

## **Parish Ministry of Thomas Chalmers**

**March 17, 1780- May 31, 1847**

Thomas Chalmers was a Presbyterian pastor in Glasgow, Scotland during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He helped lead a transformation in impoverished, urbanized Glasgow by organizing believers in his parish. The parish was divided into 25 districts embracing from 60 to 100 families, over each of which an elder and a deacon were placed. The minister and elders together carried the spiritual responsibility of the congregation. Manageable districts were organized and the homes regularly visited. Deacons were appointed to serve the material need of the people.

Parochial ministry enabled him to make great strides in dealing with the problem of poverty. Chalmers believed that government involvement actually encouraged the evil it was intended to curb, and that relief should instead be raised and administered by voluntary means. His critics replied that this was impossible in large cities. When he undertook the management of the parish of St John's, the poor of the parish cost the city \$2800 annually, and in four years, by the adoption of his parish plan, the expenditure for the poor was reduced to \$560 per year. All new applications for relief were committed to the deacon of the district, and every effort was made to enable the poor to help themselves. Once the system was in operation a deacon could provide more than adequate counsel by spending an hour a week among the families committed to his charge. This led to great transformation.

The churches of Chalmers' Presbytery opposed his plan, arguing that he would shame the poor and the poor from his parish would flock to theirs, overburdening them. The opposite happened. The poor were treated with great dignity, experienced personal, familial and social transformation and flocked to his Church from their parishes.

At a time when little public provision was made to cover the needs of the people, Chalmers encouraged those with financial means to look for unobtrusive but useful means of aiding others within the parish. *"It is quite marvelous in the organization of any system of means how much sub-division adds to its productiveness and its efficacy. Let us never forget that a penny a week from each household of Scotland would afford the yearly sum of a hundred thousand pounds."*

The practical fruits of this work can be seen in the fact that by 1841 almost \$612,000 had been raised voluntarily and 222 churches built in 7 years. Dr Chalmers had studied the need of Scotland, knew from his reports the areas that were distant from parish churches and set about to remedy the situation. In his time the tide was turned and Christian thought and action received such impetus through him and those who worked with him that the church renewed its efforts to promote the truth of the gospel and attack social and moral evils in well organized partnerships.