more sparing methods, distributing poor relief to those deemed genuinely needy.

9. Thomas Chalmers, "Dr Chalmers' Lecture," *The Witness*, June 19, 1844; Thomas Chalmers, "Dr Chalmers' Second Lecture," *The Witness*, June 26, 1844; Thomas Chalmers, "Dr Chalmers' Third Lecture," *The Witness*, July 13, 1844; Thomas Chalmers, "Dr Chalmers' Fourth Lecture," *The Witness*, July 27, 1844.

10. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844; Brown, *Chalmers*, 351.

11. This controversy emerged in the late 1820s, when evangelicals outside the establishment began publicly to challenge the propriety of a state-supported church. This prompted evangelicals within it, including Chalmers, to come to its defense.

12. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 27, 1844.

But Chalmers was not content just to motivate—he would participate, leading the vanguard. To make his experiment truly worthwhile, he picked arguably the worst cesspool of Industrialized 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,¹³ 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 laborers.¹⁴

A survey his “agents” conducted that September in the West Port only confirmed the perception of 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.¹⁵

But these agents saw much more than just disappointing statistics in a ledger. Their walks through the West Port exposed them to heart-wrenching inhumanity. William Hanna, Thomas Chalmers' son-in-law and biographer, 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.¹⁶

The bottom had evidently fallen out in the West Port. As Stewart Brown, the modern Chalmers' biographer, put it, “The West Port exhibited the collapse of the traditional Christian community ideal in urban Scotland.”¹⁷

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.¹⁸ Then they would convene on Saturday evenings to compare notes and to discuss successes and failures.

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.¹⁹ Further, they definitely should be creative; Chalmers didn't want to micromanage the operations. The more the agents did their own work, the more it would be obvious that territorial operations didn't depend on charismatic leaders like Chalmers, and so were repeatable *en masse*. Yet above all, they concentrated their temporal efforts on fostering the classic Scottish means of self-improvement—education. 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

13. In 1828, this notorious duo lured a series of unfortunate victims in Edinburgh into dark alleys, where they dispatched them and subsequently sold their corpses to the University of Edinburgh for the ‘benefit of science.’

14. West Port Local Society minutes [hereafter WPLS minutes], July 27, 1844, January 11, 1845. Records of Free, United Presbyterian, United Free and Other Protestant Churches, National Records of Scotland; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 354.

15. *Ibid.*; Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:394–95.

16. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:395.

17. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 354.

18. WPLS minutes, Finlay MacPherson to the Countess of Effingham, December 15, 1845.

19. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 356.

poor, because all children have the innate potential for academic achievement given the opportunity.²⁰

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.”²¹ 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.²²

They often noted their interactions with Roman Catholics among the population, 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.²³ 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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵

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

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 neighborhood 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.²⁶

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 this meeting, he shared that the society offered each genuinely West Port family a subsidized, quality education for their children. Yet he made clear that each family must contribute a certain amount towards the cost of the schooling. They had to be personally invested in order to appreciate the value of this true, long-term boon to their community.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

20. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:396–99, 418.

21. WPLS minutes, July 5, 1845.

22. WPLS minutes, September 6, 1845.

23. WPLS minutes, Finlay MacPherson to the Countess of Effingham, September 23, 1844.

24. WPLS minutes, April 5, 1845.

25. WPLS minutes, May 24, 1845.

26. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:401.

27. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:402.

28. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 355.

29. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:403.

minister. Tasker began in April of 1845 and immediately joined Chalmers' side at the head of the West Port experiment.³⁰ The two became close comrades-in-arms, and Chalmers found himself enthused once again to be among the working-class.³¹

The society spearheaded other related projects to help address the temporal needs of the West Port poor. These included a savings bank, a library, a public bath, barbering services for the children, a wash house for laundering, a school to teach females domestic skills, and three Sabbath schools. All of these, of course, were founded exclusively for the benefit of the West Port population, not indiscriminately for any of Edinburgh's poor. Should others wish to help such living outside the West Port, Chalmers replied that they might by all means form new territorial societies to "go and do likewise" for them.³²

As time progressed, there were most encouraging signs of success. Within a year, the number of day school students had nearly quadrupled to 250.³³ By March of 1846, the Sabbath schools had increased to 150 students.³⁴ 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."³⁵ 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."³⁶

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.³⁷

Thus on both main fronts, church and school, the experiment was moving in a positive direction.

