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Thomas Chalmers: Scottish Amyraldian?

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Introduction:

Scotland has probably produced more Reformed theologians than any other country of comparable size. The Scottish theology has influenced Holland, France, the United States, New Zealand and Canada;¹ in short, everywhere that Reformed theology has been known. Many Scottish theologians taught in France in the early seventeenth century, for example.

The Scottish Theology has been decidedly Calvinistic, and no Scottish Church has done so much to disseminate this theology than the Free Church of Scotland. A late nineteenth century number of the *Methodist Times* said, “The Free Church is the most theological and literary Church in the world.”²

Thomas Chalmers is widely regarded as the ‘Father’ of the Free Church of Scotland. As Professor of Moral Philosophy at St. Andrews, and later as Professor of Theology at Edinburgh University, Chalmers trained up the first generation of Free Church leaders. It was his mind that planned the structures of the Free Church and energised its mechanisms – and of course, he was the first Moderator of that Church. Yet Thomas Chalmers is commonly regarded as anything but a theologian. In some circles he is regarded as an economist, in others as an ecclesiastical politician, in still others as an administrative genius, and in yet others as a great preacher. All of these things are true, but it is his theology that we find the core of the man himself. In this paper I intend to show that Thomas Chalmers had his own contribution to Scottish theology, and that he cannot really be properly understood outside of an understanding of the core of that theology – a theology that departs significantly from Westminster orthodoxy on one major point. What is more, on that point Chalmers leans in a significantly Amyraldian direction.

¹ My own volumes of Chalmers are a witness to this. One comes from the United States, another from Canada, and a third has the signature of a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist student in it.

² Quoted in Norman L. Walker: *Chapters From the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1895) p. 298

Chalmers' life, and especially his early years as a student and then as a parish minister, played a significant part in the formation of his theology. Mercifully his biographer excellently serves Chalmers; I say biographer because there is only one biography of Chalmers, from which all others are really just compilations. It is the *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers* by William Hanna, his son-in-law.³ In his recent *A Scottish Christian Heritage*, Iain Murray has suggested that the book is a little long for modern tastes.⁴ That is more an indictment of 'modern tastes' than it is of "That truly classical and absolutely invaluable book."⁵ Though the two-volume edition weighs in at about sixteen hundred pages of closely packed text, there is nothing tedious about it. Alexander Whyte exhorted the New College students of his day to read it "again and again and again all through life," he got great good out of it every time he opened it, and he was always opening it for something.⁶ One rises from Hanna's book with the feeling that one has sat and talked with Dr. Chalmers himself.

Thomas Chalmers' writings themselves are voluminous. They occupy thirty-four volumes and cover subjects as diverse as prefaces to theological books and tracts concerning economics. Therefore for practical reasons I have confined myself in this paper to Chalmers' three works that have a bearing on systematic theology. They are firstly his series of expository sermons on the Epistle to the Romans⁷, given to his Glasgow congregation in the 1820s; second his 'Prelections' on the textbooks used in the theology classes at Edinburgh in the 1830s⁸; and thirdly his *Institutes of Theology*, which are based on his theological lectures given at Edinburgh, and were still unfinished at the time of his death.⁹

I. His Life:

The life of Thomas Chalmers may be summed up in a single paragraph, as Norman Walker does¹⁰. Born in Anstruther, Fife on St. Patrick's Day 1780, sent to St.

³ *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LL.D.* (Edinburgh, Thomas Constable and Co. 1854) 2 volumes. Hereafter *Hanna*.

⁴ Iain H. Murray, *A Scottish Christian Heritage* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 2006) p. 120

⁵ Alexander Whyte: *Former Principals of The New College, Edinburgh* (London, Hodder and Stoughton 1909) p. 16

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 13-14

⁷ Thomas Chalmers: *Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh, Sutherland and Knox, 1848) 4 volumes, hereafter *Romans*.

