

Parish Evangelism

Rediscovering Focus in Evangelistic & Pastoral Effort

By Michael J. Ives

Apathy can only be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice.

-Arnold Toynbee

Pico Iyer considers himself the epitome of the “Global Soul.”¹ Born to “middle-class academics,” Pico never learned a word of his parents’ two native tongues. Not only do all of Pico’s relatives live in different continents, but Pico himself is a permanent alien and is thus ineligible to vote in any election. He has never had an employer in the same country where Pico has “more or less” lived. Religiously, Pico was raised by Hindu Theosophites, yet surprisingly was educated almost exclusively in Christian schools. Today, he lives mostly in rural Japan or in a Catholic monastery (!). Perhaps his most significant source of identity is his airline of choice, on which he has accumulated a whopping 1.5 million miles. No, this is not a bizarre Orwellian fiction of the future – Pico’s story is real, though admittedly surreal.

To be sure, Pico is an anomaly. Most people do not live in such extreme uprootedness, however mobile or technologized their lives may be. But the frightening thing is that Pico is an icon of the global citizen, who is fast losing any sense of identity - social, religious, or otherwise. Our culture increasingly lives everywhere and at the same time nowhere. The 20th century saw the age-old boundaries, once so impenetrable, melt into irrelevance. Technology erased the atmospheric barrier in the space race, the epidemic barrier in the advance of modern medicine, and the communication barrier on the information

¹ Pico Iyer, “Citizen Nowhere,” *Civilization* (February/March 2000): 72-77.

superhighway. Today, the process of globalization continues rushing on at break-neck speed, and the homogenization of the world's cultures is becoming a reality. The golden arches now bridge Boston and Beijing. Yet at the same time, triumphant man's massive success is soured by an aftertaste. Something about all of this is just not right.

Of course, Christianity holds the solution. However much the social and religious landscape has changed, the fact remains that there is a preacher in Galilee with the answer. Our message is timeless, because the problem is essentially timeless.

But it is evident that the Christian church is spinning its wheels – at least in America, the nexus of this globalization process. Certainly, a major element of the problem lies in the church's tinkering with (or *dismantling* of) the message. The biblical, tried and proved doctrines of grace have fallen out of vogue within so much of evangelicalism. But what of those churches that lay claim to the great Reformation ideals? What of those churches that still prize the confessional faith? Do we see a channeled, energetic obedience to Jesus' churchly charge in Matthew 28:18? Anyone with honesty in our circles must concede that we are doing nothing for the Picos of the global community. We are treading water in the flood of secularization; and if heresy does not infect us from within, the culture shall do us in from without.

I propose, however, that our Reformed forbears have more than just the old, solid message to confer to their spiritual heirs. They also offer strategy. Permit me to call that strategy parish evangelism.

To the modern Reformed ear, perhaps the very terms "parish" and "parochial" sound more Anglican or Roman Catholic. True enough, both these communions still operate on the parochial principle. Even America, as religiously heterogeneous as it is, is still parceled out by the ecclesiastical

hierarchies. But any knowledgeable student of Protestant history knows that the Reformed churches did not abandon the parish system. Rather, they reclaimed it as the conduit through which they could effectively Christianize their respective populations.

From Geneva, to London, to Edinburgh, to Boston, the Calvinists believed in the old Augustinian ideal of the *corpus Christianum* (Christian body), the *civitas Dei* (city of God). The catholic, universal church was still one seamless garment even after the great cleavage of 1517. Its most basic, visible manifestation was the local assembly. And that adjective, 'local,' should here be stressed.² These were community churches, believing fraternities typically of those who were baptized, grew up, married, labored, socialized, and died within the borders of a given locality. Their children's children were accustomed to enter church every Sabbath past the graves of their ancestors, who lie in plots annexed to the house of worship. The parish minister descended the pulpit on the Lord's day to visit the parishioners on Monday, both churchgoing and non-churchgoing. All in the district knew their parish minister quite intimately, and he knew them. His responsibility was not vague and undefined: upon his shoulders was laid the *cura animarum* (care of souls) of a definite number of households, families with names, faces, and very real problems. Some parishes were wild and untamed, some diffused with the spirit of evangelical piety, and others on the spectrum somewhere in between. The church, though not identified with the parish, was the center of the social orbit.³

² The modern English words "parish" and "parochial" come from the old Latin *parochia*, and ultimately from the Greek *paroikos* (*para* + *oikos*), meaning 'dwelling near' or 'neighboring.' If the term *oikos* be applied to the house of God, the parish then is the neighboring community *by* or *about* that house.

