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THE APOLOGETIC DISTINCTIVES OF THOMAS CHALMERS

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 31 May 1847, Dr. Thomas Chalmers, ‘the greatest of living Scotchmen’ was found to have passed peacefully in his sleep.¹ The public outpouring at his funeral was something seldom seen in Edinburgh, as the procession of mourners stretched for mile after mile, and as one chronicler said, it was ‘amid the tears of a nation, and with more than kingly honours’ that this Scottish divine was laid to rest.²

This humble minister of the word of God left behind a wealth of written works covering a diverse range of subjects from pauperism, education, church government, evangelism, and missions, to philosophy, theology, and apologetics. At times, he even waded into the arenas of public policy, economics, and natural science. He has been referred to as the ‘main-spring of the whole evangelical movement in the Scottish church’,³ and ‘the greatest spiritual force Scotland saw in the nineteenth century’.⁴ His contributions to Scottish Protestantism cannot be understated, and it is reasonable to rank him second only to John Knox in religious importance.

For all his dedication to the ministry and years of theological effort, Dr Chalmers is primarily remembered for two things: being the man at the centre of the 1843 disruption of the Church of Scotland culminating in the establishment of the Scottish Free Church, and his pastoral work on missions and social issues like pauperism and education. However, Chalmers was more than a church organizer and champion for the needs of the poor. He was an active apologist of formidable intellect with an evangelical zeal that motivated him to spread the Gospel.

¹ Thomas McCrie, *The Story of the Scottish Church. From the Reformation to the Disruption* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988), p. 527.

² William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D.*, IV vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1852), vol. IV, p. 593.

³ McCrie, p. 526.

⁴ Iain H. Murray, *A Scottish Christian Heritage* (Edinburgh and Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), p. 75.

His apologetic works profoundly influenced the students who sat under him at St Andrews and Edinburgh Universities, and were often praised by his contemporaries for being of the highest calibre.⁵ Yet, even with this praise, Chalmers' status as an apologist was short lived, for in a little more than ten years after his death, his writings were rarely read.⁶ Today, few of his works are in publication, with little written of his apologetic endeavours, and even fewer references to the arguments or recognition of their similarity to modern apologists.⁷ These days, it is safe to say that Chalmers' apologetic prowess and apologetic distinctives are essentially forgotten.

REASONS FOR CHALMERS' APOLOGETIC ANONYMITY

At the core, there are essentially three reasons for the limited duration and understanding of Chalmers' apologetics. The first reason for Chalmers' apologetic anonymity was his style of writing.⁸

Chalmers rarely wrote simply to convey some fact or piece of information. His desire was to stir, motivate, and awaken the emotion. When reading Chalmers' apologetic works, this objective becomes obvious. His writings, which have the aim of defending Christianity, are excessively verbose and too repetitive for the academic apologist. A reviewer of his writings in 1842 says, 'his style is often incorrect, and almost always verbose and tumid, and, amidst a wilderness of words, the reader is sometimes at a loss how to find any meaning whatever'.⁹ The result of this excessive wordiness is that the reader of Chalmers' works can become lost. At times, his writings read as though they are dictated and in need of editing. They often lack a coherent or recognizable structure, and are seemingly contradictory amidst his extended efforts to explain.

The second limitation, to the wider acceptance of Chalmers' apologetic works, grew out of the tendency in his personality to be more receptive than critical in his research.¹⁰ Though he was ahead of his time in the pastoral application of his theology toward the needy, intellectually

⁵ Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, pp. 76–9.

⁶ Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, p. 77.

⁷ Steven Adamson, 'The Apologetics of Thomas Chalmers: The Influences, Methods, and Effects of Chalmers' Rebuttals to Objections to Christianity' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, Highland Theological College, 2013).

⁸ Adamson, 'The Apologetics of Thomas Chalmers', p. 26.

⁹ 'Chalmers' Natural Theology', in *The North American Review* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1842), p. 357.

