

This book provides a fresh and accessible summary of the life of one of Scotland's greatest sons—and a chief Scottish man! Sandy Finlayson honestly assesses the hugely significant influence Chalmers had on a very different Scotland from today—socially, economically, politically and spiritually—without descending into hagiography. The great Scottish church leader had a heart of iron with feet of clay! A refreshing reminder that even giants stumble! The book demonstrates well how the gospel which transformed Chalmers life and priorities should still fuel our vision. for contemporary Scotland. A nation that needs the church to be visionary, confident in the power of the Gospel to change hearts, but also communities and society. A church that empowers its people to serve and inspires in them a missionary heart and a radical social conscience. This book will introduce 'The Chief Scottish Man' to whole new audience who will be inspired and challenged by his life story, as I have been as I read it's pages.

**Rev. Derek Lamont,**

**Minister, St. Columba's Free Church, Edinburgh**

Who is the Christian leader from nineteenth-century Scotland whose ministry had the greatest impact? One could make a case for David Livingstone in the wider world, but inside Scotland itself the most likely candidate is undoubtedly Thomas Chalmers—a truly great preacher, denominational leader, and evangelical statesman. Sandy Finlayson has written a clear, judicious, and lively biography of Victorian Scotland's Chief Man. I learned from it, was inspired by it, and highly recommend it.

**Dr. Timothy Larsen,**

**McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton**

**College, Wheaton, IL, and author of *A People of***

***One Book: The Bible and the Victorians***

This biography of Chalmers is written from a clear understanding of Chalmers' Reformed faith and with strong historical insights. Never was

there a time when the life and thought of Thomas Chalmers was more needed than ours today. Chalmers' insistence on the theological integrity of the church and its commitment to biblical truth provides a necessary antidote for the wavering of many who claim to share Chalmers' historical lineage. His social and economic teaching provides an important balance to those who equate theological conservatism with social conservatism. Professor Finlayson writes clearly and with keen insight into why Chalmers has cast such a long shadow over succeeding generations.

**Rev. Dr. A Donald MacLeod,  
Research Professor of Church History,  
Tyndale University College and Seminary, Toronto**

Yet again, the Church of Jesus Christ, finds herself indebted to Professor Sandy Finlayson. Having previously written concerning the Founding Fathers of the Free Church of Scotland, Professor Finlayson, in the space of 11 chapters, now focuses our attention on the first among equals of these founders, Thomas Chalmers. He does so in a manner that not only informs the reader, but also evokes thanksgiving to God for a man like Chalmers, who like us all, had his flaws; yet at the same time, exposes the paucity of men of similar stature and influence in the 21st Century Church. The first chapter, which gives an overview of Scottish Church history since the Reformation, is itself, worth the price of the book alone. We look forward, with eager anticipation, to other writings from the keyboard of Professor Finlayson.

**Rev. D. Allan MacLeod,  
Pastor, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Toronto**

Every serious church leader should be familiar with the towering figure of Thomas Chalmers: intellectual genius, compelling orator and the ecclesiastical giant who, in 1843, led the "Disruption" in which 450 ministers in the Church of Scotland separated themselves from the "Establishment" to form the Free Church of Scotland. Yet, at root,

Chalmers was a compassionate Scottish pastor who, moved with pity for hundreds of helpless families caught in the poverty trap, sought to bring about revolutionary social reform to desperate communities in the context of church and gospel. In this well researched and highly readable new biography, Sandy Finlayson will help to ensure that the legacy of Thomas Chalmers is maintained well into the future. A thoroughly enjoyable and inspiring read.

**Rev. Iver Martin,  
Principal, Edinburgh Theological Seminary,  
The Mound, Edinburgh**

Thomas Chalmers was a colossal figure who deserves to be far more widely known and studied today. He was in the first-rank of preachers in his era; his social reform and political thought exercised a tremendous influence on Scotland; and his place as a professor and churchman put him at the center of Scottish Church History during one of its most significant eras. If Chalmers is unfamiliar to you, then this is the place to start. Sandy Finlayson's biography is clearly written and accessible, while interacting with the best scholarship and primary sources. It shows an appreciation for the personality and accomplishments of its subject, but it never slips into hagiography or holds back on legitimate criticism. This is a book worthy of your time, and Chalmers is a man worthy of your appreciation.