³ It is a most interesting observation that the geographical center of every Massachusetts town incorporated during the era of the Puritans was the town meetinghouse. David F. Wells illustrates the progressive American displacement of theology and worship from the center of its social orbit by tracing the social and demographic changes of one formerly Puritan community in Wenham, Massachusetts. See "A Delicious Paradise Lost" in *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 17-52.

It is quite true that the national church establishments of these Reformation countries patronized and safeguarded this Medieval institution. Hence, we have yet another example of the Reformers not throwing the baby out with the bath water. But it may be asked, how can the Reformers hand us a strategy for diffusing the Christian message that relies upon a defunct institution? After the American Revolution, old state establishments progressively faded before a non-establishmentarian Federal government. And today, America is completely loosed from any of its European establishmentarian moorings. How, then, can we learn anything from the parochial strategies of our Reformed fathers? Even if we had a desire to implement a parish system, how could such a feat be accomplished without state sanction and denominational consolidation?

To answer this, we really need to understand the details of Reformed parochialism. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847),⁴ the great champion of the Free Church of Scotland and unquestionably the greatest Scottish figure of the 19th century, was an ardent advocate both of church establishment and the parish system. In four of his lectures, found in his works *On the Christian and Economic Polity of a Nation: More Especially With Reference to its Large Towns* and *On Church Extension*, we discover a spirit of evangelization as fervent and visionary as it is careful and well thought-out.

In reading Chalmers, one discovers basically three concepts that are fundamental to his vision of the parish ministry, and by consequence, a program of national evangelization. These are locality, emanation, and development.

The first is the principle of locality. "Locality, in truth," says Chalmers, "is the secret principle wherein our great strength lieth; and our enemies could not

⁴ For a short, refreshing overview of Chalmers' life and labors, see W. M. Mackay, *Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1980).

have devised more effectual means of prevailing against us, in order to bind us and to afflict us, than just to dissever this principle from our establishment.”⁵ The particular church should be a neighborhood church. Though he did not wish to identify church and parish, yet he wished to place the former concentrically within the latter. The congregation of the faithful, ideally, would live the Christian life among each other throughout the week, and the parish minister would have daily interactions with them. The unchurched who reside in the parish would also come under the regular, ministry-long care of the parish minister, with the goal of “recruiting” them to the household of faith.

There is no rocket science in the principle of locality – it is simply common sense, and that in many respects. Evangelistic responsibility must be concrete to prevent indifference on the one hand or exasperation on the other. If in the words of John Wesley the world is truly one’s parish, then the burden will either be amazingly light or unspeakably onerous. Furthermore, without a local focus, the settled minister’s zealous and faithful energies would forever be scattered, irregular, and thus dissipated. He would be spread too thin, and his fruit would be sporadic at best. But on the local model, there is a pre-determined scope. Follow-up, for instance, the nagging problem of contemporary evangelistic effort, would on the parish principle rise to the top of consideration.

Other benefits naturally flow from an adherence to the principle of locality. One of them is the increased devotion and respect accorded to the public ministry, a byproduct of effective outreach. What was said by Chalmers of early 19th century Scotland eerily sounds like the close of 20th century America: “Everything has been permitted to run at random; and as a fruit of the utter disregard of the principle of locality, have the city clergyman and his people lost sight of each other.” How can the minister, busily engaged in unfocused evangelism projects, be an adequate pastor for his members if he is not frequently among them? Or on the other hand, how can he be energetic in

⁵ *Works*, 14:120.

evangelism when he is thwarted with the regular visitation demands of the distant and scattered members of his congregation? Something must give, says Chalmers – either he spends all his non-study time visiting those who are already Christians, or he spends it among those who are not, and that randomly and irregularly.⁶ Someone is the loser. But if the minister begins to focus on a fixed, local region, then his members will in time become those dwelling contiguously with the unchurched in the crosshairs of his evangelistic enterprise. At 617 Elm Street will be Frank Jones, a church member, while at 619 Elm Street will be Sarah Clark, a Roman Catholic who has previously shown interest in the Gospel. Two hours spent in parochial visitation would then go far to develop ministerial rapport with believers and unbelievers alike; while on the existing model, the pastor could easily burn one of those two hours on the road, visiting but one church member.

