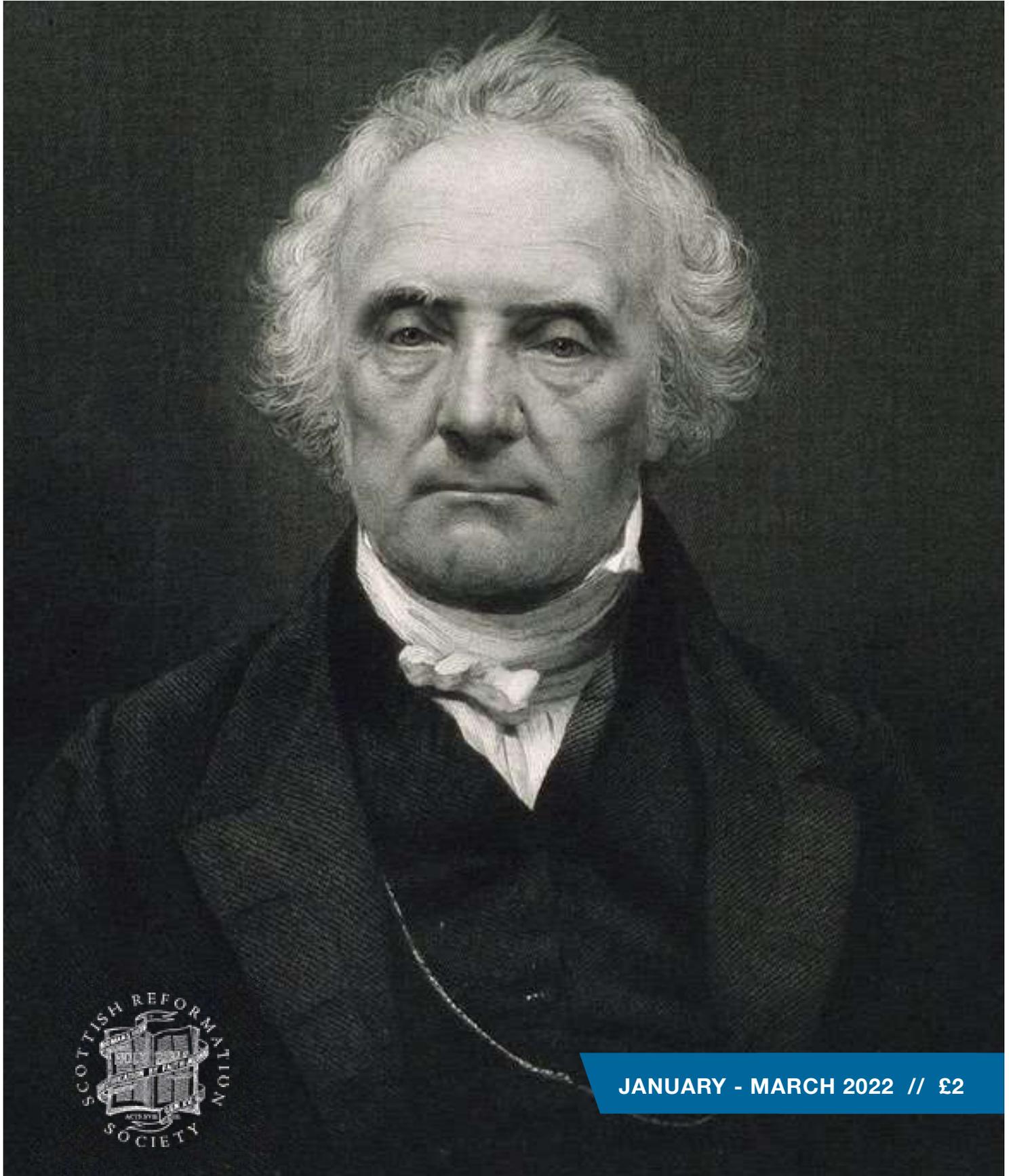


THE BULWARK

MAGAZINE OF THE SCOTTISH REFORMATION SOCIETY



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The section entitled "Young Bulwark" is edited by Matthew Vogan.

OBJECTS OF THE SOCIETY

(a) To propagate the evangelical Protestant faith and those principles held in common by those Churches and organisations adhering to the Reformation;

(b) To diffuse sound and Scriptural teaching on the distinctive tenets of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism;

(c) To produce and distribute evangelistic, religious and other literature in connection with the promotion of the Protestant religion.

