

## CALVIN REDISCOVERED:

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# Thomas Chalmers and Scottish Calvinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

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Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847)<sup>1</sup> taught theology in Edinburgh from 1829 and was the first moderator of the Free Church of Scotland founded at the Disruption of 1843 when a third of the ministers and people left the Church of Scotland after a bitter ten year battle over the spiritual independence of the established church and the right of congregations to veto nominations to pulpits. A liberal evangelical famous for his parish experiment at St John's in Glasgow from 1819 and the most celebrated preacher in Britain, Chalmers was a strong supporter of home and overseas missions and reinvigorated the ministry of elders, deacons and Sunday School teachers. His vision of a Godly commonwealth and a united mission inspired students who took his ideas around the world, including to New Zealand, where Port Chalmers is named after him. His attitude towards the Calvinism of his day, particularly as his theology developed after his conversion in 1811, is a window into a changing complex of Scottish ideas and traits which may be traced directly and indirectly to the Swiss reformer.

Chalmers had some notable similarities to Calvin. Both were converted after a period seeking fame through academic publications and both came to live by their preaching and their writing. Chalmers too, no doubt modelled on Calvin, produced an *Institutes of Christian Theology*.<sup>2</sup> Commentaries, correspondence and pastoral concern were features of both their ministries. Both got out of their studies and engaged with people. Both had a capacity for taking things personally and taking things too far, though the more impulsive and emotional Chalmers had the better sense of humour. Both had critical attitudes to the biblical text which can surprise. Neither were Puritans or Fundamentalists though they could be pretty serious, and those movements would later look to Calvin but seldom to Chalmers. Both enjoyed alcohol and thought banning it a foolish way to deal with abuse. Both were concerned for practical social systems as well as theological ideas. Both were concerned with the salvation of cities and not just of souls. Both attracted international visitors and had an international influence. Both were concerned with general and with theological education and with giving lay people a greater role in the life of the church. Both had an

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on material in John Roxborough, *Thomas Chalmers Enthusiast for Mission: The Christian Good of Scotland and the Rise of the Missionary Movement*, Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1999). Especially chapters 5 and 14; pp.38-65 and 228-242. See also Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *Institutes of Theology*, Posthumous Works of Thomas Chalmers Edited by William Hanna ; 7, 8 (Edinburgh: Constable, 1849).

interest in France, though Chalmers' French was basic and was learnt to read mathematics not theology.

Calvin's teaching and the model of the Genevan church and society during the last decade of his life provided reformers in other countries with a cohesive package of theology, polity, and worship embodied in his Institutes and Commentaries, the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 and successive editions of *La Forme des Prières et Chants Ecclésiastiques*.<sup>3</sup> A factor in his international influence was not the rigidity of Calvin's polity, but its flexibility.<sup>4</sup> Calvin's wide-ranging correspondence also shows development, even tolerance, but at times his followers took his teaching places he no longer wished to go.

These patterns of reception and development in Calvinism have continued and each generation has brought its own questions and emphases. The story of Calvinism in Scotland begins with those including Knox who looked to Calvin more than Luther for the shape of the Reformed church in Scotland.<sup>5</sup> It can be traced through the theology, values, polity, discipline, and worship embodied in the Scots and Westminster Confessions and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, the First and Second Books of Discipline, and the Books of Common Order based on Knox's Genevan liturgy. It is seen in the theological education of ministers, decisions by General Assemblies, and in the social and psychological commentaries provided by literature.<sup>6</sup>

As the inclusion of Dort in this list suggests, the cross-fertilization of developments in international Calvinism affected Scotland as well. French polity and Dutch theology in the half-century after Calvin's death were later augmented by English Puritanism and then North American, particularly through Jonathan Edwards. Scottish Covenanters, like French Huguenots, had to adjust an idealised vision of Christian society as the new Israel to the realities of being persecuted minorities.

The settlement of 1689 which restored Presbyterianism to Scotland as the reward for political allegiance to William of Orange both validated Westminster Calvinism and cemented its position as beyond serious theological scrutiny. The flowering of a "democratic intellect" in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland's transition from bankruptcy to an educational powerhouse may have owed something to Calvin and Knox's valuing of education and the experiences of governance provided by kirk session, presbytery, synod and assembly, but the exercise of the mind was more generally applied to the philosophical dimensions of evidences and determinism, than to the constructs of theology. The fame of Scottish ministers was real enough, but whenever theology was Queen of the Sciences, it was not in

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed. A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Pettegree, "The spread of Calvin's thought" in Donald K McKim, ed., *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*, 2004, p.217.

