
Evangelising Our Cities – The Abiding Challenge of Thomas Chalmers

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Babylon or Rome?

City life can be ugly:

There is no point to life, no point to families, no point to neighbours, no point to going to school. Life is traipsing in the rain to the Netto supermarket where everything is cut-price and traipsing home, hoping nobody notices your shameful Netto bags. Life is queuing for giros, propping up a wall on the corner of a street, sleeping till the afternoon and watching telly till dawn. Life is nothing. It is being pregnant for no reason, being jobless with no hope. It means nothing. It has fallen apart.

And it is there – in the hollow inside them, in their indifference to everyone, including themselves, in their total acceptance of pain, in their contempt for the law and for all the rest of their surroundings, in their “damaged, deprived, depraved and delinquent” way of being – it is there that the children of Hyde Park (in Leeds) and the children of the Forest in Nottingham show their common origin, in these thousands of battered council estates which together form the heartland of the undiscovered country of the poor.¹

How can the Evangelical Church reach such people?

In the city of Babylon, God’s people sat and wept. Confinement to that heathen city was seen as the ultimate covenant judgement. Their presence in the city represented a disaster in the life of the church.

In the city of Rome, the Apostle Paul sat and preached. Confinement to that heathen city was seen by Luke as the symptomatic fulfilment of the risen Lord’s promise that the Gospel would be proclaimed in the ends of the earth. Paul’s presence in the city was a portent of Gospel triumph.

Christians have generally been inclined to identify more with the tearful songwriter in Babylon, than with the writer of Acts. Cities are unpleasant necessities in a developed society. They may have to do business there, but they’d rather not live there. The inner city as Babylon, not Rome. Ever since William Wilberforce and his friends retreated to (then) semi-rural Clapham, the Evangelical Church has been predominantly suburban, in location and mentality.

Predominantly, but not entirely. There have been notable exceptions – one of the earliest and most significant being the ministry of Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow and Edinburgh, between 1816 and 1847.

Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow

Chalmers came to the Tron Church, Glasgow, in 1815 from Kilmany, a small village congregation in northern Fife. Behind the move lay his evangelical conversion in 1811. Before that, his was the agenda of a leisured country minister with an eye on the Chair of Mathematics at St Andrew’s University, but now he had different priorities and larger ambitions. Glasgow was then in the first flush of its expansion into a major industrial city. Though still small by today’s standards, it had trebled in size in thirty-

five years. In 1815 it was hit hard by the economic collapse that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Revolution was in the air, troops were on the streets, and to compound the sense of doom, a typhus epidemic struck the city in 1817. Only about 7% of the population attended church, and the old parish system of the Church of Scotland, unchanged in 200 years, was simply swamped by the growing population.

Although he was a great preacher who drew vast crowds to all his services (a series of sermons on Christianity and Astronomy sold 40,000 copies when it was published), Chalmers realised that the vast bulk of the inner-city, impoverished population was unreached. So he set out to visit every house in his parish, – itself a revolutionary action for a city minister and not lacking in personal danger. He aimed to assess the situation and formulate a ministry plan. The experience was not encouraging:

I feel as if it were a mighty and impenetrable mass, truly beyond the strength of one individual arm, and before which, after a few furtive and unavailing exertions, nothing remains but to sit down in the idleness of despair. It is a number, it is a magnitude, it is an endless succession of houses and families, it is an extent of field which puts at a distance all hope of a deep or universal impression – it is an utter impossibility, even with the most active process of visitation, to meet the ever pressing demands of the sick, and the desolate, and the dying.²

But Chalmers did not “sit down in the idleness of despair.” Instead, he devised a great “experiment”. He identified two major barriers to an effective evangelical ministry in such a city parish. One was the system whereby the Church of Scotland, and especially the parish minister, was directly involved in the distribution of relief funds to the poor – funds gathered from a rated tax on the property owners of the city. This involved the minister in much committee work and also inevitably complicated his spiritual dealings with his parishioners. The second major problem was the sheer size of the parish – a size that made direct contact between the minister and the whole population virtually impossible. Chalmers removed these barriers, firstly by creating a new, smaller parish, St John’s, out of the old parishes. Secondly, he persuaded the civic authorities that, within this new area, a totally different system of poor relief would operate – one entirely funded from the collections in the new St John’s Church. The heart of the “experiment”, though, was much more than these organisational adjustments. Chalmers divided St John’s parish into 25 sub-divisions (or, districts) each containing about four hundred people. To each of these districts he appointed two visitors – one elder and one deacon. Their job was to go regularly and frequently to each home in their district, to get to know every person who lived there. The elder was to promote the spiritual welfare of the people, beginning a Sabbath School, and then providing a day school (not free, but very cheap). There was also appropriate instruction for the adults, leading to church attendance. The deacon’s focus was on physical and social needs. But handing out money was a last resort. He was first to encourage and help the impoverished to find work; failing that, to encourage relatives to help out. If there were no family, he would try to persuade neighbours to give support. Only if these three steps all failed, would he resort to Church funds. Altogether, the visitation by elder and deacon was intended both to convert individuals and to transform families and communities.