⁸ Thomas Chalmers: *Prelections on Butler's Analogy, Paley's Evidences of Christianity, and Hill's Lectures in Divinity* (Edinburgh, Sutherland and Knox, 1849), hereafter *Prelections*

⁹ Thomas Chalmers: *Institutes of Theology* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1849), hereafter *Institutes*

¹⁰ Walker, p. 20

Andrew's University in 1892, ordained pastor of Kilmany, Fife, 1803, converted winter 1810-11; translated to the Tron Church, Glasgow, 1815, then to the Church of St. John, built especially for him, in 1818. In 1823 appointed to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at St. Andrews, appointed Theology Professor at Edinburgh University in 1828. At the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843 Chalmers led the Free Church party and therefore left the University to become Principal and Divinity Professor at New College, Edinburgh, founded as the Free Church theological college. He died in 1847. Thus Thomas Chalmers' life in brief. Now we must look more closely at his early life up to and just after his conversion at Kilmany.

Thomas Chalmers was born in the town of Anstruther, Fife, on 17th March 1780, the fifth of fourteen children. He was born into a respectable family; his parents were Christians and taught their children the Shorter Catechism, but as was the custom in middle-class households in the period, they largely left the upbringing of their children to others – with results as disastrous in that day as they are in this. Having survived a cruel and selfish nurse and a schoolteacher whose sole mode of instruction was to apply the rod to his charges, Chalmers was sent at the age of twelve to the University of St. Andrews. While twelve sounds a remarkably young age for anyone to go to university it was quite normal for boys so young to be sent to university in Scotland in that period.

Chalmers' parents were evangelical Christians, this meant, in the Scotland of the last decades of the 18th century, that they were staunch Calvinists; the university of St. Andrews, however, was of another character. Although it could boast such stalwarts of Calvinism as Samuel Rutherford and Thomas Halyburton among its former professors, by the 1790s it was the stronghold of *Moderatism*. Chalmers would write of it: "St. Andrews was at this time overrun with Moderatism, under the chilling influence of which we [students] inhaled not a distaste only but a positive dislike for all that is properly and peculiarly gospel."¹¹

Sir Richard Hill, an evangelical of a slightly earlier era characterised 'Moderates' thus:

"A moderate divine is one who has a very moderate share of zeal for God. Consequently, a moderate divine contents himself with a

¹¹ *Hanna* Vol. 1 p. 11

very moderate share of labour in his master's vineyard. A moderate divine is too polite and rational to give any credit to the antiquated divinity of our articles, homilies and liturgy [Sir Richard is speaking of English Moderatism, a Scots Moderate would not give much credit to the Confession or catechism]. And therefore he seldom quotes them except it be to show his contempt for them, or to torture their meaning; nevertheless, a moderate divine is ready enough to subscribe to them, if by so doing he can get an immoderate share of church preferment. A moderate divine is always very cool and calm in his pulpit; he never argues, except when he is preaching against... the principles and conduct of the evangelical and zealous servants of Christ, who seek to do away with abuses which are favourable to Moderatism. A moderate divine is usually an advocate for card-parties, and for all assemblies except religious ones; but thinks no name too hard for those who assemble to spend an hour or two in prayer, and hearing God's Word."¹²

It is no wonder that, in such an atmosphere, Chalmers preferred natural science and mathematics to theology.

Nevertheless, at the end of his arts curriculum at St. Andrews he chose the Christian ministry as his profession and enrolled as a student of Divinity. I use the word 'profession' advisedly, for that was what he saw it as. Though intellectually assured of the truth of the Bible, he had no living faith at all. His true love was mathematics, and he saw the ministry as a profession that would give him plenty of leisure time to pursue mathematical studies and one that (since at the time the Church of Scotland dominated the universities and professors were ordained ministers) might very well lead him to a mathematical professorship.

The Divinity Professor at St. Andrews at the time was George Hill. Hill's doctrine was orthodox enough, when brought to the standard of the Westminster Confession, but Chalmers suspected that Hill only taught the doctrines of the Confession because he had to do so in order to keep his post. Even as a Moderate, Chalmers disliked hypocrisy and a slavish following of theological standards.