<sup>5</sup> James Kirk, *Patterns of Reform : Continuity and Change in the Reformation Kirk* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. More serious theological enquiry in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in the pages of the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, started by young Evangelicals as a parallel to the *Edinburgh Review* and for a time appealing to the theologically non-aligned such as Chalmers around the time of his conversion in 1811. Whatever questions they may have had, the authors took the Confession and concern for mission as the base line of orthodox commitment.

In July 1980, as one of his Burns Lectures, the late Professor Alec Cheyne of New College Edinburgh gave a presentation here at Knox College on the “Confessional Revolution” in Victorian Scotland.<sup>7</sup> Cheyne recalled an incident which serves to introduce some of those who might now be called “the usual suspects” in the changing place of Calvinism and of the Westminster Confession in 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. The consequences both facilitated and masked trends which would in due course contribute to the loosening of confessional ties with the passing of the declaratory acts by Uniting Presbyterians in 1879,<sup>8</sup> the Free Church of Scotland in 1892<sup>9</sup> and the Synod of Otago and Southland in 1893.<sup>10</sup> The Church of Scotland followed in 1929.

At the May 1831 General Assembly, John McLeod Campbell of Row (Rhu) and his assistant A J Scott were accused of teaching contrary to the Confessions and Catechisms of the Church.<sup>11</sup> In his pastoral ministry Campbell had been shocked by the lack of assurance in his congregation. In response he was hardly the first to over-ride the Confession to proclaim God’s love for all, but he did so in a way that gave occasion for him to be accused of universalism by people troubled by his idea that assurance was essential to faith, and his support of those who claimed to speak and write in tongues.

McLeod Campbell’s theological response to pastoral need has since come to be appreciated but it did not immediately help. He wrote to his sister in India in 1829 “As to the extent to which there is anything new in my views . . . when I go back to the writings of Luther and Calvin I find it not great.”<sup>12</sup> When the case reached the General Assembly two years later he appealed to Scripture over the Confession to argue that Jesus had died for all people. However theologically grounded his views, Campbell evoked sympathy but no real support amongst either the Moderates or the Evangelicals who were on the cusp of

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<sup>7</sup> A C Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk*, Edinburgh, St Andrew Press, 1983, 60-85.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy : Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> James Lachlan MacLeod, *The Second Disruption : The Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church*, Scottish Historical Review Monographs Series ; No. 8 (East Linton, Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> In America some Presbyterians rewrote parts of the Confession they did not like, but in Scotland and New Zealand it was felt to be easier to change the relationship of ministers and elders to the Confession than to change the Confession itself.

<sup>11</sup> For Campbell’s theology see James B Torrance, "The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26, no. 3 (1973). 295-311. Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology : From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> John McLeod Campbell to Jean Mary Macnab, 6 March 1829. (Macnab of Macnab papers, Killin NRA(3) 1126; bundle 111.)

dominating the Assembly. Both parties in the church were concerned less for his theology than for his unruly charismatic friends who threatened the order and discipline of the Church.<sup>13</sup> The final debate took place through the night. When the motion was put, 185 abstained but Campbell was deposed, 119 votes to 6.

Towards the end, in the small hours, the principal clerk meaning to say “the Church of Scotland will remain and flourish after these doctrines of Mr Campbell have perished and are forgotten” was instead heard to say “these doctrines of Mr Campbell will remain and flourish after the Church of Scotland has perished and is forgotten.” Seated in the gallery the Episcopalian lay theologian, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, was heard to retort: “Thus spake he, not of himself, but being high priest, he prophesied.”<sup>14</sup>

Later, as dawn broke over the Edinburgh skyline and they returned to their lodgings, Scott asked Campbell, “Could you sign the Confession now?” Campbell replied, “No. The Assembly was right: our doctrine and the Confession are incompatible.”<sup>15</sup>