Another benefit is the immense advantage of a compact Christian community for the people themselves. What Chalmers recognized then is no less true now: “Juxtaposition forms no security whatever for acquaintanceship – insomuch that the members of distinct households might live for years under the same roof [of a tenement], unknowing and unknown to each other.”⁷ Otherwise disparate, disconnected, and perhaps transient households would by the process of gradual parochialization develop a revived sense of community. And those once coming into it would perceive something appealing. “The new comers could soon catch the *esprit de corps* that was already formed in the neighborhood of their new residence, and be soon so far assimilated by the overwhelming admixture of their superior number, to the tone and habit of the people who were there before them, as at least, to be accessible to all the attentions which are current in the parish, and be trained very shortly, to such a recognition of the

⁶ *Works*, 18:46-47.

⁷ *Works*, 18:56.

parish-church and parish-minister, as, in our large towns at present, is nearly unfelt and unknown altogether.”⁸

The second principle of the parish model is that of emanation. Chalmers, as a good Calvinist, did not hold out a humanistic optimism concerning the human condition. He did not think that setting up shop and posting the hours would do for a Christian church. No, men will not buy that for which they feel no need. Rather, “Nature does not go forth in search of Christianity; but Christianity goes forth to knock at the door of nature, and, if possible, awaken her out of her sluggishness.”⁹

To understand better Chalmers’ notion of emanation, we should understand what he conceived its antithesis to be, namely, attraction. The attraction principle is simply that the church’s witness operates more on attracting a populace indiscriminately and waiting for the turnout. It may be aggressive attraction, or it may be less so – but attraction it remains. Though he had great esteem for many dissenters,¹⁰ he respectfully demurred to their non-local operation. A dissenting minister would schedule his services and attract parishioners from several parishes, thus constituting a ‘mixed’ and not ‘local’ assembly. “But the mere building and opening of a new church, will not attract them,” says Chalmers.

The sluggishness of existing habit, will not be so easily overcome as those may imagine, who have only observed the readiness with which a place of worship is filled, where there is the glare of novelty, or the attraction of a little more eloquence than usual, or even the solid recommendation that attaches to him who is a firm and faithful expounder of the New Testament. All this will impress a preference and locomotion on the part of those *who have a pre-existent taste for Christianity*; and thus a new congregation may immediately be formed, out of shreds and detachments from all the previous ones. But it will be a mixed, and not a local congregation. There is no portion of the outfield population, that will sensibly be reclaimed by it.¹¹

⁸ *Works*, 14:139.

⁹ *Works*, 14:109.

¹⁰ The evangelical pastors working outside the establishment, and thus the parish system.

¹¹ *Works*, 14:127.

The very same phenomenon is operative in contemporary American evangelicalism. No one is making any effort to bolt the revolving door of the religious market.¹² The only tangible difference between now and then is that the theology has been diluted, and gimmicks have increasingly replaced the standard methods of attraction.

Emanation, on the other hand, is the centripetal push of the smaller circle - the believing community - to the furthest boundaries of its vicinity. The parish is a lump with definite boundaries, and the Christian ministry is the leaven.

On the basis of emanation, the duties of the Reformed parish minister are twofold: ministerial and pastoral. The ministerial duty encompasses the labors of the closet and the pulpit. Then Chalmers subdivides the pastoral duty into pastoral care for those in the church and care exerted for those in the parish, but not in the church. The goal is to win those over from the latter category into the former, thus narrowing the margins of the unbelievers in the parish. And in the end, the ministerial and pastoral duties reciprocate in usefulness upon each other - the ministerial labors aid the pastoral, and the pastoral the ministerial.