¹⁰ Adamson, 'The Apologetics of Thomas Chalmers', p. 30.

he was regulated by contemporary thought. He did not question the generally accepted Newtonian mechanical view of the universe, and readily incorporated preliminary and sometimes false findings of modern geology, especially if they aided his gap theory view of Genesis.¹¹

Third, Chalmers' apologetic writings came at a time when natural theology was increasingly challenged by scientific discoveries. By the time the eight *Bridgewater treatises*, were published, of which Chalmers was one of its authors, the ideas of Paley, Reid, Butler, Buckland, and other natural theologians, of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, had been recycled so often that scholars and scientists paid them little attention.¹²

These factors contributed to Chalmers' technical works languishing on library shelves for over one hundred years. However, with renewed interest in arguments for Christianity resulting from contemporary research in natural theology and intelligent design Chalmers' apologetics and distinctives as an original thinker are beginning to be realised.

CHALMERS' PHILOSOPHICAL DISTINCTIVE

As an apologist, Chalmers possessed great interest in mathematics and the sciences, had thoroughly imbibed Scottish common sense philosophy, natural theology, and preferred the scientific method of argument via induction to deductive arguments. This aspect, his philosophical foundation, forms the first of two distinctives in Chalmers' apologetics.

The philosophic foundation in Chalmers' apologetic arguments for the existence of God, creation, inspiration, and miracles arises out of his common sense belief in the human mind's innate tendency to expect constancy in nature, a tendency he believes is always matched by nature's harmonious Newtonian constancy.¹³ As an example of this presupposition, consider Chalmers' proof for the existence of God, which follows the traditional teleological design analogy, generally associated with William Paley. He employs his foundational presupposition to argue that humanity expects constancy in nature; hence, when presented with objects that are contrived for a purpose, they are warranted in presuming upon an antecedent designer. As such, Chalmers argues that the analogy is valid as it is merely an application of the expectation of nature's constancy to presume upon a designer of the world. His argument does not overcome the formidable theistic objections of David Hume as he had intended.

¹¹ Wade Huie, 'The Theology of Thomas Chalmers' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh: New College, 1949).

¹² Adamson, 'The Apologetics of Thomas Chalmers', p. 31.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 66–85.

Nonetheless, Chalmers presents a noteworthy attempt by reducing one's gaze to the essential attributes of a generic designer and any artefact contrived for a purpose. In so doing, he exposes a flaw in Hume's argument (i.e., that all effects are singularities, thus knowledge is impossible if the accessory components of the cause are included) and develops a line of reasoning previously unrecognized in reviews of his works, a line of reasoning that displays nearly identical statements as the concept of irreducible complexity put forward in the latter half of the twentieth century by intelligent design advocates.¹⁴

CHALMERS' EVANGELICAL DISTINCTIVE

While Chalmers had the intellect of a scientist and philosopher, his desire was for the gospel. He was schooled in Scottish philosophy; however, he did not allow it to dictate his theology. He was a believer in the value and necessity of natural theology, but his evangelical orientation would not allow it to replace God's revelation found in Scripture. He had seen and tasted moderatism, but was awakened after a long near death illness, to the necessity to preach and teach the gospel as a full-fledged evangelical.¹⁵

It is this picture of Chalmers, which is often overlooked. True, his theological writings do not meet the expectations of academic rigour. That is because his motivation is always evangelical; his goal is to lift and stir the soul. His methods of argumentation are dominated by his love for science, and devotion to natural theology and common sense philosophy. Yet his concern for evangelism is constantly evident in his illustrative style of presentation, a style that has unfortunately removed his works from the arena of serious academics.

Often the aspects of Chalmers' works that outline the need for schools, and serve as the motivation for people to enter the missionary field, are labelled 'social work'. In some respects this is a correct characterization, but it should not be overlooked that at the core they are an outgrowth of his apologetics. And these apologetics had a warm and life-changing

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 89–127.