**Rev. Dr. Jonathan L. Master,  
President, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary**

While little known today, Thomas Chalmers was a colossus in the mid-nineteenth century, of such stature that even Karl Marx felt the need to name and shame him in *Das Kapital*. A scholar, a philosopher, an economist but, above all a churchman and a Christian, his was a life lived to the full. Here, Sandy Finlayson continues his project of bringing nineteenth century Free Church divines to life for a new day and a

new audience by focusing on the greatest of them all. Clear, concise and accessible.

**Rev. Dr. Carl R. Trueman,  
Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies,  
Grove City College, Grove City, PA**

This revised and expanded portrait of one of Scotland's chief men is written with the best qualities of a sympathetic biography, and readers will find it responsible, engaging, and instructive. Finlayson writes a book which every Christian should read, for it introduces us to a man with godly ambition, a reformer's vision, and a few of the faults sometimes found in great men. The first two we sorely need in the church today. The last we must learn to forgive in others, and see in ourselves, and this life and study of Thomas Chalmers well help us to that end.

**Rev. Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn,  
Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary,  
Philadelphia, PA**

Don't let the compactness of Professor Finlayson's work on Chalmers deceive you. It is chock full of useful information on the subjects of shepherding strategy, preaching, church history, church and state, mercy ministry, church planting, and pastoral leadership. All of this comes in the context of the life story of a faithful servant of Christ. This volume will inform, encourage, and equip you to grow in your effectiveness as a shepherd of God's flock.

**Rev. Dr. Timothy Witmer,  
Emeritus Professor of Practical Theology,  
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA,  
and author of *The Shepherd Leader***

For Rod, Mary Ann and Cathie



• Thomas Chalmers as a young man •

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# **Introduction and Acknowledgements**

In 2015 Evangelical Press published my brief biography of Thomas Chalmers in their Bitesize Biographies series. That short book surveyed the life and ministry of the Scottish church leader, pastor and public figure, and suggested a few areas where Chalmers still speaks to the twenty-first century. Given the scope of the project, there was much that could have been said that had to be left out.

This volume contains most of the material that appeared in the original book, but it has given me the opportunity to do some additional things. First, it has allowed me to add more details to the original narrative. Secondly, as a result of more reading and reflection on Chalmers, I have fleshed out my analysis of some areas of his life. Chalmers was a complex man who did much good, but at the same time he made mistakes, and it is my hope that this expanded volume will deal fairly with both his achievements and his failures. Lastly, this book contains an entirely new chapter that takes a closer look at his preaching and pastoral leadership.

A word of explanation about the title of the book is in order here. After Chalmers' death, his son-in-law, the Reverend William Hanna took up the task of writing Chalmers' life. Hanna used his diaries, letters and manuscripts and he also drew widely on other contemporary sources.<sup>1</sup> When the fourth and final volume was published in 1852 he sent a copy to Thomas Carlyle, the philosopher and social commentator. In acknowledging receipt of the book, Carlyle wrote this to Hanna:

A few days ago, I received, and have now gone thro', with much interest and pleasure, your Fourth volume; for which, and for all your other kindnesses to me, accept many sincere thanks. This important work is now concluded; and I think we may safely say, is a piece of work well done on your part, and likely to be long useful to mankind ... It is not often that the world sees men like Thomas Chalmers; nor can the world afford to forget them, or in its most careless mood be willing to do it, when they do appear, in whatever guise that be. Probably the time is coming when it will be more apparent than it now is to everyone that here intrinsically was the chief Scottish man of his Time.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Carlyle was not in sympathy with many of the things that Chalmers believed or did makes this testimony all the more remarkable. He had met Chalmers and recognized that he had done much for his church and his country. It is my hope that this volume will go some way to explain why it was that Carlyle paid this tribute to him.

There are a number of people I have to thank, who have made this book possible. I would like to begin by thanking Graham Hind of Evangelical Press, who approached me with the idea of revising and expanding the original

*Bitesize Biography*. He has been encouraging and supportive throughout the process.

I am grateful to the Board of Trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary for their generous allowance of a study leave in 2019, when the book was written. I am also very grateful to the staff of the Montgomery Library at Westminster: Donna Campbell, Robert McInnis and Donna Roof. Without their smooth running of the library in my absence, this book could not have been written.