Last, there is in the parish theory the principle of development. This is the visionary element in Chalmers' paradigm. Chalmers was a long-term thinker. "There is a philanthropy more sanguine than it is solid, which, impatient of delay, would think an operation so tardy as this unworthy of being suggested, and refuse to wait for it. But it is the property of sound legislation, to look to distant results, as well as to near ones."¹³

Indeed, the problems that challenged him and the Scottish evangelicals in his day were formidable. The population of Scotland had doubled since the time

¹² And sadly, conservative Reformed churches frequently let the door fly on its hinges. Frequently, we admit applicants from other churches without doing the previous churches the kindness of first inquiring with them. The loss of the one Reformed church becomes the other's gain, thus fostering jealousies and ultimately leaving the problems of the individuals pastorally untreated and prone to flare up anew. If we are to reject the market approach, we must do so root and branch!

¹³ *Works*, 14:132-33.

of the Reformation, while the number and boundaries of parishes had remained static. The large, industrial centers, such as Glasgow where Chalmers labored, teemed with ever-growing masses of unchurched commoners who lived both in physical as well as moral squalor. The dissenters were remedying some of the problem, but were at the same time complicating the situation by fostering a non-local church arrangement. To complicate the problem, the Church of Scotland was not uniformly evangelical,¹⁴ and the issue of patronage was increasingly troubling. Chalmers would, in fact, lead a massive exodus of evangelical ministers out of the national church in 1843. Yet at the same time, Chalmers was a high optimist of the Pauline sort. This was precisely because he labored for the long-term and did not concoct quick fixes.

His confidence in the parish principle was doggedly determined. "The descent of more than half a century, will not be so easily or so speedily recovered. Such an achievement as this, can never be done without labour, and without the perseverance of men, willing to plod and pioneer their way through the difficulties of a whole generation."¹⁵ Elsewhere he writes, "It needs but the assiduities of the clergyman, and of his various office-bearers, to secure at length the general observation of the church-going. ... A population cannot long withstand an influence like this, if only kept up amongst them with sustained and busy perseverance; and with all the greater speed and certainty will they infallibly give way, in that they are a local or contiguous population. Such is the prolific virtue that lies in the mere principle of juxtaposition."¹⁶

Chalmers also believed that the long-term goal should ever be in the minds of parochial ministers to keep them from hasty over-implementation. Some things had to be borne with while working towards the ideal. While permitting auditors from other parishes to remain in the parish church, the parochially minded minister would increasingly concentrate his evangelistic

¹⁴ Many ministers were 'moderates,' as he had been prior to conversion.

¹⁵ *Works*, 14:130.

efforts on the parish. With the right plan implemented, time would perfect the imperfections. Says Chalmers,

...there may, at the outset of every new church, be but a small proportion of parishioners attending it; but, with the removal of the dying off of extra-parochial hearers, there will be a certain number of vacancies [available seats] to dispose among them annually. Meanwhile, the interest of the minister, in his new parish, will be gradually extending, and, with very ordinary attention on his part, may so keep pace with the disappearance and decay of the exotics among his congregation, as will enable him to replace them by parish applicants; and thus, in the process of time, will a home be substituted in the place of a mixed congregation. It were laying an impossibility upon a clergyman, at once to call in from a yet unbroken field, fifteen hundred ready and willing attendants, upon his ministrations. But this, without any colossal energy at all, he might do at the rate of fifty in the year. So that though he begins himself with a mixed auditory made out of hearers from all parishes of the city, there may be such a silent process of substitution going forward during the course of his incumbency, as shall enable him to transmit to his successor an almost entirely parochial congregation.

Though certain circumstances surrounding the above plan were unique to his day, such as an establishment, pre-existing parishes, and the ordinance of seat letting, yet the principle of biding one's time endures.