The Assembly decision in the “Row Case” marked a hardening of orthodoxy in the Evangelical Party of the Church of Scotland which they carried into the Free Church at the Disruption of 1843. This however masked social and educational changes which in due course would expose the fragility of the new rigidity. By 1847 Campbell could write of “a great breaking up of the Calvinism of this country, and not only a preaching of the universality of the atonement, but a reaction against Calvinism”.<sup>16</sup> The Disruption itself weakened the ability of the Church of Scotland to maintain “the historic Calvinist standpoint that the Christian Church ... could so impress itself upon the surrounding community that the standards of the Gospel became the rule of life for society at large” even if the theological assumption remained intact.<sup>17</sup> Romanticism in literature, a shift from reason to experience as a source of truth, and the articulation of an attractive piety in Erskine’s writings contributed, though he, like Campbell, was outside the mainstream of the churches. Campbell’s work on the atonement appeared in 1856.<sup>18</sup> In 1847 the formation of the United Presbyterian Church from the union of the United Secession and the Relief churches had a formula which quietly dropped a requirement for ministers to affirm that the Confession was their confession not merely that of the church.<sup>19</sup> In 1866 some 70 ministers of the Church of Scotland petitioned that “the old relation of our Church to the

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<sup>13</sup> Stewart J Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982, pp.216f.

<sup>14</sup> John 11:51.

<sup>15</sup> William Hanna, ed., *Letters of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen*, 1884, p.106. Quoted by A C Cheyne

<sup>16</sup> John McLeod Campbell to Jean Mary Macnab, 17 April 1847. (Macnab of Macnab papers, Killin NRA(3) 1126; bundle 117.)

<sup>17</sup> A L Drummond and J Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, 1975, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *The Nature of the Atonement*, republished by Eerdmans in 1996 with an introduction by James Torrance.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy : Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism*. p.22f.

Confession cannot continue.”<sup>20</sup> Campbell’s award of a DD in 1868 by Glasgow University could be seen as a belated act of contrition by the establishment. By 1872, the drift in opinion across the Scottish churches was being noticed.<sup>21</sup>

If Campbell was a factor in this, what about the Evangelical leader, Thomas Chalmers?

Chalmers was known to be sympathetic to Campbell and to Erskine. Edward Irving had been his assistant in Glasgow. When recently applying for the Divinity chair at Edinburgh, Chalmers had been accused of not believing in systematic theology, a credible accusation to which he gave an evasive answer. In 1831 he was about to be moderator the following year, and was silent on the issue.<sup>22</sup> Suspicion about his theology might not prevent him becoming leader of the Evangelicals, but he needed to be careful. His theological heart was in a different place from the younger generation of hard liners who succeeded him after he worked with them in the Disruption struggles.

Chalmers illustrates very well how acceptance of missions and interest in revivals undermined double predestination for people of unquestionable evangelical commitment, though in his case the interest in mission came before the question of predestination was taken with any seriousness. What was emerging in Scotland in the 1830s and 40s was a tension between keeping the faith and giving it away. It would be the evangelical impulse as much as its threat to the good sense and reason of the Victorian mind, which corroded confidence in the Confession.

Chalmers’ encounters with Calvinism began with his family in Anstruther, Fife, where he was born in 1780 and then as a student in arts and divinity at St Andrews where George Hill, leader of the moderate party and professor of theology, taught a comprehensive and reasonable theology which conformed to the Confession. Hill praised Calvin and recommended him to students.<sup>23</sup> Heartfelt commitment was regarded as an oddity but the teenage student was for a time carried away by Jonathan Edwards’ *Freedom of the Will*. At the Theological Society in March 1796 he opened the debate “Can man be held accountable for wrong belief?” In 1798 he gave a paper on predestination and a year later on “Is man a free agent?”<sup>24</sup> He learnt from Hill to distinguish between systematic theology as a means of organizing beliefs and to think about what was pastorally helpful from the pulpit.

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<sup>20</sup> Cheyne, *Transforming of the Kirk*, p.68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas F Torrance, “From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell: A reading of Scottish theology,” in David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock, eds., *Disruption to Diversity : Edinburgh Divinity, 1846-1996* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996)., 22.

<sup>23</sup> “I do not know a more useful book for a clergyman in the country. It may be purchased for a trifle, and it is the best body of divinity.” Alexander Hill and George Hill, *Lectures in Divinity* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1854)., 172.

<sup>24</sup> St Andrews University Theological Society Minutes, 1786-1823, StAUL UY911.

Predestination was not.<sup>25</sup> The quality of teaching was better than Chalmers appreciated but he felt the requirement to sign the Confession, artificial.