I would also like to thank these friends who have read the manuscript and provided very helpful feedback: the Rev. Father Lawrence R. Farley and Mrs. Donna Farley, the Rev. Dr. Don and Mrs. Judy Macleod and the Mr. Cris Simpson. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to my wife Linda Finlayson. Linda read and edited multiple drafts of the manuscript and more importantly, provided great encouragement and many cups of tea during the writing process. Her contribution has made the book much better than it otherwise would have been, but I remain solely responsible for the opinions expressed and for the blemishes that remain.

This book is affectionately dedicated to my brother Rod Finlayson, and my sisters Mary Ann Vandenberg and Cathie Morton. I have been greatly blessed by them, and they continue to be three of the most important people in my life.

Oreland, Pennsylvania,  
1 July (Canada Day) 2019.



## Chapter 1

# Scotland in Transition

On Thursday 18 May 1843 the Rev. Dr. Thomas Chalmers walked out of St. Andrew's Church in Edinburgh, along with two hundred and two other ministers and elders. These men were leaving the Church of Scotland's General Assembly for the last time and within a few hours, Chalmers would be appointed as the first moderator of the newly constituted Free Church of Scotland. Ultimately, four hundred and seventy ministers and one hundred and ninety-two probationary ministers also aligned themselves with the Free Church. And, remarkably, all of the Church of Scotland's overseas missionaries joined the Free Church. At the local parish level, it has been estimated that forty per cent of the church's lay membership withdrew from the established church.

This event, which rocked the Scottish ecclesiastical scene, was the culmination of many years of struggle for the spiritual independence of the church, a struggle led by the Free Church's new moderator. Thomas Chalmers was certainly not the only leader, but without his vision, organizational skills,

and his ability to mobilize opinion, it is probable that the Free Church would never have come into existence.

But, as we shall see, Chalmers was much more than a gifted leader in the church. He was that rare breed of scholar, teacher, pastor and public theologian. He was someone who not only had great intellectual gifts, but he also had a very practical impact on the lives of many people. As we survey his life in this book, we will see his various gifts put into practice. Despite his giftedness however, he was a far from perfect man, and so we need to learn from his failures as well as his successes.

Before looking at the details of Chalmers' life, we need to spend a few moments examining the times in which he lived. Even though he only lived for 67 years, this was a period of enormous change and transition. There were immense economic, social and political changes, but more importantly for us, this period saw significant developments within Scotland's churches. All of these developments would mean that Scotland could be said to have undergone revolutionary change during Chalmers' lifetime.

To begin with some socio-political data, at the time of Chalmers' birth in 1780, Scotland's population was approximately 1.5 million people. By the time of his death in 1847, the population had increased to nearly 2.8 million. To place this population growth in context, during the whole of the eighteenth century, Scotland's population had grown by less than 600,000.

On the world stage, the conflict with the American colonies was still ongoing at the time of Chalmers' birth. And if this was not enough, Great Britain was also at war with France. While the war with the French came to an end in 1783, the

French Revolution of 1789 posed a real threat to the stability of Britain. There was genuine fear that the tide of revolution that was sweeping away the old order on the European continent would cross the English Channel and bring about similar revolutionary changes in Britain.

To put the political scene in context we need to remember that the crowns of Scotland and of England had been united in 1603 when James VI of Scotland inherited the crown of England upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I. While it was a moment of triumph for the Scots to see James Stuart crowned King of England, the next one hundred years saw periods of intense drama and conflict. The rise and fall of the fortunes of the Stuart dynasty, which included the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, would have wide reaching ramifications for English-Scottish relations.

When Queen Anne died without an heir in 1714, England, and eventually Scotland, turned to a German royal house for their next monarch. There was reluctance on the part of some Scots to embrace the House of Hanover in the person of George I. Despite justifiable suspicions regarding the Roman Catholic sympathies of some of the Stuart monarchs and their families, they were nonetheless seen as a Scottish dynasty and as a result, there was considerable sympathy for their ongoing claims to the throne. James II, who had been deposed during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, never gave up his claim and his heir, Bonnie Prince Charlie, would continue the campaign. Persistent risings were finally suppressed at the decisive and brutal Battle of Culloden in 1746.

The Acts of Union of 1707<sup>1</sup> which formally united the Scottish and English Parliaments were intended to emphasize the common aspirations of a United Britain. These acts

merged the parliaments of the two nations and established the Kingdom of Great Britain. Scotland now had free trade with England and her colonies. As Britain's empire expanded the Scots played a great part in its development.