By 1823 Chalmers was satisfied that the experiment had been a great success, with St John’s congregation growing, and the church collections being amply sufficient to cover the grants given to the parish poor. He wrote and spoke voluminously about it, even addressing a committee of Parliament in London. Not everyone was convinced.

Some said that Chalmers' popularity as a preacher guaranteed a supply of elders and other volunteers which an ordinary minister could never attract. Others questioned the financial aspects of the welfare scheme. But many were persuaded to try something similar. The Church of Scotland, increasingly dominated by a resurgent Evangelical party, launched a Church Extension campaign in 1834, to plant new churches within the old, over-large urban (and, indeed, rural) parishes. Their slogan was "*A church and a minister within easy reach of every door*" – neatly implying that ministers ought to go to doors, as well as people to church! By 1840, 216 new churches had been erected – one of them St Peter's Church in inner-city Dundee, to which a young man named Robert Murray M'Cheyne was ordained.

Chalmers in Edinburgh

Ironically, Chalmers' Church Extension Scheme became a major cause of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843, when a large minority of ministers and people left to form the Free Church of Scotland. Ironically, because although Chalmers is remembered as the inspirational leader of the Free Church, in many ways he was a most unlikely and unwilling seceder. The Church's mission to the urban masses remained his great obsession, even as he became the first Principal of New College (the Free Church's Theological Seminary). In 1844 Chalmers startled friend and foe alike by resigning from most of the committees of the new denomination in order to conduct a second great experiment. For a laboratory, he chose one of the most notorious slums in Edinburgh – the West Port. It contained about 2,000 people, with a large proportion of paupers, beggars, thieves and prostitutes. Church attendance was minimal. No longer involved with a State church, Chalmers did not now face the complications of the Poor Law which so dominated discussion of the St John's experiment. But the heart of the experiment was the same as in Glasgow. The area was divided up into small districts – this time with about 100 people in each. Chalmers recruited a team of volunteers to carry out regular visitation of an assigned district, under the oversight of a missionary. Chalmers himself met regularly with the visitors, to encourage and advise them. Almost immediately, in November 1844, a school was set up (charging 2 pence a week), followed by a weekly service. Welfare assistance included the provision of a laundry. By February 1846, when a church building was opened, the new congregation had one hundred communicants from the West Port area. The missionary was ordained as the first minister.

Chalmers believed that this second experiment had demonstrated that his basic approach of "district visitation" was an effective way of evangelising the massed population of the cities. The method would work both for a state-recognised "parish church" and for a church such as the Free Church which was totally without any state connection.

Chalmers' lessons were applied by a whole regiment of Scottish ministers, both before and after the Disruption. They appointed missionaries and visitors to their parishes, then created new "parishes" within the original one as evangelism led to increased congregations and the "hiving off" of daughter churches were formed. In some cases there were several "generations" of new churches, as the earlier "daughters" were themselves sub-divided.

But it was not only within the (Free) Church of Scotland that Chalmers found followers. In many British cities, the 1820s witnessed the creation of "District Visiting Associations" as Evangelical Christians seized on the essential element in the St John's

experiment. In England, the Church Pastoral Aid Society was initially established to provide extra (lay) manpower to assist the clergy in the visitation of their parishes. And, beginning in Glasgow in 1826, David Nasmyth began founding “City Missions” that were manifestly based on Chalmers’ approach.

Some writers on the history of (secular) social work acknowledge Thomas Chalmers and his district visitors as pioneers of the “case study” method. But among his successors in the ministry of his own and other Evangelical churches, the lessons of Chalmers’ ministry have been largely forgotten or quietly shelved. Chalmers work and numerous writings therefore constitute an abiding challenge and an untapped resource for today’s church as it struggles with the “mighty and impenetrable mass” of our 21st-century inner-cities and the Council Estates epitomised by our opening quotation.