Chalmers originally hoped to have seen funds raised from within the West Port for the residents' own church building. Self-reliance was the goal. But as that goal seemed as yet a far way off by the summer of 1845, Chalmers, eager to exhibit a completed experiment for the nation, decided to purchase land with funds from the society. In January of 1846, he 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 center of gravity.³⁸ 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.

30. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:404.

31. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 360.

32. WPLS minutes, October 30, 1844; Hugh Miller, "The West Port Mission," *The Witness*, August 9, 1845; Hanna, *Memoirs*, 4:404; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 356–7.

33. WPLS minutes, November 16, 1844, November 8, 1845; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 358.

34. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 358.

35. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 358–59.

36. "The West Port Mission," *The Witness*, August 9, 1845.

37. Thomas Chalmers, *Churches and Schools for the Working Classes* (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1846), 18–19.

38. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 360.

I presided myself, on Sabbath last, over its first sacrament. There were 132 communicants, and 100 of them from the West Port.³⁹

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.

Now, it should be said that contemporary scholarship challenges the success Chalmers claimed for his philanthropic efforts, including the West Port experiment. Brown points out that Chalmers significantly underestimated the actual money required for the enterprise.

39. Chalmers to Lenox, April 29, 1847, James Lenox Papers.

40. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 361–3.

41. Stewart J. Brown, “The Disruption and Urban Poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port Operation in Edinburgh, 1844–47,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 20, no. 1 (1978), 86.

42. Some contemporary thinkers sympathetic to Chalmers’ religious and political outlook have continued to argue in favor of older, voluntary models of poor relief over the modern welfare state. See Marvin N. Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1995), 24–26, 47–48.

43. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, xiii–xviii, 350–51; Stewart J. Brown, “Thomas Chalmers and the Communal Ideal in Victorian Scotland,” in *Victorian Values: A Joint Symposium of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the British Academy, December 1990*, ed. T. C. Smout (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1992): 61–80.

44. David William Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin and Hyman, 1989), 10–12.

45. Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 55–63, 88–9.

46. R. O. Cage and E. O. A. Checkland, “Thomas Chalmers and Urban Poverty: The St. John’s Parish Experiment in Glasgow, 1819–1837,” *The Philosophical Journal* 13, no. 1 (1976): 37–56; Brian Dickey, “‘Going About and Doing Good’: Evangelicals and Poverty c. 1815–1870,” in *Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal: Evangelicals and Society in Britain, 1780–1980*, ed. John Wolfe (London: SPCK, 1995), 45–6; John F. McCaffrey, “Thomas Chalmers and Social Change,” *Scottish Historical Review* 60, no. 169 (1981): 32–60; Mary T. Furgol, “Thomas Chalmers’ Poor Relief Theories and Their Implementation in the Early Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1987); Atsuko Betchaku, “Thomas Chalmers, David Stow and the St. John’s Experiment: A Study in Educational Influence in Scotland and Beyond, 1819—c. 1850,” *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): 170–90; Alec C. Cheyne, “Thomas Chalmers: Then and Now,” in *Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999): 79–106.

47. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, “‘Making the Working Man Like Me’: Charity, Pastorship, and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Thomas Chalmers and Dr. James Phillips Kay,” *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2001): 591–617; David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 1; Alison Twells, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792–1850: The ‘Heathen’ at Home and Overseas* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 53, 78, 153.

He also contends that the district remained just as socially and economically impoverished as before the experiment and that his band of volunteers over time lost heart and retreated from the cause.⁴⁰ It certainly is possible that Chalmers underestimated the systemic problems unique to his age in the throes of the Industrial Revolution; a purely voluntary initiative may not have been the answer to poverty in its modern shape. Yet Brown also concedes that Chalmers was limited by his declining health and only had two and a half years to be actively involved in such a formidable project. He also pursued it even while events such as the Scottish Poor Law Act of 1845 and the famine in 1846 were drawing public opinion “away from the old faith in voluntary charity and parochial Christian communities as viable means for social organisation and improvement.”⁴¹ In any case, it is beyond the scope of this article to reconsider the question.⁴² But from an ecclesiastical point of view, Chalmers’ West Port operation has been recognized as an impressive success.