How inconsistent ... with reason and conscience, after we have finished our course at the Divinity College, to subscribe our assent to the Confession of Faith after a superficial examination of its tenets and doctrines.<sup>26</sup>

In reality Chalmers was more interested in maths and science, which he then pursued at Edinburgh. In both science and theology he distrusted systems. In Edinburgh Baconian induction appeared to him as the means to explore the world and discern how it worked.<sup>27</sup>

In 1803 he was appointed to his first parish; Kilmany, about 10 kilometres from St Andrews. For six years he neglected his ministry to pursue literary and scientific fame. As his schemes, including for marriage, failed, he turned to address the needs of his parish and his own spiritual state. He had been impressed by young Edinburgh Evangelicals who were challenging the domination of the Moderate Tory elites, but it was during a period of illness from mid 1809 when he thought he was dying that a change of heart took place. On his 30th birthday, 17 March 1810, he began a daily journal.<sup>28</sup> Impressed by Pascal, Wilberforce and Thomas Scott a clergyman like himself who was converted after some years in ministry, Chalmers began to devour the theology he had despised and record his interactions with books and people as he sought a new theological identity.

The influence of the Edinburgh Evangelicals was important but indirect. Much of his progress was documented in his daily journal entries. Chalmers' reading was wide, and he laid a foundation of interest in missions and familiarity with the lives church leaders. He received the *Edinburgh Review*,<sup>29</sup> read Boswell<sup>30</sup> and Walter Scott<sup>31</sup> and was familiar with Burns<sup>32</sup> and Wordsworth.<sup>33</sup> He received Bible Society reports, read Claudius Buchanan's *Christian Researches* twice and Thomas Clarkson on the *History of the abolition of the slave*

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<sup>25</sup> William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1849), 1, p.15.

<sup>26</sup> T C to John Chalmers, 24 November 1796, NCL CHA 3.1.17.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Chalmers*, p.14f.

<sup>28</sup> There are fragments from earlier periods, but from 1810 onwards he kept a diary fairly regularly except apparently for 1817 to 1821 and 1834 to 1837. Extracts are in the *Memoirs*, but without indication where passages were omitted. In a few instances the *Memoirs* contain sections later excised from the manuscript copies. Unless otherwise stated all references and quotations here are from the manuscript originals in New College Archives.

<sup>29</sup> In 1843 Chalmers' library contained "38 volumes and many numbers" of the *Edinburgh Review*. Catalogue of books, p.50, NCL CHA 6.3.12. There are several references to the *Edinburgh Review* in his journals for 1810-1815.

<sup>30</sup> *Life of Johnson*, Journal, 18 November 1813. *Journal of a tour to the Hebrides*, Journal, 12 January 1814.

<sup>31</sup> *Lady of the lake*, Journal, 16 March 1811. *Marmion*, Journal, 16 March 1812.

<sup>32</sup> *Memoirs*, 1, 297

<sup>33</sup> *Edinburgh Christian Instructor.*, July 1811, p.44 (Review of Charters' *Sermons*).

trade. As well as Baptist and Moravian *Periodical accounts*, he read William Brown, *History of the propagation of Christianity*, and Jonathan Edwards' *Life of Brainerd*.

He found inspiration in English Evangelical and Puritan traditions including Hannah More,<sup>34</sup> Richard Cecil<sup>35</sup> and John Newton.<sup>36</sup> Philip Doddridge<sup>37</sup> and Richard Baxter<sup>38</sup> became life-long influences as were Joseph Alleine,<sup>39</sup> Matthew Henry<sup>40</sup> and John Owen.<sup>41</sup>

Moravians were important for their piety commitment and missionary methods. In 1813 he began A G Spangenberg, *An exposition of Christian doctrine as taught in the Protestant Church of the United Brethren*.<sup>42</sup>

He read Thomas M'Crie's *Life of John Knox* late in 1812 and like Wesley and Whitefield was influenced by Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712) an earlier professor of divinity at St Andrews.<sup>43</sup> Sermons of Robert Walker (1755-1808) he had read as a student were now seen in a different light. The *Marrow of modern divinity* recalled the controversy in which pietist 'Marrow men' were censured by the General Assembly. Ironical for his later

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<sup>34</sup> Chalmers began *Practical piety* in May 1811 and finished it by October. He recommended it to others and had to stop his aunt lending his copy before he had got through it. Journal 20, 23 May, 14, 21 June 1811. S Charters to T C, 10 July 1811, NCL CHA 4.1.33, *Memoirs*, 1, 236.

<sup>35</sup> Chalmers completed the *Remains* by 16 March 1813 and wrote out several extracts in his commonplace book. NCL CHA 6.2.5.