The District Visiting Model

[The aim of this section is to give more detail on the method Chalmers employed, and the reasons he gave for advocating it. I have used many of Chalmers own writings, although his grandiloquent prose makes crisp quotation difficult. His was definitely not a sound-bite generation!]

In his experiments, Chalmers had a clear aim– to show the superiority of his “District Visitation” (DV) model for the urban church over the form of church which had come to predominate in Scotland’s cities. The latter involved a church drawing its congregation from across the city, with people choosing a church where they wished to worship, then travelling to its services. This may be termed the “Gathered Church” (GC) model – though, as Chalmers pointed out, it could equally be called the “Scattered Church” model, for its members were scattered across large areas. It made little difference whether the churches were “parish churches” of the Church of Scotland, or dissenting churches of the various breakaway denominations. Then (as today) almost all churches followed the GC model, whatever their theoretical attitude to the parish system.

Following the St John’s experiment, it was a major aim of Chalmers’ writings to convince his fellow church leaders in all denominations that the DV model could, under the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, effectively evangelise large cities, whereas the GC model *would not* and *could not*.

Most Christian societies (churches, etc) try to cover a large area with their work. It is far better to concentrate on particular districts, assigning a particular worker to a definite locality, and restricting their labours to that area.³

The Details of District Visitation

What was required was a small enough area (or parish), sub-divided into manageable districts where one or two visitors could regularly and frequently visit each home. It was crucial that the same visitors should go to the same homes, building up a relationship of trust. The minister himself would also visit the homes of unbelievers as well as church-goers, but would mainly deal with special needs and crisis situations. The ordinary visitation would be by volunteers, whether office-bearers or suitable Church members. They were definitely *not* “door-step preachers”. They were not to “ram the gospel down people’s throats” (to use the modern terminology). Instead, they were to be friendly and practically helpful, using “*the simple elements of attention, and advice, and civility, and good-will*”,⁴ and waiting patiently for relationships to develop. They had no “official” authority – only the moral authority of their interest in and love for the people.⁵

Depending on local conditions, they would organise Sunday Schools and day schools for the children, and such facilities as libraries, savings banks and laundries for the adults. There would also be a pressing invitation to church services, with the aim of establishing a strong community-congregation within the parish. "Outsider Christians" (living beyond the designated area) would be welcome initially to help get things moving – but the whole focus was on the needs of the locality. The church's programme and planning would be controlled by the needs of the local population, not the preferences of the travelling believers.

The Advantages of District Visitation

Chalmers defended the DV system against accusations that it was somehow "unspiritual" to plan and organise such a "mechanism" for evangelisation:

Some Christians "look, and they rightly look, to the Spirit of God, as the agent of every prosperous revolution in the Christianity of our land. ... (It) were folly to think, that, by the mere erection of a material framework, the cause of Christianity can be advanced, by a single hairbreadth", unless the Holy Spirit works. But they then draw the totally erroneous conclusion that there is no point in doing anything at all – "they would sit in a sort of mystic and expectant quietism, till there come down upon us from the skies the visitation of that inspiring energy which is to provide for all and do all."⁶

DV has many advantages. For one, it saves much time which GC ministers spend travelling to and fro across the city, visiting their scattered congregations. It also has an important "psychological" impact on the minister and the visitor, in that it gives a clear sense of responsibility and a realistic sense of progress and achievement. The DV minister or visitor knows that a precise group of unbelievers is "his", or "hers". And, even after their first few visits, they can see that they are making progress – there are only another 90 or so families to go!

The worker will feel a more powerful urge to go forth among (his district's) families ... His task will be rendered finite and manageable, instead of paralyingly indefinite.⁷

In contrast, the minister of a GC simply cannot hope to visit all the homes of non-church-goers in the city, and so visits none except those of his congregation:

nothing so reduces one to inaction as the despairing sense of a task so oppressive and operose (laborious) as to have become impracticable. When there exists an invincible barrier in the way of doing all that we would, it often discourages even from doing all that we can.⁸

Far more fundamental, however, is the reality that the DV church is essentially and deliberately evangelistic. It is, by its very nature, a "going" church, reaching out "aggressively" to the non-Christian population around it, including those who have no interest at all:

In moving through the lanes and the recesses of a long-neglected population, will it be found of the fearful multitude that not only is their acquaintance with the gospel extinguished, but their wish to obtain an acquaintance with it is also extinguished. In these circumstances, we know of no expedient by which this woeful degeneracy can be arrested... but by an actual search and entry upon the territory of wickedness. A mere signal of invitation is not enough... Instead of holding forth its signals to those who are awake, (the District Church) knocks at the doors of those who are most profoundly asleep.⁹

In contrast, the GC always tends to relegate aggressive evangelism to (at best) a secondary priority. Any influx is of people so spiritually awakened as to be at least seeking for the truth. Such churches, as a matter of observation, simply do not reach the working-classes.