Thomas Chalmers was licensed to preach on 21st July 1799, but he showed little interest in the work of the ministry. Chalmers was not a lazy man, it was just that

¹² Quoted in Robert Buchanan: *The Ten Years' Conflict* (Glasgow, Blackie and Son, 1859) Vol. 1 pp. 150-1

he had, as Sir Richard Hill noted of the Moderates, “a very moderate share of zeal for God.” “Consequently,” indeed Chalmers did content himself “with a very moderate share of labour in his master’s vineyard,” but that did not mean he was not busy elsewhere. His preaching was little more than the delivery of brilliantly composed moral essays (some composed early on Sunday morning), his interest more in learning about chemistry and physics than in preaching. When he was appointed to his first post, that of assistant minister in the parish of Cavers, he worked diligently, but without fervour.

He was ordained to his first parish, that of Kilmany, on 12th May 1803. To Chalmers it was just another event in what he hoped to be the orderly progress to a university chair. He entered into the holy calling with none of that sense of awe and responsibility that ought to attend an ordination. In fact he was more concerned about a post as assistant to the professor of Mathematics at St. Andrews that he had held before he was ordained. The assistantship was an obvious stepping-stone to the Professorship itself. He hoped to be re-appointed, even though he was now a parish minister. After all, he noted, did not his work at Kilmany leave him four days in the week free? The university did not agree and he was not re-appointed. So Chalmers started teaching independently of the University, trying to impress them by his ability. Of course, since he had set himself in opposition to them, they were not impressed and even less likely to appoint him to any position!

In 1806 an event occurred that shook the young Moderate minister. His brother George, captain of a merchant ship, fell ill and returned to the family home at Anstruther to die. George shared the Evangelical faith of his parents, and it was that faith that comforted him in his decline.

A short time before this, Thomas Chalmers, in a fit of Moderate zeal against evangelicalism, had condemned certain Christian writers from the pulpit at Kilmany. Leaning on the pulpit, he had said: “many books are favourites with you, which I am sorry to say are no favourites of mine. When you are reading Newton’s Sermons, and Baxter’s *Saints’ Rest*, and Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress*, where do Matthew, Mark, Luke and John go to?”¹³ Which is not to say that Chalmers was reading his Bible very much at the time, but that he didn’t want his congregation to be reading evangelical books! Yet in his last illness, Captain George Chalmers got great comfort from just

¹³ *Hanna* Vol. 1, p. 72

those books! Every evening one member of the family read George one of the very sermons of John Newton that Thomas had denounced from the pulpit. The family took turns reading to him – and so Thomas was practically forced to read Newton.

George Chalmers died on the sixteenth of December 1806, trusting in Christ alone for salvation. On his lips were the words of Simeon, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.” It was the first time that Thomas Chalmers had seen one of his close family die, and seeing the comfort and support George got from the evangelical doctrines he despised shook the young minister. It did not shake him out of his Moderatism, but it shook him *in* it. Less than two years later one of his sisters was taken ill and died in the same faith. He saw the solid comfort evangelical religion gave in death, and it troubled him.

Thomas Chalmers had already been asked to contribute several articles on mathematics to the Edinburgh Encyclopaedia. Following his sister’s death, he asked to be allowed to write the article on ‘Christianity’. Really what he began to write was an essay on the evidences of Christianity. He began in a thoroughly Moderate tone, not understanding how it was that the death of Christ could take away sin; but before the article was finished, he too was struck down with a terrible illness. For months he hovered on the brink of death, confined to bed. He found that he had no comfort in his religion, and he realised that, though a minister of the Church of Scotland, he had been living without God.