<sup>36</sup> Chalmers used Cecil's life of John Newton for reading to his household. Journal 8, 21 December 1813.

<sup>37</sup> In 1806 *The rise and progress of religion in the soul* was disowned by Chalmers from his pulpit. In 1812 he read John Osten *Life of Doddridge* and recommended the *Rise and progress* to others. Journal 26 February, 12 March, and 3 June 1812. T C to J Honey, 2 May 1812, *Correspondence*, 266

<sup>38</sup> Baxter was probably the single most important writer for Chalmers during this period and it was said he exchanged a horse for one of his works (*Memoirs*, 1, p.282). He read Baxter's *Body of practical divinity*, *Call to the unconverted*, and *Life* at this time though it appears he did not read the *Reformed pastor* before the late 1820s. The journals contain many references to being impressed by Baxter's practical advice. Chalmers used the *Call* as a tract, and gave copies to a painter working on the manse (Journal, 9 May 1812) and to several parishioners. The outline "heads of doctrines" in the *Call* provided the structure of Chalmers' sermon on Isaiah 27.3-5, 'Fury not in God' (*Posthumous Works*, 6, 422-440). Preached on seven occasions in and around Kilmany during 1814-15, in the last years of his life Chalmers rediscovered this sermon and delivered it all over the country.

<sup>39</sup> Alleine's *Alarm to the unconverted* was read in January 1815 and used for his first communicants. He described it as "a very close and vigorous performance," but had to overlook "its occasional coarseness of imagery and expression" (T C to Mrs Glasgow, 13 August 1819, *Correspondence*, 113.)

<sup>40</sup> He began Matthew Henry's *Life* in August 1811 and a year later his work on prayer. In May 1813 he began Henry's *Commentary* and by August 1814 finished volume 1 on the Pentateuch. In 1825 he was impressed by Matthew Henry's life of his father, Philip Henry.

<sup>41</sup> Between September and December 1814 Chalmers read Owen on indwelling sin, temptation and mortification, Journal, 13 September, 3 October, 24 December 1814.

<sup>42</sup> Journal, 16 May 1813. 3 September 1814. On 30 August 1814 he was "soothed and edified with the Moravian doctrine" and the day after that he could "feel the impulse of Spangenberg."

<sup>43</sup> Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae. : The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1923). Hereafter, *Fasti*. 7, 429.

role in the Row case, Chalmers<sup>44</sup> believed he would have been among its supporters at the Assembly in 1722.

What he did not read is also striking. Thomas Boston's *Memoirs and Fourfold state* do not appear until 1826 and 1828 respectively. *Pilgrim's progress* is not mentioned.<sup>45</sup> Samuel Rutherford's *Letters* are another omission.

There was little systematic theology, at least in part because there was not much to be had.<sup>46</sup> The *Theological Institutes* of George Hill published in 1803, contained only headings and the text appeared later. Chalmers borrowed George Campbell of Aberdeen's *Lectures on systematic theology and pulpit eloquence*<sup>47</sup> but they contained only slender advice on constructing a theological system and suggestions for sermons.<sup>48</sup>

The only reference to the Westminster Confession was on 4 July 1811 when he "looked into the Confession of Faith" and resolved to "give it an attentive perusal." Not long after he wrote to a friend in Dundee.

My Christianity approaches nearer, I think, to Calvinism than to any of the *isms* of Church History: but... I feel the influence of these systems to be most unfortunate in the pulpit. ... Is not this scrupulous orthodoxy of Calvin a principle altogether foreign and subsequent to the native influence of divine truth on the heart?<sup>49</sup>

In March 1812 he began to read Calvin's *Institutes*, at first in Latin, and then in English.<sup>50</sup> A year later he finished Book Three, but found Book Four on the church "heavy and uninteresting" and gave up.<sup>51</sup> Once the idea of all things being part of God's grand design filled him with ecstasy, now systematic theology was oppressive. When Thomas Snell Jones (1754-1847) from Edinburgh<sup>52</sup> visited and preached, Chalmers noted:

I hope that his free, and unshackled, and scriptural divinity will help to overthrow the spiritual tyranny of systems over me.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly it was a Moderate, Samuel Charters, who told him he was going too far in his distrust of systematic theologies.<sup>54</sup> Instead of the newly committed Evangelical

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<sup>44</sup> Journal, 23 August 1812.

<sup>45</sup> Although he had read it at some stage. T C to J Anderson, 18 December 1811, *Memoirs*, 1, 249.