Another advantage of the DV system is that its outreach is interactive and cumulative:

... (The visitor's work becomes) tenfold more effective, by the concentration of these various good offices on the contiguous households of one and the same locality. There is in it somewhat like the strength of an epidemic influence, which spreads by infection, and more amalgamates the people both with him and with each other ... Let him ever and anon be making presentation of himself to the same eyes, and he will be the talk of the people on the same stair – the object of a common reference and recognition among the inmates of his own locality. ... (The) same amount of attentions ... done to fifty families far apart from each other does not tell with half the influence they have when discharged upon them in a state of juxtaposition. ... So he may (quickly) become the familiar of all, and even the friend ... or a few.¹⁰

As that quote suggests, the DV also has the advantage of creating (or restoring) a local community, for it “*amalgamates the people with him and with each other*”.

The GC deals with some individuals. Indeed, anticipating the terminology of the Church Growth movement, Chalmers says that the GC minister may “*bring around him such families as are of a homogeneous quality with himself*”,¹¹ but it will not be a congregation which reflects the social balance of the local community. The DV minister, however,

may acquire over the hearts of his hearers the likeliest influence of any that is ever to arise in an aggregate of human beings, for building up ... **a community of virtuous and well-ordered families.**¹²

Chalmers was a preacher of rare ability. But he had no illusions that the great mass of a city population could be evangelised by church-based preaching, however powerful:

The glare of publicity and an eloquent preacher may draw a crowd, but it will be from those pre-disposed to Christianity... (It) will be a mixed, not a local congregation... There is no portion of what may be called the outfield population, that will be sensibly reclaimed by it. And little do they know of this department of human experience, who think that it is on the mere strength of attractive preaching, that this is to be done.¹³

(Similarly, another great nineteenth-century city preacher, CH Spurgeon, when encouraging support for the London City Mission, said, “I love the City Mission because it takes the glorious Gospel direct to the people. Thank God for all faithful preaching in churches and chapels, *but the multitudes are outside*. Oh, support this Mission because it takes Jesus and His salvation to the perishing.”)

Chalmers had another criticism of the GC system:

There is not a city population that will not rapidly degenerate under the regimen of well-served pulpits and ill-served parishes [i.e where there is no systematic visitation] The word that is sounded forth may carry far and wide, as by the four winds of heaven, and even descending here and there upon individual consciences, may cause that the town shall not be spread, but (if I may use the expression) be **spotted** with Christianity; ... yet the town after all is a moral wilderness.¹⁴

Those purer ingredients of the mass ... may travel ... a considerable distance [to attend a GC]. But the bulky sediment remains untouched and stationary ... and below the goodly superficialities of a great apparent stir and activity, may an unseen structure of baser materials deepen and accumulate underneath, so as to furnish a solution of the fact, that with an increase of Christian exertion amongst us, there should, at one and the same time, be an increase of heathenism.¹⁵

There have generally been big churches with famous preachers in our cities. They have impressed visitors, and built up generations of Christians. But at the very same time, the level of Christian commitment and influence in those cities has been decreasing. They have not changed the city:

The Implications of District Visitation

Amongst many, three may be specified:

1. The DV approach demands the mobilisation of ordinary Christians

it is a great mistake, to think that any other peculiar power is necessary for such an operation, than peculiar pains-taking. It is not with rare and extraordinary talent conferred upon a few, but with habits and principles that may be cultivated by all, that are linked our best securities for the reformation of the world.¹⁶

2. The DV approach demands wise thought and action in welfare/charity.

Because it brings Christian visitors and ministers into direct contact with the full cross-section of inner-city society, the DV system inevitably confronts them with the harsh and complex realities of financial, social and moral impoverishment – realities not met within the gathered congregation. As mentioned above, the subject of Poor Law reform tended to overshadow the St John's experiment, and Chalmers was passionately interested in it. Whatever the value of his particular remedies, he is pressingly relevant in his call for Christians (and society) to think deeply about the nature of welfare:

If the mere money-giver is mortified to find that, with all his liberalities, he has utterly failed to spread over (his district) the face of a larger sufficiency or contentment than before, (and that there is no) sensible abatement of the raggedness and filth, ... then let him be made to understand that, for the purpose of doing .. substantial or permanent good, something more is necessary than to **compassionate** the poor, he must also **consider** them; and let him learn at length that there is indeed a more excellent way of charity, than that to which his own headlong sensibilities have impelled him.¹⁷

3. The DV method demands co-ordinated action by Evangelical churches

Chalmers recognised that the "heathenised" city population was so vast as to be beyond the resources of one congregation, or even one denomination, to tackle. Therefore he genuinely hoped that his experiments would galvanise not just his own, but every Evangelical, denomination.