Chalmers recovered, and then, like many who have been convinced of their need of God, he laboured to convert *himself*, giving up mathematics and chemistry and concentrating on the reading of theological books and the Bible. It was in this condition of trying rather than trusting that he picked up William Wilberforce’s book *A Practical View of Christianity*.¹⁴ Under God, Chalmers owed his conversion to that book; it awakened him to the true depths of human sin, and our need for atonement. It revealed to Chalmers his need for a supernatural salvation from outside himself. Thus Wilberforce was used to strike off the chains that held Thomas Chalmers in a worse slavery than any man could impose – a slavery to sin. Wilberforce urged his readers to examine their foundations and insisted on justification in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,” was the message brought home to Chalmers as Wilberforce ‘preached’ to him through his

¹⁴ Recently republished in a modernised form as *Real Christianity*

book. In later life Chalmers would come to know the great abolitionist personally.¹⁵ Thus Thomas Chalmers, the minister, was brought from darkness into light by a book written by an MP. Truly God moves in a mysterious way.

Following his conversion, Chalmers devoured the books he had once denounced from the pulpit. Baxter and Doddridge were particular favourites of his, especially Baxter. On one occasion he exchanged a horse for a volume of Baxter!¹⁶ As a result of this course of reading, Chalmers' preaching was formed in a particular way. In his pastoral work he followed Richard Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*. He found the Parish plan to be particularly suited to a Baxterian method, and Kilmany was a model Scottish parish. When he was called away to Glasgow Chalmers found the city parishes had become too large; he therefore sought to have the oversized parishes broken up into smaller ones to allow each parish minister to be the sort of parish minister Baxter had been in Kidderminster.

Now preaching the very evangelicalism he had long opposed, Chalmers was made a great instrument for good.

II. Theology

Thomas Chalmers bound himself to no rigid system of theology. He wanted to take as his guide the Bible, as it was, not stretched to fit someone else's ideas, not even to fit the Westminster theology. "Let me not be the slave of human authority, but clear my way through all creeds and confessions to Thine own original revelation," he prayed.¹⁷ In private he was even more outspoken. In conversation with one of his daughters (they took down his more notable sayings like Luther's students), he was more outspoken:

I look upon catechisms and confessions as mere landmarks against heresy. If there had been no heresy, they wouldn't have been wanted. It's putting them out of their place to look on them as magazines of truth. There's some of your stour orthodox folk just over ready to stretch the Bible to square with their Catechism. All very well, all very needful as a

¹⁵ See *Hanna* Vol. 1 pp. 138-141

¹⁶ *Hanna* Vol. 1 p. 212 (note)

¹⁷ Quoted *Hanna*, Vol. 2 p. 707

landmark, but what I say is, do not let that wretched mutilated thing be thrown between me and the Bible.”¹⁸

Thomas Chalmers was a Calvinist. There is no other theological term that can describe him. Not that he was a blind follower of Calvin, as we have seen, he refused to make any man his master in theology save for “the man Christ Jesus.” Chalmers merely felt that Calvin had come closest to the true meaning of the Bible and to the system of theology taught in the Scriptures. He insisted on the total depravity of man, the unconditional election of sinners by grace to salvation; the sweet irresistibility of God’s gracious call, and the final perseverance of all the saints of God. He also taught that only the elect would be saved by Christ’s death, “not because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross,”¹⁹ but because the rest would not believe. However, as we shall see, Chalmers differed significantly from such writers as James Haldane and Robert S. Candlish in his understanding of what ‘Limited Atonement’ or ‘Particular Redemption’ meant.

1. The Free Offer

The Free Offer of the Gospel was practically axiomatic with Chalmers, indeed it was the starting point of his theology, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” had been his entrance into the Kingdom, and he presented the same entrance to his hearers. William Hanna notes that, “The most marked characteristic of his pulpit ministrations after his conversion was the frequency and fervour with which he held out to sinners Christ and his salvation as God’s free gift, which it was their privilege and their duty at once and most graciously to accept.”²⁰ Writing in 1812, shortly after his conversion, Chalmers described the gospel like this: “It is just [God] saying to one and all of us, - there is forgiveness through the blood of my Son, take it; and whoever believes the reality of the offer takes it.”²¹