¹⁵ The religious moderatism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scotland can be said to be somewhat unconcerned with the drama of redemption. Instead, it focused on affirming the reasonableness of religion and morality from a rationalistic and humanistic perspective. It was predominantly an anthropocentric religion that found common ground with natural theology, being heavily influenced by Scottish Common Sense Philosophy; it was less theological than it was philosophical. Daniel Rice, 'Natural Theology and the Scottish Philosophy in the Thought of Thomas Chalmers', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), 23–46 (p. 33).

appeal on people, and demonstrate his evangelical distinctive to apologetics.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND ON CHALMERS' APOLOGETIC DISTINCTIVES

In many respects, Chalmers is representative of the typical apologetics of natural theologians prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, there are, as has been demonstrated, aspects of Chalmers' apologetics that are unique. These distinctives combine into what can be termed a 'Chalmerian' uniqueness to his apologetics.

Daniel Rice writes that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural theology, in both England and Scotland, were heavily synthesized with religious moderatism.¹⁶ Many of the apologetic works of this era were noticeably lacking in orthodox doctrine or evangelical sentiment. Instead, they were endowed, as George Trevelyan writes, with 'a cauld clatter of morality'.¹⁷ The overwhelming objective of these works was not for the evangelical promulgation of Christianity, but merely the reasoned demonstration of the existence and character of God, and reliability of Scripture via appeals to nature.¹⁸

This attitude is understandable, for outright atheism or anti-Christian beliefs in nineteenth-century western society was a social taboo. Consequently, Christianity was assumed true without exception, and all that was required was to demonstrate the underpinnings of faith (i.e., the existence and character of God and the credibility of the Bible). Doctrine was left to the ministry, and evangelism in this time of Britain's history was frowned upon as being too closely related to religious fanaticism.¹⁹

Chalmers' works have the same basic contents as the works of his contemporaries. His efforts in natural theology reflect what had been produced by Butler, Paley, Reid, and a host of others: focusing on demonstrating the existence and character of God via appeals to creation, and the ordered working of the world and humanity. Many of his other treatises are oriented toward demonstrating the veracity and authority of Scripture, and reflect the same ideas of Butler's eighteenth century *Analogies*.

¹⁶ Daniel Rice, 'The Theology of Thomas Chalmers' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Drew University, 1966), p. 33.

¹⁷ George Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History* (London: Longmans, 1944), p. 459.

¹⁸ Rice, 'The Theology of Thomas Chalmers', pp. 111–55.

¹⁹ Rice, 'Natural Theology and the Scottish Philosophy', *passim*.

In general, Chalmers' apologetics contain the traditional subjects of natural theology.²⁰

Even so, James McCosh, who considers Chalmers to be essentially a synthesizer of moderate religion with philosophy, also says that the tenor of Chalmers' apologetics reflected a great uniqueness in his time.

Hitherto there has been a severance, at times an opposition if not avowed yet felt, between the Scottish philosophy and the Scottish theology. The one had magnified human nature, and tended to produce a legal, self-righteous spirit; whereas the other humbled man and exalted God, enjoining such graces as faith, humility and penitence. But there never was any real opposition between the facts gathered by the one and the truths taken out of God's Word by the other. The metaphysicians had shown that there is such a faculty in man as the conscience; and the conscience proclaims that man is a sinner, while the Bible provides a forgiveness for the sinner in a way which honours the moral law. The reconciliation between the philosophy and the religion was effected by Thomas Chalmers, who has had greater influence moulding the religious belief and character of his countrymen than any one since the greatest Scotchman, John Knox.²¹

Considering this statement, it is possible to distinguish Chalmers from his natural theological contemporaries. In short, the apologetics of Chalmers are differentiated by their practical evangelical nature and reliance on innate tendencies. This then is the 'Chalmerian' difference attested to earlier. This I have defined as 'the apologetics of natural theology with an anthropological evangelical emphasis on humanity's disease of sin remedied by Christ's atonement'.²²

When reading Chalmers' works, the practical nature and the evangelical sentiment of his inductive apologetics becomes obvious. Chalmers writes not just to prove a point, but also to motivate his readers to pick up and read their Bibles. 'It will be a great satisfaction to the writer of the following pages, if any shall rise from the perusal of them, with a stronger determination than before to take his Christianity exclusively from the Bible.'²³ In this, Chalmers' apologetics are unique, being more evangelical, while still inductively rooted in common sense, than the typical works of his day.