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.

THE WEST PORT METHOD

Now, how did Chalmers advocate his territorial model? What was it that so captured Chalmers’ imagination and drove him to persuade others similarly to adopt it? While he expressed himself on this subject many times throughout his career, it would be fitting to focus on the public lectures that he gave in 1844 to drum up interest in his great final project.

First, we consider its main design. It has been argued in contemporary scholarship that it served to promote the restoration of “the godly commonwealth” within a secularizing Britain and to revive the old communal ideal shattered from the strains of the Industrial Age.⁴³ The method has also been considered as a vehicle of evangelical activism, in which both clergy and laity busied themselves with worthy causes⁴⁴ or an expression of typical, evangelical doctrines of the day, such as natural theology, divine providence and retribution, and substitutionary atonement.⁴⁵ Often, it is considered as an agency of philanthropy, typically construed as a quixotic if not a calloused attempt to impose an outdated model of poor relief on a hapless population or,⁴⁶ relatedly, as a paternalist upper- and middle-class tool to civilize the working-class.⁴⁷ Last, it has been

interpreted as the fruit of secularization theory, where the agency was contrived to combat the putative 'unholy city' threatening to swallow up the old Christian order of pre-industrial, rural Britain.⁴⁸ But while all of these interpretations help situate and explain Chalmers' territorial method, we must not neglect what he himself deemed its foremost purpose—evangelism:

I ought not to speak of it as an innovation; for it is the precious system of the olden time, though it has been grievously departed from. Let me call it now a great Home Mission; for it is, to all intents and purposes, a missionary enterprise. There are a number of people who will not encourage the work, unless it is work across the ocean, or over vast continents. But let me remind you, that though the distance of the heathen be in this case but half a mile from your own doors, yet, morally speaking, it is as great as if they lived in the wilds of Tartary, or in the South Sea Islands.⁴⁹

Chalmers had long been passionate about foreign missions. He personally trained many missionaries at the University of St. Andrews and later at the University of Edinburgh, inspiring them with his zeal.⁵⁰ Yet all along, he was tireless about the cause of missions right on the Scottish doorstep. The proximity of lost sinners living within a Christian land can easily beguile. In reality, an abundance of churches among them matters nothing if the people themselves are spiritually "alienated" from the things of God.⁵¹ For Chalmers, such was the case with the lower classes in Britain. Consequently, only an explicitly missionary effort could overcome the "great moral distance" of the home heathen. "You must go to them, and perform essentially the work of a missionary. The object of the local [territorial] system is a series of missionary operations."⁵² Its paramount concern was "the saving of the souls of a district."⁵³ Admittedly, scholarship has recognized this spiritual dimension of Chalmers' parish model⁵⁴ and even its priority over things temporal.⁵⁵ Yet since it has not been explored in any depth, further study is warranted. And the subject should be of all the more interest, given the fact that no other figure before him had argued at such length for the ecclesiastical parish, nor so uniquely, construing it as a mission agency within the confines of Christendom.

Chalmers has frequently been quoted, "I should count the salvation of a single soul more important than the rescue of a whole empire from pauperism."⁵⁶ Such hyperbole could mislead, for the missionary nature of Chalmers' territorial method cannot simply be reduced to the salvation of souls. In the first case, there

was the socio-ecclesiastical dimension. Since the habit of church-going among the target population had bottomed out, the immediate aim of the missionary enterprise was to restore that habit. Reflecting a Reformed view of salvation and the means of grace, this method endeavored to recruit "hearers,"⁵⁷ such as would be in the way of salvation through a regular attendance on the preaching of the Gospel. "Then let all our teaching and all our testimony be on the side of the Church-going—let it be our great endeavour to bring them to the habit of submitting themselves Sabbath after Sabbath to attendance on the services of a Christian minister . . ."⁵⁸ To be sure, this made it a species of paternalist social reform, an attempt to civilize a population. But it was viewed as a necessary means to the end of personal salvation.