The end of the eighteenth century has been called "Scotland's most creative period": David Hume won world fame in philosophy and history, Adam Smith in political economy, and Robert Burns in poetry. In the next generation, Sir Walter Scott made the land, people and history of Scotland known throughout the world and Scottish inventors made discoveries that helped to advance the industrial revolution. Also, during this period, the Scots played a major role in establishing the colonies in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The single largest societal change that took place during the lifetime of Thomas Chalmers was the advance of the industrial revolution. The chief form of employment moved from the fields to the factories and, with this growth of manufacturing, came a major shift in population from rural areas to the cities. It was not that the agricultural sector entirely collapsed during this period, but the industrial sector was on a massive growth curve. Scotland's two largest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, saw significant growth. In 1801 the populations of Glasgow and Edinburgh were 77,000 and 83,000. Just fifty years later they were 345,000 and 194,000 respectively.

While this rapid growth was an indication of growing prosperity for some, there were also serious problems facing Scotland. Along with increased wealth generated by the manufacturing industries came massive social problems. While factory work could provide decent enough wages for

some, this often came at significant social cost. Working conditions were frequently difficult and often dangerous. The health and safety laws that most of us take for granted were nowhere present. Many people were required to work seventeen hours a day and then lived the rest of the time in cramped, unhygienic and squalid conditions. While the British economy could be seen to be very prosperous the question was being asked, at what human cost? Crime in the cities was on the rise and there were serious issues caused by easy access to alcohol. One scholar has summarized the changes taking place in this way:

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

Immigration was another factor that was changing Scottish society in this period. Cheap labour, particularly from Ireland, flocked to the cities looking for work. Families separated from their roots and social structures added to the challenges being faced by Scotland's cities. In light of all of this it may be asked, how well was the church responding to the rapid change?

At the end of the eighteenth century Britain as a whole and Scotland in particular had a largely church-going population. In England, the Church of England commanded the largest share of those who attended church, although non-conformist

Protestants and Roman Catholic populations were on the increase.<sup>3</sup> In Scotland, the Church of Scotland, which was Presbyterian in polity, commanded the largest share of the populace by a wide margin.

The Church of Scotland was made the established church by the Act of Settlement in 1689. This was achieved after significant struggle and at no small loss of life. The Covenanters had valiantly resisted various attempts on the part of the House of Stuart to impose the Episcopalian form of church government and the *Book of Common Prayer* upon them. But even though Episcopalian government and worship had been successfully resisted, there were still problems, and one of the biggest issues had to do with how parish ministers were appointed. This issue would loom large during the lifetime of Thomas Chalmers.

Even before the Protestant Reformation, some landowners had taken upon themselves the right to appoint the local parish priest. New ideas of church government that emerged after the Reformation included attempts to do away with this system of patronage and replace it with a system whereby members of congregations could elect their own pastors. However, landowners, Protestant and Roman Catholic alike, were unwilling to give up their long-standing rights. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a number of pieces of legislation were passed by Parliament that attempted to settle these thorny issues. Conflicting laws first abolished patronage in 1649, then re-established it in 1662, abolished it again in 1690, only to have it re-established in the Patronage Act of 1712. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries there was both confusion and conflict within the Church of Scotland regarding who had the right to call ministers.

By the end of the eighteenth century the Church of Scotland had suffered from a number of relatively small secessions caused in part by differing views on the church's relation to the state. The secession churches objected to the establishment principle which held that there is a link between the church of Christ and the state. This principle holds that both institutions have been created by God and it is their duty to support and further the work of the other. One implication of this view is that it is the duty of the state to provide financial support for the work of the church. At the same time, both the church and the state have their own duties to carry out and should not interfere in the distinct areas belonging to the other. So, for example, the power to maintain peace and order in society belongs to the state, while the administration of the sacraments and the carrying out of church discipline is the sole responsibility of the church.

Despite the victories achieved by those who had fought for religious freedoms after the Reformation and throughout the seventeenth century, it must be conceded that by the time of Chalmers' birth, the Church of Scotland was not in the healthiest of conditions. To be sure, the churches were reasonably full of people and the balance sheets were strong, but what of the churches' spiritual health?

The Church of Scotland in this period was largely divided into two groups. While generalizing about these two groups can lead to over-simplification, a few important characteristics can be noted. On the one side were the "moderates" for whom the work of the church was more about appearing respectable in the eyes of the leaders of society, than it was about preaching the gospel. For the moderates, the church was as much a social entity within