Who cares about ...

The Christian Good of Scotland?

Recent articles in the *Bulwark* by Michael Ives have described the West Port Experiment that Thomas Chalmers implemented in Edinburgh in 1845. This home mission with its simple methods transformed one of the most deprived and depraved localities in the nation. The inevitable question arising from this is: Could this not be at least attempted and achieved on a wider, even a national scale? This burden on the heart of Thomas Chalmers was summed up well by Robert Buchanan:

To reform society was the object of his life. The gospel could do this, and nothing else could do it. And how to bring the gospel to the homes and the hearts of the neglected masses that were multiplying with such fearful rapidity on the "ground floor" of the

social edifice, — this was his grand problem, which he spent his days in working out with incredible energy, and in labouring with matchless eloquence and power to get other men to learn.

Chalmers was asking such questions while the West Port Experiment was in its embryo and while the Disruption events were still in full momentum. At a public meeting held in Edinburgh on 17th December 1844 he spoke about the West Port Experiment and pressed the need for pursuing the evangelisation of the masses and the penetration of the gospel into every corner of the land. He was not simply trying to build a Free Church empire; he wanted anyone who could to engage in such endeavours due to the urgency and scope of the task. In a famous expression he exclaimed:

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.

Such a statement can be easily misunderstood and misrepresented. It is



Thomas Chalmers

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necessary therefore to enquire further into what Chalmers meant by it, as well as to seek to appreciate his national vision.

I. THE CHRISTIAN GOOD OF SCOTLAND

Chalmers believed that Established Churches had a key role in bringing the gospel to every corner. In 1811, not long after his conversion, he declared that he could not see how else it was possible to ensure that “through every district of the land there is a church to which the people may repair.” As he later put it, an Established Church secures “over the whole length and breadth of the land, such a juxtaposition between the gospel and every human creature, as will never be accomplished in any other way” (*On the Use and Abuse of Literary and Ecclesiastical Establishments*, 1827). This was in large measure what he meant by the Christian good, or the good of religion, as he also explained in 1827.

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I have no veneration for the Church of Scotland merely *quasi* an establishment, but I have the utmost veneration for it *quasi* an instrument of Christian good: and I do think that with the means and resources of an establishment, she can do more, and does more, for the religious interests of Scotland, than is done by the activity of all the Dissenters put together. I think it a high object to uphold the Church of Scotland, but only because of its subservency to the still higher object of upholding the Christianity of our land.

His view was that “every part and every function of a commonwealth should be leavened with Christianity.” The necessary consequence of this was that it should be the great goal of the church. He argued in



Robert Buchanan

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1814 that the “single object” of the General Assembly in enacting legislation ought to be the “good of religion”.

The alternative to focussed attention on every district of the nation was a more gathered Church model, with much good preaching and well-attended churches but within a town or city that was still largely a moral and spiritual wilderness. A lack of concentrated district visitation and attention would mean “that the town shall not be spread, but (if I may use the expression) be spotted with Christianity.”

As chairman of the Church Extension Committee from 1835 to 1841, Chalmers was responsible for building 220 new churches in Scotland. He had asked, “What is the most effectual method of making Christianity so to bear upon a population as that it shall reach every door and be brought into contact with all families?” The Church Extension campaign now took as its slogan, “A church and a minister within easy reach of every door”, clearly implying that there should be two-way traffic between the church and the individual’s door.

II. THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

“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?” In saying this, Chalmers was not being dismissive of organised religion or of Church principles. He had championed the principles of spiritual independence as much as any and had abandoned position and income as much as any. But he saw a danger of people becoming swallowed up in the struggle so as to forget their responsibility towards the nation. This

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concern was not unique to Chalmers. Thomas Brown expresses the same thought in the following way in *The Annals of the Free Church*:

It was a great thing for the Church to have lifted up such a testimony; but it was, at the same time, all-important that no wrong use should be made of what had been done. If the Free Church, for example, had attempted to live on the past, and fight over again for ever the old battles of the Disruption, the greatest injury would have been done both to herself and to the grand truths for which she had contended. Better than these vain contentions – better far than all other arguments – would be the spectacle of ministers and elders throwing themselves with energy into their own proper work, and manifesting the presence of Christ Himself in the Free Church as her living Head – the source of that spiritual power which she was enabled to put forth; most earnestly was she urged to make this the great object of her efforts and her prayers.