The writings of Thomas Chalmers positively teem with Free Offer passages, in his own preaching and in his instructions to his students on how to preach. “He would bend over the pulpit and press us to take the gift, as if he held it that moment in his hand, and would not be satisfied till every one of us had got possession of it. And

¹⁸ *Hanna* Vol. 2 p. 729

¹⁹ Canons of Dort, Chapter 2, Article 6

²⁰ *Hanna* Vol. 1 p. 317

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 263

often when the sermon was over and the psalm was sung, and he rose to pronounce the blessing, he would break out afresh with some new entreaty, unwilling to let us go until he had made one more effort to persuade us to accept it,” one of his old hearers recalled.²² Here is a sample of that pleading from his expository sermons on Romans:

“We tell you of God’s beseeching voice. We assure you, in His name, that he wants you not to die. We bid you venture for pardon on the atonement made by Him who died for all men. We bid you apply forthwith to the spirit of all grace and holiness, that you may be qualified to enter into that beatific heaven from whose battlements there wave the signals of welcome, and whose gates are widely opened to receive you. We would bring this plain word of salvation nigh unto every conscience, and knock with it at the door of every heart; and commissioned as we are to preach the gospel not to a chosen few, while we keep it back from the hosts of the reprobate, but to preach it to every creature under heaven, we again entreat that none here present shall forbid themselves – for most assuredly God has not forbidden them. But come unto Christ all of you who labour and are heavy-laden, and ye shall have rest. Look unto Him, all ye ends of the earth; and though now placed at the farthest outskirts of a moral distance and alienation, even look unto Him and ye shall be saved.”²³

Chalmers based these offers on what he found in the Bible, especially the ‘universal language’ that was used there, the ‘whosoever’ and such like. Speaking to his students he told them they ought to offer Christ to all:

“This you are fully warranted to do by the terms in which the message of the gospel is conceived – by words, for example, of such universal and at the same time of such pointed and specific application, as ‘whosoever’, and ‘all’, and ‘any’, and ‘every’ being associated with the calls and invitations of the New Testament.”²⁴

²² Ibid. p. 318

²³ *Romans* Vol. 3 p. 392.

²⁴ *Prelections* p. 167. Chalmers says much the same thing in the *Institutes*

What was more, Chalmers insisted that this offer was to be made not just to a congregation in the mass, but to every individual to whom the minister spoke. The offer in the Scriptures, “though expressly addressed to no one individual, yet by the wide sweep of a ‘whosoever will’ makes it as pointed a message to all and to any as if the proprietor of each Bible had received it under cover with the inscription of his name and surname from the upper sanctuary.”²⁵ He exemplified this himself in his preaching, as we see from his *Romans*:

“There is not one here present to whom the gospel does not hold forth a warrant for so hoping [that they may be saved]. It declares the remission of sins to all who put faith in the declaration. By its sweeping term ‘whosoever’ it makes as pointed an offer of eternal life to each, as if each had gotten a special intimation by an angel sent to him from heaven.”²⁶

In view of this it should come as no surprise to find that Chalmers had a high opinion of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen’s book on *The Freeness of the Gospel*. “Dr. Chalmers said over and over again that he thought Mr. Erskine’s ‘Freeness’ one of the most delightful books ever written. It seems to me that the Gospel had never appeared to him in any very different light from that in which Mr. Erskine represents it,” a friend of his wrote.²⁷ Not that Chalmers liked in any way the hints of universal *salvation* that he found in Erskine. Those came from ignoring certain other passages of Scripture that plainly indicate all shall *not* be saved, but some will be damned, and therefore were false and dangerous.

As to what is offered in the gospel, Chalmers said without hesitation, “Christ is offered.”²⁸

2. Object of faith

This quotation brings us to the question of what Chalmers called upon people to believe *in*. What was the appropriate object of faith to Thomas Chalmers?