Then there was the socio-economic aspect of the mission. While his uppermost concern was personal salvation, Chalmers advocated the territorial method particularly for the benefit Britain's impoverished "masses" who had been cruelly neglected by their betters.⁵⁹ Fast on the heels of their spiritual well-being

48. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000*, second ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 18–30, 43–48.

49. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

50. Stuart Piggin and John Roxborough, *The St. Andrews Seven: The Finest Flowering of Missionary Zeal in Scottish History* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985).

51. Chalmers, *Works*, 6:271, 16:196.

52. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.

53. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 27, 1844.

54. H. D. Rack, "Domestic Visitation: A Chapter in Early Nineteenth Century Evangelism," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24, no. 4 (1973): 357–76; 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, Cumbria: Paternoster Publishing, 1999); Ian J. Shaw, "Thomas Chalmers, David Nasmyth, and the Origins of the City Mission Movement," *Evangelical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2004): 31–46. Further, several of those cited in footnotes 31–34 also refer to it.

55. Mary T. Furgol, "Chalmers and Poor Relief: An Incidental Side-line?" in *The Practical and the Pious: Essays on Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847)*, ed. Alec C. Cheyne (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1985), 115–29.

56. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 138; Cheyne, "Then and Now," 88; Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 88; Harald Beutel, *Die Sozialtheologie Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) und ihre Bedeutung für die Freikirchen: eine Studie zur Diakonie der Erweckungsbewegung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 106. Chalmers nearly repeats the quote again in his lectures; Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844. "Pauperism" was a term commonly used at the time to refer to the degraded condition of the poor as recipients of statutory relief.

57. Chalmers, *Works*, 18:71, 164, 271.

58. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

59. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

came their moral and physical well-being, so such an endeavor should seek to ameliorate their wretchedness. Even if the mission should fall short in conversions, he contended, yet the byproduct of the religious efforts would invariably elevate their outward condition. In purely sociological terms, religion moralizes. And morality pays. Further, the collateral benefit of a single conversion is far-reaching:

Give me a real spiritual convert,—one, it may be, out of fifty,—and though not one more of the fifty be savingly converted but himself, yet his example has a certain reflex influence on the neighborhood in which he lives, and has the effect of elevating the general standard of morals in that neighborhood. Christians are the salt of the earth. Salt bears but a small proportion to the thing which it preserves; and in like manner, a pure and healthy Christianity sheds an influence on more than those who have believed in it to the salvation of their souls.⁶⁰

Now, while Chalmers made much of the byproduct argument, he did not stop there. As we shall see below, he promoted a rather developed “machinery” for the alleviation of poverty.

Having, then, treated the design of the territorial method, we now turn to its two cardinal principles—locality and aggression. “The local system,” embodying the first of these two principles, stands opposite the “the general system.” The latter system offers its services indiscriminately to a general population lying at all points of the compass. Whoever likes may avail himself of the church. The local system, however, operates with a very specific remit, a geographically defined neighborhood. While not excluding any coming from afar, the church operating on the local system gives preference to those within the particular district.⁶¹ Clearly, Chalmers was pushing for the return of ecclesiastical domains, a kind of parish system for the modern age. Yet such a system would be far less authoritarian and much more voluntary than

its Medieval and Reformational antecedent. Chalmers’ was a soft paternalism.

The second governing principle is aggression. The general system contravenes this, proceeding instead upon the principle of attraction. It aims to attract whomever from wherever by the force of its minister’s eloquence. Its fatal flaw, however, is that it only attracts those with a “predisposition for Christian instruction.” In other words, it only attracts those who are already Christians. Such a preacher, “with great powers of oratory, eloquence, and impressive preaching,” draws many and packs his church. “But with whom?” Chalmers queries. “With the people who were formerly attending other churches; so that he fills his church at the expense of previous congregations. There is no increase of churchgoers, in this process; there is no creation of new worshippers; it is mere transference of the old worshippers to a new place of worship.” The general system, then, is not only an exercise in futility. It is irresponsible. It fosters an uncatholic jockeying over the same pool of Christians, and even more damning, tends to “float over the mass of practical heathenism beneath them.”⁶²

The local system, on the other hand, works on the conviction that the masses had no natural predisposition for Christianity. They had lapsed into an “inert, lethargic, sluggish carelessness to the importance of spiritual things.”⁶³ Such was their natural bent, for it was the natural bent of mankind. Clearly, Chalmers here held the line of strict, Calvinist orthodoxy. Because this population was impervious to mere attraction, it must aggressively be pursued. Chalmers was wholly supportive of *laissez faire* in economics, but not at all in religion. While there was always a natural demand in the marketplace for the necessities of the body, not so with the necessities for the soul. Such a demand, then, must be created.