<sup>46</sup> Few Professors of Divinity were not also parish ministers. Hew Scott, *Fasti*, 1928, 7, pp.357-435. The key issue was what could be preached, a concern both Hill and Chalmers addressed with their students.

<sup>47</sup> StAUL borrowing record, 28 June 1815.

<sup>48</sup> George Campbell, *Lectures on Systematic Theology and Pulpit Eloquence*. (London: W. Baynes & Son, 1824)., xii.

<sup>49</sup> T C to J Anderson, 2 November 1811, *Memoirs*, 1, 241f.

<sup>50</sup> Journal, 24 March, 10 November 1812.

<sup>51</sup> Journal, 22 March 1813. In the *Memoirs* Hanna omits the phrase "I have resolved to give him up." *Memoirs*, 1, 327.

<sup>52</sup> Independent minister of Lady Glenorchy's Chapel in Edinburgh from 1779. He trained at Trevecca and was ordained by the Scotch Presbytery of London.

<sup>53</sup> Journal, 23 August 1813.

advocating Calvinism, Chalmers needed to be told by a Moderate clergyman to pay it more attention.

In 1814<sup>55</sup> Chalmers revisited Jonathan Edwards. He began in March with Edward's life<sup>56</sup> and worked through his major writings. By July he had completed the posthumous sermons,<sup>57</sup> account of the conversions in New England,<sup>58</sup> and life of Brainerd.<sup>59</sup> Chalmers enjoyed Edwards but still felt the close reasoning got in the way of what Christianity was really all about.

I suspect both Edwards and Brainerd impair the freeness of the gospel offer and may embarrass and restrain a young convert in the outset of the work of seeking after God.<sup>60</sup>

A few days later he began Edwards on religious affections<sup>61</sup> but again came to the conclusion "there is a tendency in it to unsettle gospel faith".<sup>62</sup> He went on to the life of the Methodist John Fletcher (1729-1785) by whom he was "edified and impressed".<sup>63</sup> In March 1813 when he began Richard Cecil's *Remains* he found a kindred spirit. He copied out a lengthy extract.

The right way of interpreting Scripture is to take it as we find it without any attempt to force it into any particular system. ... Many passages speak the language of what is called Calvinism and that in almost the strongest terms. I would not have a man clip and curtail these passages to bring them down to some system ... but let him look out as many more ... which speak the language of Arminianism, and let him go all the way with these also.<sup>64</sup>

Chalmers was later to develop a warm relationship with the Methodist leader Jabez Bunting, and the conflict between Wesley and Calvinism seemed distant. However much, in its moderate and common Scottish forms, predestination was not held to be a barrier to

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<sup>54</sup> S Charters to T C, 16 February 1814, NCL CHA 4.3.24

<sup>55</sup> C Stuart to T C, 29 April 1813, NCL CHA 4.2.41. T C to C Stuart, 24 May 1813, NCL CHA 3.5.79. T C to C Stuart, 18 May 1815, NCL CHA 3.7.23. Copies of Edwards on religious affections and his posthumous sermons were lent by Stuart. William M'Culloch of Cambuslang had been one of Edwards' correspondents.

<sup>56</sup> Journal, 15 March 1814. Chalmers later owned the 1834 two volume edition of *The works of Jonathan Edwards*. It is not always clear which of Edwards' writings Chalmers is referring to as he used abbreviated titles.

<sup>57</sup> Journal, 27, 28, 29 June 1814. There are five collections of sermons included in the 1834 *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, and it is not clear to which or how many of these Chalmers' refers.

<sup>58</sup> Journal, 2 July 1814. It is not clear whether this is the 'Narrative of surprising conversions' (*Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1, 344-364) or 'Thoughts on the revival of religion in New England' (*Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1, 365-430).

<sup>59</sup> Journal, 9, 29 July 1814. Edwards, 2, 213-458.

<sup>60</sup> Journal, 29 July 1814.

<sup>61</sup> Journal, 1 August 1814, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1, 234-343.

<sup>62</sup> Journal, 14 August 1814.

<sup>63</sup> Journal, 7 October, 15 December 1814, 17 March 1815.