What *is* faith? Chalmers dedicated some seventy-eight pages of his *Institutes* to this question.²⁹ Thomas Chalmers answer was that faith was assent to the propositions

²⁵ *Romans* Vol. 1 p. 145

²⁶ *Romans* Vol. 1 p. 284-5

²⁷ Quoted in *Hanna* Vol. 2 p. 194

²⁸ *Romans* Vol. 1 p. 412

of the gospel. ‘Rabbi’ Duncan called it a “Sandemanian” view.³⁰ The Rabbi said “Ah! My doctrine about faith was better than his, but he went to prayer, and his faith was better than mine.”³¹ This assent, Chalmers insisted, if it was real, would lead to *consent* to what was taught and therefore to obedience.³² Nevertheless that consent was not a part of saving faith but an effect of it.

What propositions did Chalmers think that *all* were warranted to accept? While he felt that those who taught all a sinner must accept was that ‘Christ died for me’ unnecessarily narrowed the object of faith as it was presented in the gospel, unlike Sandeman, he did not think they were wrong.³³

“I do not object, you will observe, to the object of their faith being in this particular form, that He died for my sins – as I hold the precious terms of *all*, and *any* and *whosoever*, wherein the overtures of the gospel are couched, abundantly warrant this blessed application.”³⁴

“A man might fain to believe that Christ died a propitiation for his sins, because he reads that Christ died a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and he, therefore, as one of the world, takes this declaration to himself.”³⁵

3. Extent of the atonement.

This brings us to the heart of the question. For whom did Chalmers believe Christ died? As we have noted, the Free Offer of the gospel was the starting point of Thomas Chalmers’ theology and the touchstone to which he brought other matters. His theology of the particularity of Christ’s redemption was formed by this doctrine:

“This doctrine of particular redemption is either not a doctrine at all³⁶, or is grievously misunderstood – if in virtue thereof a minister feels

²⁹ Part II, Chapter VI, (Vol. 2, pp.122-200)

³⁰ John M. Brentnall: *‘Just a Talker’ Sayings of John (‘Rabbi’) Duncan* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1997) p. 175. In some respects the accusation was just.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 174

³² See *Institutes* Vol. 2, p. 185

³³ “That Christ died, is indeed a truth fully ascertained in the Scriptures; that Christ died *for me* is a point not so easily settled...” Robert Sandeman, quoted in Luke Tyerman *The Oxford Methodists* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1873) p. 142

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 168

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 165

³⁶ That is, not properly a doctrine

himself restrained from making the open proclamation of its offered forgiveness to all within his reach.”³⁷

Which was it? Chalmers answered that the doctrine was true, but not in the manner imagined. Although Chalmers disliked discussions on the extent of the atonement, in those few places where he does treat of it, it is apparent that he held a basically Amyraldian view of it. Christ had died for all in offer, but for the elect only in effect.

“It is nowhere said in the Bible that Christ so died for me in particular, as that by His simple dying the benefits of His atonement are mine in possession. But it is everywhere said in the Bible, that He so died for me in particular, as that by His simple dying the benefits of His atonement are mine in offer. They are mine if I will.”³⁸

Chalmers preached a hypothetically universal atonement, finding that there was no other basis for a free offer, “If Christ died only for the elect, and not for all,” ministers “are puzzled to understand how they should proceed with the calls and invitations of the gospel.”³⁹ And he preached that way: “We tell you of God’s beseeching voice. We assure you, in His name, that he wants you not to die. We bid you venture for pardon on the atonement made by Him who died for all.”⁴⁰

“Christ did not so die for all as that all do actually receive the gift of salvation; but He so died for all, as that all to whom He is preached have the real and honest offer of Salvation. He is not yours in possession till you have laid hold of Him by faith. But he is your in offer. He is as much yours as anything of which you can say – I have it for the taking. You, one and all of you, my brethren, have salvation for the taking; and it is because you do not choose to take it if it do not indeed belong to you.”⁴¹

According to Chalmers’ view, Christ died for all men *in offer*. Every human being who ever lived and who ever will live is warranted to come to Christ and