²⁰ Huie, 'The Theology of Thomas Chalmers'.

²¹ James McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy, Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (New York: R. Carter, 1875), p. 393.

²² Adamson, 'The Apologetics of Thomas Chalmers', pp. 274–5.

²³ Thomas Chalmers, *The Evidence and Authority of the Christian Revelation* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1817), pp. vii–viii.

Even Chalmers himself identifies this apologetic uniqueness. He believes the approach he, and for that matter his evangelical contemporaries in Scotland were taking, reflects something different, something he considers more Scottish than English. Of this, he writes:

The treatment which Mr. Hume's argument has met with in the two countries of England and Scotland is strikingly in unison with the genius of the respective people. The savants of our nation have certainly a greater taste and inclination for the reflex process, while it is more properly of our southern neighbours to enter, vigorously and immediately and with all that instinctive confidence wherewith nature has endowed us, on the business of the direct one. Our general tendency is to date our arguments from a higher point than the English do to reason for example about reasoning, before we proceed to reason about the matter on hand . . . The English again, to borrow another phrase from their own parliamentary language, are for proceeding to the order of the day.²⁴

Chalmers identifies this English-Scottish difference when commenting on Paley's work on Christian evidences. He indicates that the Scottish theologian, trained in common sense philosophy, first thinks upon the metaphysical underpinnings to the question, before embarking on proofs. He comments:

This is what our friends in the south seem to have no patience for. Their characteristic is not subtlety of discrimination on the powers and principles of the mind, but often admirable soundness and sagacity in the direct application of their powers to the practical object coming to a right judgment on all important questions. Dr. Paley stands forth in full dimension as an exemplar of this class.²⁵

Chalmers considers the English approach to apologetics to be characterized by this more direct attack. Metaphysical reasonings do not take such a central focus in the recognized works of English theologians. Scottish apologists, on the other hand, according to Chalmers, place significant emphasis on philosophical thinking. A survey of the Scottish works of Reid, Stewart, and Brown, for example, are replete with metaphysical preliminaries. In all of Chalmers' technical works, metaphysical preliminaries occupy the first several chapters of the writings.

McCosh considers the influence of Scottish philosophy on the religious and theological expression of the nation as the primary reason for

²⁴ Thomas Chalmers, *On the Miraculous and Internal Evidences of the Christian Revelation* (Glasgow: W. Collins, 1836), pp. 42–3.

²⁵ Chalmers, *Miraculous and Internal Evidences*, pp. 42–4.

a unique form of apologetics found not only within Chalmers, but also within Scotland as a whole. McCosh points out that the reason for this uniqueness is that the Scottish church exerted power and influence over the people, in the absence of a political structure, long since removed to Westminster.²⁶ James Buchan gives the same reason for the distinctiveness found in Scottish theology in general, claiming throughout his work, *Crowded with Genius*, that without the presence of political or aristocratic elites, the church and university professors assumed the role of the formulators of society.²⁷

With this pivotal role in Scottish society occupied by the clergy, the general make-up of Scottish thinking, according to McCosh, became more reflective, bearing the hallmarks subscribed to by common sense philosophy. In general, Scottish apologetics, of which Chalmers is an excellent example, have a tendency to use inductive pursuits, to be distinguished from apologetics of other writers who use more *a priori* metaphysical thinking. While still focused on natural theology, Chalmers considers the intellectual processes behind human nature, the mind, and epistemology, to be in essence a blending of philosophy and religion.²⁸

Based on this analysis, Chalmers' own assessment, and the views of other researchers, it is safe to say that Chalmers' apologetics were unique for his time. They reflect the general contents of natural theology, but were controlled by the empirical demands of common sense induction and were written for an evangelical not academic purpose. It is the evangelical purpose that Chalmers focused on later in life, believing that future ministers should be instructed with the same evangelical zeal that his parishioners observed from the pulpit.