Brown and Chalmers were concerned lest they had merely a paper church of zealously held documents and principles but little practical expression of the consequences of such truths. As Brown puts it, Chalmers “would fain save his Church from sectarian narrowness”. Too often this had been the result of separation from the national Church. It was with such motives that Chalmers said, “Who cares about the Free Church compared with the Christian good of the people of Scotland?” Part of the benefit of the Disruption had been that the Free Church could pursue the work of church extension with even greater energy

and vigour and without the restrictions and opposition that had previously been experienced. Brown reflected further on this as follows.

It would, indeed, have been a miserable result if the doctrine of Christ's headship, which the Church had defended at such cost, had been taken apart from its practical influences and set up as the mere shibboleth of a sect – a form of words from which the life and the power had departed...With the sacrifices of the Disruption in view, they were thrown back on the great realities of faith and hope, seeking that Christ their Master might be with them in the day of trial. But in after times, when the struggle was over, the danger was that the truth might be retained as the mere badge of a Church denomination, while its vital influence might have gone. It was to guard against such defections that the warnings of Dr Chalmers and others were directed. We had better work to do than to be for ever assailing the Establishment which we had left, and exposing the Erastian encroachments of the State.

III. OTHER FREE CHURCH LEADERS

Others maintained a similar outlook. Rev. John Sym, of Free Greyfriars, Edinburgh uttered his earnest desire “that the Church which has been so eminent in fighting the battles of the faith should be no less distinguished in the way of doing good” in “scattering the Gospel blessings of holiness, peace, and everlasting life among the destitute around them.” “I would despair for my Church, if we were to lie upon our oars, resting on the mere evidence which historical documents, or transactions founded on historical

documents, may afford,” said Dr Candlish. He went on as follows.

I should despair of our having God's blessing on any steps we took ... if we were to rely on such evidence, solely to prove our identity with the Church of Scotland from the beginning. No, sir, it is not by raking up musty documents; it is not by going back to old testimonies ... that we are to establish really our claim to be the living representatives of our forefathers; but by showing that we have the life in us – that we are alive to the exigencies of the times in which our lot is cast, and that we are prepared to take the full responsibility of the Church of Scotland in reference to dealing with the spiritual wants of our countrymen everywhere.

Director of the Commercial Bank of Scotland, Robert Paul was a prominent elder who laboured in the cause of the Disruption. He is one of the central figures in David Octavius Hill's famous painting of the first General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. His thoughts ran along the same lines as others.

Much as I love the Free Church – much as I am interested in all her doings – strongly attached as I feel to her principles, and greatly as I will ever rejoice in the testimony to vital and Scriptural truths which she has been honoured and enabled to bear, I look on all this as comparatively nothing, unless our Church shall be made a great instrument for maintaining and extending the cause of sound religion and vital godliness in the land.

Much was indeed done. It did not take

long for a similar “West Port experiment” in Glasgow to bear fruit in a district called the Wynds. Within a short period twenty additional Free Church congregations were formed in the Presbytery of Glasgow. Here was simple spiritual labour transforming the most degraded parts of Victorian Scotland. Dundee, Aberdeen, and other towns witnessed similar endeavours. The Convener of the Home Mission Committee Church was Dr Roxburgh. He asserted that the Church “was not sufficiently aware how much of that measure of Christian usefulness to which she had attained was due to these territorial operations. He could name twenty-six of these stations, which within the last very few years had risen into congregations, some of them most vigorous and flourishing – some of them shining as centres of light in the midst of the darkest and neediest districts.” Dr William Wilson followed him in this post, and he provided a summary of the work accomplished later:

We are adding year after year to the number of such missions, and year by year God is showing how wide and effectual is the door open to us for obtaining access to the masses of the population crowding the lanes and closes of our large cities. And if I may venture to say it, nowhere in the field of missions at home or abroad in connection with the agency of the Free Church has such an abundant blessing been poured out as in connection with these territorial missions.

All this was the fruit of the vision that Chalmers had articulated and implemented. But if there was a subtle note of self-congratulation as well as thankfulness in the later reports perhaps it was evidence of

pride creeping in. The later decades of the Free Church seemed to reflect the desire of a leadership who aimed to be the biggest and most influential ecclesiastical force in Scotland, especially when consummate politicians took the reins. Arguably, the desire for academic prestige led to the influence of German scholarship and a consequent drift towards liberalism. None of this invalidates the original vision or its achievements; we fully expect a measure of sin to taint our best efforts.