³⁷ *Prelections* p. 318

³⁸ *Romans* Vol. 2 pp. 104-5

³⁹ *Institutes* Vol. 2 p. 418

⁴⁰ *Romans* Vol. 3 p. 392

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 203-4

believe that Christ had died for him. Chalmers could have sung without complaint the lines of Charles Wesley:

Who did for every sinner die,
Hath surely died for me.⁴²

Indeed, he could have agreed with all of Charles Wesley's universal atonement language, for Chalmers declared explicitly his agreement with the Arminian William Paley that "Christ died for the whole world, because now and in consequence of His death, the offer of the remission of sins may be made to the whole world."⁴³ He noted carefully that there are two sorts of universality that may be postulated with regard to the atonement. One was false, namely the heresy of universalism, that Christ so died for all that all without distinction will certainly be saved. That was a universality of effect, and that was false. The second was a universality of proposition, a conditional universality conditioned on faith.⁴⁴

"The remedy [for human sin], in fact, is much more extensive in proposition than it is in effect. It may be held out, in proposition, to all, while at the same time, and effectively, it is limited to those who repent and believe, while most assuredly all those who do so repent and believe shall be saved. And it is also quite true, that though the offer of redemption were rejected by all, there is a sense in which that redemption⁴⁵ might still be called universal. The offer could not be made without it; and now that Christ hath died, the offer might be made to one and all of the species."⁴⁶

"We hold as unfortunate," Chalmers told his students as he criticized the very lectures he had heard at St. Andrews, "the assertion that Christ did not die for all men, but for those of every nation who are in the end to be saved."⁴⁷ The implication, backed up by Chalmers' own preaching, was that the students, in calling sinners to Christ, ought to tell their hearers that Christ died for all. And this hypothetical universalism, which is the marrow of Amyraldianism, was not just a brief theological

⁴² 'Spirit of Faith come down' No. 85 in John Wesley's hymn-book and No. 318 in *Christian Hymns* where the 'offending' line is altered to 'who did for guilty sinners die'

⁴³ *Prelections* pp. 107-8

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 324

⁴⁵ Not the *offer*, note, but the atonement itself.

⁴⁶ *Prelections* p. 326

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 356

phase in Thomas Chalmers' career. From the *Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans* in the 1820s to his *Institutes of Theology*, which was still unfinished at his death, Thomas Chalmers insisted on this doctrine when he thought it necessary. In the pulpit it was urged with the outstretched hand of offer, in the classroom urged with scientific logic.

And at the very end of his life, when he was but a few hours from eternity, Chalmers was still defending the hypothetical universalism of his old favourite Richard Baxter. Hanna records a conversation Chalmers had on the day before his sudden death:

“Doddridge, [his friend said] for example is latitudinarian; but I should be very unwilling to call him unsound. And Baxter is still more latitudinarian; but I should be very unwilling, in the full sense of the word, to call him unsound. There are what are called Baxterian errors, I am aware, and one of these is in relation to the extent of the sacrifice of Christ; Baxter, I think, holds that Christ died for all men.’ Dr. Chalmers answered, ‘Yes, Baxter holds that Christ died for all men; but I cannot say that I am quite at one with what some of our friends have written on the subject of the atonement. I do not, for example, entirely agree with what Mr. Haldane says on the subject.’⁴⁸ I think that the word *world*, as applied in Scripture to the sacrifice of Christ, has been unnecessarily restricted; the common way of explaining it is, that it simply includes Gentiles as well as Jews. I do not like that explanation; and I think that there is one text that puts that interpretation entirely aside. The text to which I allude is, that “God commandeth *all men, everywhere*, to repent.” Here the Doctor spoke of the connexion between the election of God, the sacrifice of Christ, and the freeness of the offer of the Gospel. He spoke with great eloquence, and I felt that he was in the pulpit, as some of his finest bursts rolled from his lips. ‘In the offer of the Gospel,’ said he, we must make no limitations whatever. I compare the world to a multitude of iron filings in a vessel, and the Gospel to a magnet. The minister of the Gospel must