CHALMERS' INFLUENCE ON EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS

In addition to his writings, Chalmers' evangelical orientation came forth in his sermons and lectures. He constantly encouraged his congregations and students to live out their faith in a very active manner. The response given by the public to his sermons brought him many laudatory descriptions, of which these are typical: 'as a preacher, the foremost of his age ...

²⁶ McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy*, p. 16.

²⁷ James Buchan, *Crowded with Genius. The Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), pp. 4–23, 56–118.

²⁸ McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy*.

no living rival',²⁹ 'the greatest preacher which Scotland has produced',³⁰ possibly 'the greatest pulpit orator of modern times'.³¹ Anthologies of great sermons and great preachers would be inclined to include one of Chalmers' sermons, usually the *Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. That the reputation of this master preacher of nearly two hundred years ago has not been forgotten is indicated by the description given him by a contemporary professor of homiletics, who called Chalmers 'the ablest preacher that the Presbyterian Church has produced'.³²

In Chalmers' sermons, there is recognition for an enlarged view of relating Christian truths to everyday life. This recognition was the impelling force behind his beliefs on such subjects as pauperism and missions. According to one church historian, Chalmers was the first churchman to see the significance of the industrial revolution in the church's life, and his *Commercial Discourses* certainly exemplified his keenness to see a broader application of Christian teaching than had previously been expected.³³ William Blaikie recognized Chalmers to be the first to apprehend the capabilities and obligations of the pulpit. Indicating that a minister's job is 'to educate character, to establish right relations with nature and humanity, to improve all that was improveable in man, to saturate the social and national life of the country with the spirit of Christ'.³⁴

'The king of practical theologians' was Peter Bayne's description of Chalmers, observing that he 'wrote with the sound of the world in his ears; every one of his books seems anchored to earth'.³⁵ This testimony is supported by many other writers who recognize Chalmers' contribution to the practical side of apologetics, to that of an enlarged view of Christian truths toward the demands of everyday life.³⁶ Blaikie sums it up this way:

²⁹ D.S. Williamson, *The Homage of the Wise Men of Christ* (Edinburgh: Myles Macphail, 1847), p. 23.

³⁰ McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy*, p. 397.

³¹ D. Macmillan, *Representative Men of the Scottish Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), p. 146.

³² Huie, 'The Theology of Thomas Chalmers', p. 263.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³⁴ W. G. Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland: From the Sixth to the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), p. 8.

³⁵ Peter Bayne, *Six Christian Biographies. John Howard. William Wilberforce. Thomas Chalmers. Thomas Arnold. Samuel Budgett. John Foster* (London: D. Bayne & Co., 1887), p. 167.

³⁶ N. L. Walker, *Thomas Chalmers: His Life and Its Lessons* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1880), pp. 91, 123.

Thoroughly Calvinistic in his theology, he was yet full of humanity, and breathed only love and kindness to his race; and the bones of Calvinism were so covered with flesh and skin and life-like colour, that, in his hands, it became a thing of beauty and joy forever.³⁷

By approaching theology from the bottom of the heart as well as from the top of the head, Chalmers' apologetics are noticeably evangelical, especially in the spoken word. Their impact on his congregations and the entire Free Church of Scotland cannot be underestimated.