<sup>64</sup> Commonplace book, 1813, NCL CHA 6.2.5. *Memoirs*, 1, 322.

mission, the reality was that commitment to mission was undermining expressions of Calvinism once held to be characteristic of the tradition. The Westminster Confession, which had also been adopted in modified form by English Independents and Baptists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was as much under strain from evangelical revival movements with their shift in focus from reason to experience and their desire to offer salvation to all people, as it was from the thoughtful, the philosophical and the indifferent. Abuses of Calvinist piety could also be tellingly ridiculed by Burns and the temptations of election were cuttingly depicted by James Hogg,<sup>65</sup> but whether these were criticisms of theology or explorations of the ironies of humanity and the Scottish persona is perhaps a mute point. Chalmers certainly found pious language difficult and an obstacle to evangelism, and it was another element in his cautious and selective approach to what it was in the evangelical faith of his times he would make his own.

Both the Calvinism of Scotland and its critique can be seen as social commentary as well as religious narrative. There were broad markers of Calvinist culture in the value placed on education, and the preponderance of “church” type beliefs which Chalmers never questioned though Presbyterians could at times contrive to combine these with a sectarian mentality. Concern for order in church and society could be theological and Calvinist for him as for others. Those who were fearful and accusatory towards Catholics might be assumed by themselves and by others to be thereby loyal to the cause of the Reformation, Knox, and the teachings of Calvin. Here Chalmers took a view in sharp contrast to his Evangelical and Calvinist friends especially when he preached that Protestants were themselves guilty of the sins they attributed to Catholics.

Some fresh interest in Reformation history focussed on Knox and Melville with biographies by Thomas M’Crie and later interest in the Covenanters revived for their resistance to the state, and their apparent association with the cause of religious freedom, but for Evangelicals serious historical and theological engagement with Calvin came later. After the Disruption, the Free Church got involved in the publication and distribution of Merle d’Aubigne’s *History of the Reformation*, and Calvin’s works were freshly translated and republished in Edinburgh from 1843 to 1855<sup>66</sup>, seemingly without reference to the Disruption but perhaps as a response to the challenge of the Catholicism of the Oxford Movement.

Through the century “old Calvinism” always seemed to be dying and yet somehow remaining alive. People were touchy about premature obituaries. Princeton was firmly Calvinist, Holland had a Calvinist Prime Minister, and International Presbyterianism staged

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<sup>65</sup> James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner : Written by Himself: With a Detail of Curious Traditionary Facts, and Other Evidence* (London: Longmans, 1824).

<sup>66</sup> At least one subscription to the series was to someone in New Zealand. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and the Ephesians*, trans. from the original Latin by the Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854). The twelfth annual report for the year 1854. Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1793/99061> on 10 August 2009.

world conferences in 1887 and 1880. However by later in the century action on the key document which symbolised and ossified the tradition could no longer be avoided. The Declaratory Acts which changed the terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession helped remove the burden felt by many in both Evangelical and Moderate streams in the Scottish Presbyterian churches that the Westminster version of Calvinism no longer said what they believed.

Putting some distance between the church and double predestination, may have brought in a new denouement for the Confession, but not for Calvin. After the Declaratory Acts Calvinism in its more moderate forms and revived by a fresh reading of the texts began to generate a renewal of the Reformed tradition as a whole.

After his death in 1847, Chalmers' way of dealing with the theological problems of the Confession may have appeared to have been eclipsed by the appointment of William Cunningham as his successor as Principal of New College. Cunningham was a robust Calvinist historian of the old school, who was upset Chalmers affirmed the value of "good works" as worthwhile and even as steps in the direction of salvation. Chalmers appeared reckless in his praise of people who were not Christians, yet it was Chalmers' liberal evangelicalism which caught the wider mood as the century progressed.

Looking to the factors which brought about the Declaratory Acts, Cheyne discerned behind the personalities and the heresy trials in the late Victorian period, eight "pervasive influences:"<sup>67</sup> A new sense of history and of moral sensitivity, a new picture of the natural world, a different estimate of human nature, tolerance and tentativeness, a preference for the apologetic as opposed to the dogmatic spirit, an awareness of other religions and of the problems posed by them, and also, "A new approach to evangelism (and possibly in consequence a new understanding of the Evangel.)"