IV. WHO CARES?

Some today would respond with disinterest about the “musty documents” and “old testimonies” of such events. But we have much to learn. Indeed, we need to ask if anyone cares about the Christian good of Scotland today. The Church of Scotland, once a religious presence in every parish, is now withdrawing headlong from many localities due to a lack of resources. There is an ongoing work of evangelical church planting, some of it in needy and deprived communities, with a range of methods under various banners and it displays a commendable desire for the gospel to reach the unchurched. Yet often it may still be an attritional model that is adopted, trying to entice people to meetings and events by “doing church” in a different way, or luring them with other things than the gospel. Every instance is different, and we cannot prejudicially tar them all with the same brush; the methods proposed must be assessed as to whether they are biblical. But even if, for the sake of argument, they were, the broader point is also whether they will meet the exigencies of the time. A 2007 Tearfund report found that almost 70% of the UK population have no intention of attending a church service at any point in the future. That means that

activities, courses, changing worship style, and other things will not reach them.

Chalmers' method was simple, systematic, spiritual, and unadorned. It was concerned with reaching souls rather than building brands; it sought them out. A gathered team of committed individuals connected with their local community and the lives of individuals through visitation and interaction. Such a method has massive challenges in a society where community has disintegrated but that is not to say it is impossible. No doubt something resembling it is bearing fruit in some communities.

But let us return to the question: who cares about the Christian good of Scotland? Is there anyone with a national vision? There are those tilling hard ground here and there and there are denominations in managed decline. But who has the national vision? There are more than a handful of smaller denominations with the words “church of Scotland” in their name but while they claim its heritage, they are less vocal about pursuing the responsibility of the Christian good of Scotland as far as they can. Would that heritage not greatly contribute to the Christian good of Scotland if it was widely taught and disseminated? Is there not a great deal of biblical teaching that would help the church in Scotland mature if it were understood and applied? What will they know of vital godliness if they are not enlightened in it? “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48).

It is entirely right to seek to be as biblical as possible in doctrine, worship, government

and practice but we can still do this while benefiting others. Indeed, the endeavour would enrich us. “There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty” (Prov. 11:24). The Free Church fathers feared that partisan campaigns of zealously maintaining denominational distinctives could easily become an excuse and substitute for the unenviable task of doing as much good as possible to as many as possible. We might never express it explicitly, but our actions may well be saying “who cares about the Christian good of the people of Scotland compared to x church?”

The ready response to the challenge of seeking the Christian good of Scotland is that there is a lack of resources. This was the situation that the Free Church faced at the Disruption: it had zero resources. The people marshalled the power of lobbies to gather pennies together to provide for ministers, manses, church buildings, schools, and missionaries. It was impossible to accomplish the work of district visitation with ministers alone, so they made use of church members. But we are told that the problem is a lack of manpower. In 1560 John Knox gathered twelve ministers and began the task of pursuing the Christian good of Scotland in all parts of the land. We know what fruit that bore. But some may object that Knox had the support of the state behind him, and we do not. Let us turn to the twelve original men whom Christ commissioned to pursue the Christian good of the whole world. They did not have the support of the state behind them but its opposition and persecution. They bore an unwelcome message to a hostile world in a difficult and dark day, yet they went out in faith

resting on the promises of the Head of the Church.

If we believe, like Chalmers, that we have a responsibility to “do good unto all men” as we have opportunity (Gal. 6:10) we will want to fulfil it and do what we can. Perhaps it is not so much a lack of resources or manpower but a lack of desire. Christ said of someone with little opportunity, “she hath done what she could” (Mark 14:8). If we have not done what we should and what we could, is it because we are more intent on doing what we want to do? That is why this question is so searching: “Who cares about.... the Christian good of the people of Scotland?” Perhaps in other cases, the sheer magnitude of the task makes us sit down in despair at the thought of it. We do not need, however, to wait for a national movement and vision amongst others. A little can be done by a few in a small locality, setting aside a little time for a little proportion of that district. By little and little many lobbies can contribute to a greater whole.

Chalmers was by no means perfect in all his views and actions, but he understood one thing of central importance. He pursued the Christian good of the people of Scotland in a firm and unyielding conviction that we also need to share:

Jesus Christ died, the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God. This is a truth, which, when all the world shall receive it, all the world will be renovated. ... It is this doctrine which is the alone instrument of God for the moral transformation of our species.