These two principles merge to form the territorial system. When applied, it means in the first case adopting a particular locality. A minister working on this system “chalks out” *de novo* a modest-sized urban district of “contiguous households” to win souls and build a Christian community. It is his own, manageable “territorial vineyard,” to be cared for and cultivated spiritually. He must endeavor to fill his church not with anyone from anywhere by the charm of his charisma, but with these. And because he cannot expect them to darken the doors of the church otherwise, he must with his elders aggressively ply them at their doorsteps and in their homes by routine household visits. They must overcome their spiritual lethargy and create a demand where none exists.⁶⁴

60. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

61. The language of “preference” alludes to the standard practice of the day of charging worshipers a fee to rent a seat in the church during services. As a means of guaranteeing the maintenance of the ministry and the upkeep of the property, Chalmers had no objection to it. Only, he strenuously fought the practice of pricing out the poor and appealed for giving “preference” of parishioners to sittings in their own parish church.

62. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

63. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

64. *Ibid.*; Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 27, 1844.

Ever practical, Chalmers touted his method's many benefits. Foremost is its efficiency.

Even a well-intentioned minister on the general system finds that he simply has no time to reach out to the unchurched since he feels that he must favor his regular "hearers" in pastoral visitations. As he travels to all points of the city to visit his little diaspora, the unchurched fall through the cracks. On Chalmers' system, however, the physician of souls has but to do with one modest neighborhood, his pastoral and evangelistic spheres being coterminous. Moving from door to door, he pastors any resident faithful, evangelizes and recruits hearers, and gradually transforms a mission field into a Christian community, a microcosm of Christendom.⁶⁵ Again, Chalmers was thus unashamedly endeavoring to rehabilitate—or rather re-create—the parish system, "the precious system of the olden time,"⁶⁶ in which every minister was simultaneously pastor and missionary.

The method also capitalizes on the power of moral influence. Now, as we have seen already, the very doctrinal keystone of Chalmers' model was the stern, Calvinist doctrine of human depravity. Attraction might work, if men were not half bad. But because they are altogether bad—spiritually speaking—there must be aggression. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the aggression must be gentle. The laborer must go among the people and "ingratiate" himself in their affections by his manifest care for them, body and soul, parents and children:

... he is to watch every opportunity, to go to them especially at those seasons when, through sickness or death in their houses, their hearts are peculiarly open and susceptible to impressions from one who comes to them in the character of a friend and comforter, as interesting himself in the education of their families, and by a thousand nameless offices and topics of introduction by which you may make a pretext or a real occasion of visiting them: and you will infallibly, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, meet with a cordial welcome from this alienated population.⁶⁷

This aggression is the force of moral suasion, or as he wrote elsewhere, the "omnipotence of Christian charity."⁶⁸ That the people are thus susceptible highlights Chalmers' convictions of a certain abiding goodness in human nature, which the territorial method exploits.⁶⁹ Even among the most degraded, "it is an invariable law of nature that love begets love."⁷⁰ It may not always result in conversion, but it should very well restore a population to regular church attendance—a more hopeful prelude to conversion.⁷¹

Related, the method harnesses the power of sympathy, or "the gregarious principle."⁷² Not only is it a much more efficient use of the pastor's time to visit contiguous households, but the physical proximity of his parishioners also offers potential for the power of natural, human sympathy to augment the pastor's moral suasion. Speaking of "the influence of neighborhood," he writes, imagine if

... one family is persuaded to go to a well-known church, to hear a minister who is also well known in the neighborhood. If one family thus gives in, it furnishes a common topic of talk to all the neighborhood; sympathy is excited, for there is much sympathy in the mere fact of juxtaposition. There can be no sympathy between hearers who are half a mile distant from each other; but there is much sympathy among next-door neighbours. This brings the gregarious principle into play; what people will not do singly they do with delight and readiness in a flock.⁷³

Juxtaposition is ready kindling for the flame of sympathy to spread. The general system quite misses this opportunity with its non-local approach to visitation.

65. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844. Chalmers elsewhere dealt with the question as to how a church operating on the general system might adopt these principles without spurning its own membership base. He essentially answered that the minister ought still to adopt a district, preferably adjacent the church, and incrementally draw in souls from it into the habit of attendance on the church. "Extraparochial" hearers would eventually relocate or die off. And so partly by attrition, the target population would gradually displace it, and the church would finally be "localized." See Chalmers, *Works*, 14:132, 182–4, 356–7.

66. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

67. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

68. Chalmers, *Works*, 11:293.

69. It could be argued that Chalmers' optimism about the human situation was a holdover from the Enlightenment influence of his Moderate days and so sat uneasily with his darker, evangelical outlook. Yet it should be noted that the concept of *justitia civilis* (civil righteousness) had long been a mediating doctrine within Reformed theology; see Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Columbus: Scott & Bascom, Printers, 1852), 32, 479; Johannes Althusius, *Politica: An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, ed. and trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1964), 147; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992), 1:669, 2:4.

70. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

71. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

72. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

73. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 19, 1844.

How exactly, then, would the method work? How should they go about it? Chalmers gave his listeners several lines of advice. They must begin visiting the households throughout their adopted district. They should familiarize themselves with its inhabitants, glean information from them, especially whether they attend a church and their children a school. Let the statistics be recorded. Reconnaissance is crucial. And they should return again and again, making such visits routine. Nor should the laborer be daunted by the greatness of the responsibility. "Little and often" can carry the day. "I have, as I have often said, great faith in the accumulation of littles." Should the district not yet have a church or a school, the association should seek to raise the required funds and build them. In the meantime, a preaching station should be secured.⁷⁴

As we have already considered before, the visitors should "ply them with ... moral suasion." If welcomed in, they should aim to speak "forcibly and familiarly" to them "in their own houses." They should especially urge them to the practice of church going, using "affectionate invitations and remonstrances." Other tactics would help "ingratiate" them into the hearts of the people. They should pay attention to the children, showing genuine care and concern. If they are in school, the visitor might inquire into their proficiency and even have them display their attainments then and there. He might also give books as constructive rewards. He should visit the sick and comfort the mourning. To that end, he should keep his ear to the ground, ever on the lookout for such tender moments of doing good and thus winning hearts. While he should not indiscriminately give out money, he might pay for such necessities as medical care or medicines.

The visitors, while endeavoring to recruit the people to regular church attendance, might also conduct prayer meetings or simply convene family worship in the houses of those open to it. Should someone fail to keep a promise to attend the services, Chalmers even boldly recommended holding a little service in the home of the "defaulters" and inviting the neighbors to it. But was this moral suasion or moral alienation? Chalmers countered, "Depend upon it, they will take it very well. They will of course feel themselves caught ... but still they will tolerate you, and make their escape next Sabbath, by going to the place of worship."⁷⁵ The visitors

should also compare notes with each other. He recommended that they gather once per week to share their successes and failures, further honing workable strategies for gaining the district. The deliberations should be minuted, furnishing a manual for the benefit of others who would operate on the same principles elsewhere.⁷⁶

Now, what kind of advice did Chalmers give for managing the care of the poor? He testified from painful experience that they ought to start on the right foot and stick to it. That is, make the purpose of the mission explicitly spiritual in nature, and cause the people to understand it. Let them know that they deal "only in one article," Christianity, not in the distribution of material benevolence. If the purpose is confused or the signals are mixed, the effect will surely lead to morally disastrous results. The resulting "evil is, that many people have their hearts filled with a host of sordid, mercenary expectations,"⁷⁷ counteracting whatever spiritual good is intended.