Although these developed through the course of the century and had their particular exemplars, it is striking how consistent they are with Chalmers' teaching. Another influence has to be commitment to mission. As professor of divinity, Chalmers combined his interests in parish experiments, natural theology and science with commentary on the lectures of Hill he had heard as a teenager. Like Hill he warned about mentioning Calvinism in the pulpit. He extolled the Confession but somewhat pointedly excluded what he disagreed with. He noted English critiques of Scotland's "gloomy Calvinism" but argued from the "experimental" evidence of Scottish experience rather than from theology that the charges that it was antinomian and anti-missionary did not hold.<sup>68</sup> He made it clear that he saw the Confession as an historical and not as a timeless document. In his attitude towards Catholics he had

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<sup>67</sup> A. C. Cheyne, *Transforming of the Kirk : Victorian Scotlands Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1983). p.73.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *Institutes of Theology*, Posthumous Works of Thomas Chalmers Edited by William Hanna ; 8 (Edinburgh: Constable, 1852). 364-368.

long refused to hold contemporary Catholics responsible for 16<sup>th</sup> century abuses.<sup>69</sup> His public championing of Catholic emancipation<sup>70</sup> was striking in its refusal to use history as a tool to exacerbate conflict. An informed awareness of the past enabled him to put history to one side and commit to a different future. A key sermon was entitled “Fury not in God”, inspired by Baxter, preached in Kilmany, and revived in the last years of his life when he was free from needing to impress anyone that he fitted the mould.

From his youth, Chalmers manifested a strong sense of wonder at nature and of interest in natural theology on which he had successfully published<sup>71</sup> and he ensured that science was taught to divinity students at New College. People recognised Chalmers as “large hearted” and at times – as in the trial of McLeod Campbell – were disappointed when this did not extend to causes they hoped it might. His apologetic theology was what led him to avoid problematic doctrines, sometimes rather too willingly. Through his interest in overseas missions, he was aware of issues arising with other religions and he contradicted the Confession in allowing that ignorance might indeed be an excuse. His missionary students in India increased his appreciation of difficulties to come.

This is not enough to make Chalmers responsible for the changes which came later in the century, but it is enough to claim that Chalmers’ voice was consistent with the themes identified by Cheyne, and to suggest that given his profile within church and society he needs to be acknowledged as a representative and formative figure in the process.

Yet what the overall story may also illustrate is that if the word Calvinism was being used to describe the beliefs and values which were held to be the problem with the Confession, signs of interest in Calvin in his own terms are rare prior to the works of the Calvin Translation Society. William Cunningham may be the exception here, possibly also David Welsh who taught history, but as long as the problem was the Confession not Calvin, Calvin himself remained to be rediscovered.

There were three major approaches to the church’s Calvinist heritage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: that of avoiding confrontation with the issue in the face of other mission priorities, illustrated by Chalmers; the political decisions that led to the embodiment of theological avoidance in the declaratory acts; and the longer task of theological engagement represented by McLeod Campbell. Each of these approaches had their time, but none of them were sufficient in themselves.

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<sup>69</sup> ———, “The Doctrine of Christian Charity Applied to the Case of Religious Differences: A Sermon Preached before the Auxiliary Society Glasgow to the Hibernian Society for Establishing Schools and Circulating the Holy Scriptures in Ireland. [24 December 1817],” in *Sermons Preached on Public Occasions, Dr Chalmers’ Works* (Glasgow: William Collins).

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland*. 112-114, 183-189.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as Manifested in the Adaptation of External Nature to the Moral and Intellectual Constitution of Man ... With the Author’s Last Corrections to Which Is Prefixed a Biographical Preface By ... John Cumming*, Bridgewater Treatises (London: H G Bohn, 1853).

Although Campbell himself may never have been rediscovered without the work of James Torrance, it is not wrong that he is recognised for his contribution to the theological process.

Chalmers' commitment to mission and to the Godly Commonwealth ideal both drew on Calvin and required changes to Calvinism which church and society found difficult. His commitment to education and his role in the revision of the theological curriculum contributed to the intellectual environment which made change necessary and possible. Both public and ministerial education inevitably demanded a more nuanced understanding of the faith than they had inherited, even if it took time. The sort of judgement Chalmers exercised in not facing the theology because of the needs of mission is one that it is at times appropriate to make, even if indefinitely delayed it may also be a sign of failure and even of corporate theological laziness.

The political settlement represented by the Declaratory Acts may also have its due season, when it is not a form of theological escapism. If it may now be said to have run its course, which is not to say that it was without value. It may well have been all that was possible at the time. The theological renewal of the Reformed tradition after they were enacted has been massive and that development may not be unconnected.

Taken as a whole, the story of Chalmers and Calvinism, and of the other characters in the saga, may be an indication that it is part of its very heritage that our tradition demands commitment to theology, as well as to mission and to the necessary politics that participatory decision-making in matters of faith also requires. Perhaps it is Calvin himself who points the way.

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