Last, the element of independent, focused parochial labors would in time bear the final fruit of a Christianized nation. As development would not be immediate, so neither would it largely be top-down. Contrary to what one might think about establishmentarianism, Chalmers did not entertain a messianic view of the state for purposes of Christian extension. In fact, he exhibited a fair amount of cynicism for those officials who had overweening self-perceptions of their influence for good. Lasting and universal effectiveness would arise rather, to use a modern idiom, from 'the grassroots.' What Chalmers writes concerning philanthropy certainly has bearing upon all Christian effort for national good:

The example of a well-cultured portion of the territory, will do more to spread a beneficent influence over the whole, than is done by the misplaced energies of men who cannot be tempted to move, till some design of might and of magnificence is proposed unto them. The efficacy of this humbler style of benevolence will, at length, come to be witnessed; and the comfort of it to be felt;

¹⁶ *Works*, 18:60.

and it will diffuse itself, by sympathy, over the contiguous spaces; and the local resources of each space will be abundantly called forth on the near and exciting object of its own cultivation; and the result universal will be attained, not by the combination of all the powers into one effort, but by the summation of many efforts done by these powers apart from, and independent of, each other – not by one stalking society lording it over the whole, but by manifold associations, each assuming its own distinct task, and fulfilling a work commensurate to its own separate energies.

To use a modern illustration, a natural mother is more ably suited to rear her children than a bureaucracy in the beltway. Consequently, the renovation of our society's child rearing must begin, not with civic legislation, but with an aggregate of individual, godly mothers.

As we turn to the modern situation, is Chalmers' parochial strategy realizable today? Or is the parochial "delicious paradise," as Wells terms it, mere wishful thinking? There are good reasons to think that even Chalmers, were he with us today, would advocate some kind of a parish initiative.

First, though establishment aids the *bene esse* of parochialism, it is not absolutely necessary to its *esse*. It is not establishmentarianism that energizes the local program, but the very dynamism of Christianity itself. Again, fundamental to Chalmers' strategy is the concept of an obtrusive missiology.

It is well enough, that every article of ordinary sale is to be had in stationary shops, for the general and indiscriminate use of the public at large; for all who need such articles, also feel their need, and have a moving force in themselves to go in quest of them. *But this is no reason why the same thing must have been done with Christianity.* It is what all men need, but what few feel the need of; and, therefore it is, that, under our present arrangement in towns, there are many thousands who will never move towards it; but whom still it is in our power to reclaim and to engage, did we but obtrude it upon them.¹⁷

'Missions' etymologically denotes being sent. Christ instituted a missiological program for his church at a time when there were no nations favorable to the Gospel. No state favored the Christian faith until some three centuries passed. But the leavening influence of the Christian message eventually won that patronage. If the parochial system is simply an implementation of an emanation

¹⁷ *Works*, 14:121. Italics mine.

and not an attraction principle, then some form of it may certainly be realized without a patronizing state. The Gospel is not reactive, but proactive: not passive, but obtrusive.

Second, it must be recognized that Chalmers did not view dissent as theoretically incompatible with the kind of focused evangelistic operation inherent in the parish principle. Writes Chalmers,

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. And, accordingly, it has often been alleged of dissenters, that, with all the zeal and talent of their pulpit services, there exists a grievous defect in their household ministrations; a peculiarity, however, owing, we believe, *to no defect of principle*, but to the real difficulty of their position. And there are noble examples amongst them of unquenched and unconquerable energy, by which even this difficulty has been made head against – as by my venerable friend, Ebenezer Brown of Inverkeithing, whose unwearied assiduities for about half a century have done much to sustain the Christianity of his neighborhood, and to keep alive the sense and the savour of what is good among families. He perhaps is not fully aware *how much more effectual his labors might have been, had they been concentrated on a given territory, every house of which he could have entered with the freedom and authority of a parish minister.*¹⁸

Such words do not come from one jealously blinded to the virtues of dissenters, but from a large-hearted evangelical who would rather have seen them Christianize Scotland alongside the establishment on a more effective principle, namely, the parochial one. If then Chalmers recommended a parochial plan to dissenters in the 19th century who disregarded an existing establishment, why would he not recommend it in the 21st to those Reformed churches who have no establishment to which to turn?