One of the things that Chalmers noticed when he left Kilmany for Tron Church in Glasgow was the incredibly impoverished conditions of a large proportion of the city. The people lived in abject squalor and rarely attended church. According to Charles Walker, there had been a general tendency on the part of moderate ministers to consider the problem of the poor as one that was without a solution even though they might not express these sentiments.³⁸ From the beginning of his time in Glasgow, Chalmers viewed things differently. With more than ten thousand people living in his parish, Chalmers, with his evangelical orientation, established a pattern of visitation for himself and his elders. His program was so successful that every person in the parish was visited at least once a year. Out of necessity, his visits were short, but long enough to enable him to make an accurate assessment of the congregations most urgent needs. He soon discovered that providing an education to the impoverished was high on the list of issues facing his charge. To rectify this situation, he divided the parish into smaller districts and arranged for Sunday Schools, to provide some level of education, in each district. It became evident that this was not enough, and Chalmers set about the task of raising money from the congregation to start day schools.

Even with all his dedication to the ministry and hard work, Chalmers alone could not have carried out his pastoral work in Glasgow. In this, numerous individuals aided, and it was his extraordinary gift for awakening spiritual convictions that garnered him tremendous support. He gathered a group of committed Christians, many of whom had come to faith under his preaching. He turned the detailed work over to the office of Church deacon, a position that had for many years fallen into general disuse.

When he left Glasgow in 1823, his work in pastoral apologetics did not end. During the remaining twenty-four years of his life, he was dedicated to the teaching and training of men who would carry the mantle of his

³⁷ Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland*, p. 288.

³⁸ Charles Walker, 'Thomas Chalmers (I)', *The Gospel Magazine* 1351 n.s. (April, 1965), 161-66 (pp. 164-5).

efforts into the future. When it came to the classroom, he was equally effective, as in the pulpit, instilling deep convictions and desire by his students to become ministers, teachers, and missionaries.

His impact on students during his five years at St Andrews is marked by the missionary enthusiasm he instilled in six students. John Urquhart, Robert Nesbit, Alexander Duff, John Adam, David Ewart, and William Sinclair Mackay were all stirred to take up the missionary task. These students were so moved by Chalmers' practical teachings that they all became involved in Scottish missionary work to India. Working in India for the balance of the nineteenth century, these six students began schools, hospitals, and cared and tended the needs of the church, preaching the gospel to both upper and lower classes in India's society.³⁹

After removing to Edinburgh University in 1828, Chalmers focused on teaching systematic theology. His students went on to represent the evangelical movement fifteen years later, when the Free Church started. All told, Chalmers' students rank as a 'who's who' of mid-nineteenth-century Scottish theologians, including such names as Robert Candlish and William Cunningham.

After becoming Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University in 1827, it was Chalmers' custom to allow interested residents and passers-by attend his lectures. Even with a class filled with divinity students, Chalmers was never overly technical. He constantly strove to resurrect a dead creed and enliven a formalistic theology to the eternal benefit of both the highly educated and working class people.

CONCLUSION

When assessing Chalmers' apologetics, it is clear that his written works had minimal impact on academia; they are difficult to read, lacking rigour, order, and readability. However, his practical apologetics left their mark on Scotland, and are still noticeable today. One needs only attend a presbytery or general assembly meeting of the Free Church and hear Chalmers' words quoted, followed by the obligatory foot stomping of approval by the members in attendance.

It is the practical part of Chalmers' apologetics, the evangelical nature of his works and demeanour that is most remembered. Often the aspects of these writings that outline the need for schools, and serve as the motivation for people to enter the missionary field are labelled social work. Yet, they are an outgrowth of his apologetics that had a warm and

³⁹ S. Piggin and J. Roxborough, *The St. Andrews Seven: The Finest Flowering of Missionary Zeal in Scottish History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985).

life-changing appeal. His apologetics are ultimately for the practical purpose of evangelism. He writes, 'the more practical—the better'. A maxim, which he says, 'is not vulgarizing Christianity to bring it down to the very humblest occupations of human life. It is, in fact, dignifying human life, by bringing it up to the level of Christianity'.⁴⁰ We hope this aspect of Chalmers' apologetics—the practical—will generate greater appreciation in academia, and instil a desire in Christians to seek out and read his writings.

⁴⁰ Thomas Chalmers, *The Application of Christianity to the Commercial and Ordinary Affairs of Life in a Series of Discourses* (Glasgow: Collins, 1820), p. 96.