⁴⁸ A reference to James A. Haldane: *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh, William P. Kennedy, Third edition, 1852). The first edition of this work was published in 1845.

bring the magnet into contact with them all: the secret agency of God is to produce the attraction.’’⁴⁹

Conclusion:

If words mean things, then, Thomas Chalmers held an Amyraldian position on the extent of the atonement, namely that it was for all men in view of offer, but that only the elect would appropriate that offer. Thomas Chalmers based this theology on his observation that the Bible offered the gospel freely to all, and the only basis for this was that Christ had died for all.

I began this paper thinking that I would find Chalmers was a ‘Fullerite’ free-offer teacher. He knew and admired Andrew Fuller,⁵⁰ and that admiration for Fuller led to his having a high view of the English Particular Baptists.⁵¹ In fact Chalmers went considerably beyond Fuller, into an Amyraldian view of the atonement. Perhaps it is because of these passages in his writings that Thomas Chalmers has had little part in the reprinting of reformed writings over the last fifty years or so. Yet there are recent encouraging signs. Chalmers’ *Sabbath Scripture Readings* have recently been republished in the United States by Solid Ground Christian Books, and Hanna’s selection from Thomas Chalmers’ letters is soon to be republished by the Banner of Truth Trust⁵². Most of his works, however, are out of print and hard to find. The *Romans* has languished in obscurity for a century, and I had to obtain both volumes of the *Institutes* from North America. Let us hope that, if the *Letters* sell well, the Banner of Truth Trust will consider reprinting the *Memoirs*.

The Free Church of Scotland did not follow Chalmers’ lead in theology. Instead it followed the strict Particularism of Robert Smith Candlish, the teaching that Christ died in no way for the non-elect. Chalmers was not the only teacher of Amyraldian principles in Scottish Presbyterianism, for the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland had John Brown of Broughton Place (author of the *Hebrews* and *Galatians*

⁴⁹ *Hanna* Vol. 2 p. 773

⁵⁰ See *Hanna* Vol. 1 pp. 253-5, 279, *Prelections* p. 425

⁵¹ “Let it never be forgotten of the Particular Baptists of England, that they form the denomination of Fuller and Carey and Ryland and Hall and Foster; that they have originated among the greatest of all missionary enterprises; that they have enriched the Christian literature of our country with authorship of the most exalted piety, as well as of the first talent and the first eloquence... that perhaps there is not a more intellectual community of ministers in our island, or who have put forth for their number a greater amount of mental power and mental activity in the defence and illustration of our common faith. ” *Romans* Vol. 1. p. 229. Chalmers was a true Reformed ‘ecumenist’ of the best sort, seeking fellowship with the truth wherever it was found.

⁵² (April 2007)

commentaries published by the Banner of Truth Trust, among other works). Neither of these men were followed, and when departures from Westminster Orthodoxy came in Scottish Presbyterianism in the latter years of the nineteenth century what came was theological liberalism, denial of total depravity, of substitutionary atonement and so on. The Free Church of Scotland as she currently exists was constituted in 1900 by strict subscribers to the Westminster Confession. Thomas Chalmers was represented as a name, rather than as a theologian, and ever since that has been his fate.⁵³ It is time that injustice was done away with and Chalmers revealed as he truly was. This paper is intended as a contribution to that process, and I trust that the Banner of Truth reprint of Chalmers' *Letters* will be another such contribution, so Chalmers will stand forth to modern-day Christians as he really was.

⁵³ A particularly egregious example of this occurs in Hugh Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption* (Edinburgh, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1943) pp. 358-9, where Watt pictures the shade of Chalmers as a radiant figure in the hall reunion hall of 1929 "raising those speaking hands of his in benediction." Never mind that what was there constituted was a sorry mixture of truth and error, Arminians, Calvinists and liberals pretending that they all agreed.