Third, and most conclusively, Chalmers himself became a member of the ‘dissent’ in 1843. After years of evangelical frustration with the patronage problem, Chalmers spearheaded a rupture with his cherished establishment. The lordship of Christ demanded it for him. But this departure from the Church of Scotland in no way voided his fundamental adherence to the ideal of establishment and parochialism. When the first was forced from him, he labored

to hold to the second. According to W. M. Mackay, he sincerely maintained “his firm belief in the effectiveness of the [parish] system even after the Disruption of the Church of Scotland.”¹⁹

As evidence, we may cite the ‘West Port experiment.’ In the last four years of Chalmers’ life, when in his sixties, his academic and ecclesiastical leadership in the Free Church of Scotland did not prevent him from laboring in the ‘grassroots’ of Edinburgh. West Port was a district of extreme poverty, both physical and moral. It consisted of approximately 400 families, 300 of which were unchurched. “The plan of Dr Chalmers was to divide the whole territory into 20 districts each containing about 20 families. To each district a visitor was appointed whose duty was to visit each family once a week.”²⁰ By 1845, “250 scholars attended the school” they had erected. “A library, a savings bank, a wash-house and a female school had been provided, and there was a congregation served by a missionary minister.”²¹ Clearly, Chalmers was not one to sigh at his window, reminiscing of former halcyon days. Not surprisingly did Thomas Carlyle exclaim of him, “What a wonderful old man Chalmers is! Or rather, he has all the buoyancy of youth. When so many of us are wringing our hands in hopeless despair over the vileness and wretchedness of the large towns, there goes the old man, shovel in hand, down into the dirtiest puddles of the West Port of Edinburgh, cleans them out, and fills the sewers with living waters. It is a beautiful sight.”²²

What then ought a sympathetic, confessionally Reformed eldership do to re-implement the ‘parish church’ amid the tattered fragments of American Christianity? I would be surprised if Chalmers did not advocate staking out territories, *de novo*. Or, to put it more anachronistically (or quixotically, if you

¹⁸ *Works*, 18:47-48. Italics mine.

¹⁹ Mackay, *Thomas Chalmers*, p. 30.

²⁰ Mackay, *Thomas Chalmers*, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

will), let the session draw the borders.²³ Chalmers writes again concerning dissenters of his day,

We have not yet heard of any dissenting minister in towns, who *assumed to himself a locality* for the purpose of its moral and religious cultivation. We think, that it would greatly add to the power of his ministrations, if he did so. But, as the case stands, his pulpit operates on the neighborhood, chiefly as a centre of attraction; and the people move, in the first instance, towards him, instead of him, in the first instance, going forth among the people.... But we do not see, in their system, what the forces are, by which the nation can be recalled from the declension into which it has actually sunk. We do not see, how the torpid, and lethargic, and ever-augmenting mass, can be effectually wrought upon.²⁴

The reality is that there is more than ample room for such claims to be made. The situation of the present day is little different than in the days of our Lord, who stated that though the harvest was plentiful, the laborers were few. As was the 19th century American frontier, so the 21st century spiritual frontier: the territory is wide and open. Ours is a 'manifest destiny' of a morally sublime character.

The Picos of America - and of the world, for that matter - need an identity, a spiritual place to call home. The fight to reclaim them for a truly Christian community will be a momentous challenge. Sin loves the anonymity of a culture lost in limbo. But we need not despair. The strong man has been bound, and his goods lay exposed for the taking. Let's just begin with the manageable - the house adjacent the church.

²³ Chalmers has some very practical formulas of computing how large one's parish ought to be. See *Works*, 18:63-64. But one must always keep in mind Chalmers' preference for quality over quantity. "The question, it will be understood, is not how small the population of a parish ought to be, but how large it ought not to be" (*Works*, 18:62). "A single obscure street, with its few diverging lanes, may form the length and the breadth of his [in this instance, the Christian philanthropist] enterprise; but far better that he, with such means and such associates as are within his reach, should do this thoroughly, than that, merging himself in some wider association, he should vainly attempt in the gross, that which can never be overtaken but in humble and laborious detail" (*Works*, 14:151).

²⁴ *Works*, 14:115-16.