Nevertheless, the mission should seek to relieve temporal want. In addition to the spiritual effort of personal, household visitation, funds are best used not for handouts, but mainly for the erection and maintenance of churches, schools, and other beneficial institutions. Education ennobles. And it is never degrading to contribute to or underwrite medical care. To be sure, Jesus fed the crowds twice. But he healed each and every one who came to him throughout His ministry. Chalmers made much of this contrast. When Jesus

saw the sordid expectations of the people, did he then bring them food by miracle? No. He said, 'Verily, verily, ye seek me not because ye saw the miracle, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled;' and he put them off with a spiritual advice, 'Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that which endures to everlasting life.' So he treated the case of hunger. Now, take the case of disease. He never sent away the applications of the diseased. Petitions were brought to him from the maimed, the halt, the lame, and the blind; and it is said repeatedly that he looked with compassion upon them and healed them all.⁷⁸

Thus, Christ left us this example to shape our philanthropy. Prioritize the spiritual and lavishly care for the temporal needs of the poor in ways that will not degrade them.

So how should the visitors respond to solicitations? First, kindly repeat the mission's spiritual purpose. Second, tell the individual that you do not as yet know him well enough, that you need to develop confidence that

74. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

75. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

76. Chalmers, *The Witness*, July 13, 1844.

77. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.

78. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.

a cash gift would truly be in his best interest. In order to give conscientiously, you must meaningfully know something of his “case” and “conduct.” So explain that if he is patient and you are able to become acquainted with him, it might well be different down the road. Third, does he have any relatives? If so, you would like to meet them and press upon them the plight of their own family. You could also inform him that, should you give now to him and others like him, it would detract from those higher causes that will most benefit the entire community. And ultimately, let him know that the “best way of helping people is to put them in the way of helping themselves.”⁷⁹ Such things said in sincerity should prevail over time, especially when actions corroborate claims.

Last, who should engage in this work? At the vanguard is the minister, who ideally takes up his residence in the district itself. His home “is to be considered as the missionary station, from whence he emanates among the people.” He also welcomes elders from other congregations, provided they can spare a fraction of their time on a neglected field. In fact, any large-hearted volunteer is welcome, including the laity:

We shall never be able to make a great impression, unless we avail ourselves of the lay part of the people: and many there are who, though they have not received the advantage of a University education, and are not accustomed to public speaking, yet, feeling the love of Christ in their hearts, are able to go forth to collect a few people in a room, and perform the Sabbath services in the midst of them.

The net is even further widened to include volunteers from any evangelical denomination. And the more overlap of labor, the better, as collaboration will bring down needless barriers. Nor should the agents be restricted to the middle- or upper-classes. Ideally, he desired a good number of recruits from among the “operatives.” In fact, many of the former might be ill-suited for work in the slums. “I suppose that a person may be so accustomed to the luxuries and elegancies of life that he is apt to be overwhelmed with the aspect of general and extreme wretchedness.”⁸⁰

Lest Chalmers be thought to approach evangelism in a mechanistic way, he made it clear that the territorial method was no failsafe recipe. The Spirit of God must bless the work. Earnest prayer must accompany the labor throughout. That being said, a quietistic indifference to method and effort is equally wrong. There must be a middle way:

It is in some respects like a steam engine. It is not a matter of indifference what kind of steam engine we employ; one steam engine will do its work better than another, but in all of them, the moving force is indispensable. A steam engine, however perfect, is useless if it have not a moving force; but then that does not supersede the question as to the best kind of steam engine.⁸¹

It has been said that Chalmers was a pragmatist. If true, then Chalmers was not just any pragmatist, but an evangelical pragmatist. For the sake of the lost, he cared about what works. But only God's saving intervention can make what works work.

More than 150 years has passed since the West Port experiment began at the close of Thomas Chalmers' career. Western society has only accelerated further from the days in which the old parish model flourished; social, demographic, and technological changes, to name a few, have remade the landscape. And what is more, ours is a secularizing if not a wholly secularized Christendom. Arguably, it is a Christendom no more, which would seem to make it an all the more inhospitable environment for such Chalmers-style experiments. But those sharing his viewpoint would contend that human nature has not changed, nor has the spiritual plight of modern man. And if today's Westerner still assumes an embodied existence, takes up space, residing in some “locality,” and if he is still susceptible to the moral suasion of someone who will care for his soul, then territorial experiments are yet worth attempting. Or at least dreaming about. ■

79. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.

80. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.

81. Chalmers, *The Witness*, June 26, 1844.