In December 1844 he addressed a public meeting in Edinburgh, describing the West Port experiment:

Some people say, Oh! This is all a scheme of the Free Church. Now I say this is a mistake. Who cares about the Free Church compared with the Christian good of the people of Scotland? Who cares for any Church, but as an instrument of Christian good? For, be assured that the moral and religious well-being of the population is infinitely of higher importance than the advancement of any sect. For myself, I should rejoice if the ministers

of every evangelical denomination would go and do likewise. There would be a far greater likelihood of our coming to a closer union, if we were engaged together in such missionary work, than by meeting in Committees, and drawing up articles which give rise to interminable controversies.¹⁸

This concern for a “Universal Home Mission” was also expressed in connection with the new Evangelical Alliance. In 1846 he published a pamphlet which advocated “*each denomination through all its local congregations co-operating for the evangelisation of their respective neighbourhoods.*” And, facing the anticipated objection that this would encourage the spread of what some would regard as “error and false theology”, he adds,

Where is the man, and what is his denomination, who can hold up his face to the declaration, that he would rather have the millions of our hitherto neglected population not to be Christians at all, than to be Christians minus his (own) peculiarity?¹⁹

Chalmers may not state it specifically, but he certainly implies that the GC approach tends to produce competing congregations which magnify their distinctives in order to set themselves apart from other churches, rather than magnify the great centralities of Christ in order to set them before the local population. The call for Evangelical co-operation continued after Chalmers’ death. In 1857, an Edinburgh pastor wrote: “*Let the ministers or representatives of the different denominations within the city – Episcopalian, Baptist and Independent, United Presbyterian, Free Church and Established Church – meet, and form themselves into a real working Evangelical alliance. ... Let them map out the dark and destitute districts of the city – assigning a district to each congregation. Let every congregation then go to work upon their own part of the field ...*”²⁰ He then warns, “*I have no hope of accomplishing this object if the churches are to be laced up by their old rules, and people are to leave everything to ministers and missionaries.*”²¹

4. The DV method demands patience, humility and self-restraint

Chalmers claimed, “*It is a sure movement, though a slow one.*”²²

[The district system] appears totally impracticable to those who think nothing worthy of an attempt, unless it can be done in one bound – unless it at once fills the eye with the glare of magnificence, and unless it can be invested, at the very outset, with all the pomp and patronage of extensive committee-ship... We are sure that (the district) operation will not stop for lack of labourers – though it may be arrested, for a while, through the eye of labourers being seduced by the meteoric glare of other enterprises, alike impotent and imposing. So long as each man of mediocrity conceives himself to be a man of might, and sighs after some scene of enlargement that may be adequate to his fancied powers, little or nothing will be done; but so soon as the sweeping and sublime imagination is dissipated, and he can stoop to the drudgery of his small allotment in the field of usefulness, then will it be found that it is by the summation of many humble mediocrities that a mighty result is at length arrived at.²³

A Relevant Challenge for Today?

Thomas Chalmers was not infallible, either as a church leader or as a theorist. His views were influenced by the currents of an age very different to ours. We face problems of a scale and complexity that he knew nothing of. Some would say that the entire DV approach to urban evangelism is outmoded. Lyle Schaller, expert analyst of church growth, states that “*Today friendship circles or social networks are determined primarily*

by one's vocation, employment, hobby, or membership in a voluntary association rather than by the place of residence. One result is that the neighborhood church no longer finds it easy to attract nearby residents."²⁴ That may be true. But is it also a symptom of the breakdown of community in our individualistic society, and therefore something that the Gospel should and can overturn?

Chalmers must certainly be questioned. But he remains one of the few systematic experimenters in inner-city ministry. Question him, but don't ignore him. At the very least, he provides a good starting-point for re-consideration of our whole approach to evangelisation and church life in the light of the Great Commission and in the shadow of the ugly city.

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