

Evaluating "Tamate" Past and Present: James Chalmers (1841-1901)

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The Life and Death of a Pioneer Missionary

The year 2001 marks the centenary of the martyrdom of James Chalmers, widely acclaimed as the greatest missionary ever, to what is known today as Papua New Guinea. The writer to the Hebrews would have us be mindful of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, and to learn from their example and be inspired by their faith. Centenaries present an opportunity for us to do this, and in an age when pragmatic apathy and rampant unbelief grips whole branches of the Church of Christ, the consideration of a man who "loved not his life unto the death" for the sake of the spread of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ought to be of great benefit to us.

Chalmers originated from the Scottish Highlands and the working class. He was born at Ardrishaig, Argyllshire on 4th August, 1841, the son of a stonemason near Peterhead. His mother came from Luss on Loch Lomond, and he was educated at various Highland village schools. The age of fifteen found him, in his own words, sowing wild oats, but also occasionally attending Sabbath school. At one lesson a letter from a missionary to Fiji was read out by the United Presbyterian (UPC) minister Gilbert Meikle, and Chalmers was deeply affected by it, and resolved in his heart to be a missionary to cannibals. But this was soon forgotten and he did not even profess to be converted until 1859, when, having gone along with a gang of youths to disrupt a series of evangelistic meetings, he heard an evangelist from Northern Ireland speak on Revelation 22:17, and was convicted of sin.

Immediately and with characteristic energy, Chalmers thrust himself into Christian service, soon signing up to work for the Glasgow City

Mission, which he did for eight months. He was about to apply for the UPC ministry, when he came to believe that in so doing he would not be able to fulfil the Great Commission. So he offered himself to the London Missionary Society (LMS), and trained at Cheshunt College, Cambridge from 1862 to 1864, followed by another year at another LMS institution in Highgate, London. By this time he was set on working in the South Pacific, and so spent a further year in London, this time learning the Rarotongan language. He was ordained to the Congregationalist ministry in October 1865, and on 4th January, 1866 sailed for Rarotonga, the largest island in what are now the Cook Islands of Polynesia. After a tortuous and hazardous journey that included two shipwrecks, Chalmers at last arrived at his destination on 20th May, 1867. For the next ten years Chalmers laboured in this established part of the LMS mission field where work had begun in the early 1820s. He trained indigenous teachers, and was soon placed in charge of the mission. However, Chalmers was an adventurer at heart, and life on this considerably evangelised island was too tame for him. He longed for pioneer work on the frontiers of the unknown world.

So in 1877 Chalmers was relocated to New Guinea, where work amongst the natives had commenced only in 1871. There were still scores of unreached tribes even along the coast, let alone in the almost impenetrable inland regions. For the next 24 years, Chalmers was to make the south coast of New Guinea his sphere of incessant labour and prayer, amidst constant danger from disease, crocodiles and cannibals. By the end of 1878 he had visited over 105 villages, at ninety of which he was the first white man ever seen. Chalmers' main task was to establish mission stations for his indigenously trained teachers to use as bases. His primary training institution for preparing these local teachers was at Port Moresby. Chalmers was the first to administer baptism in New Guinea, and by 1884 Chalmers had sent out nine New Guinea "evangelists" from his college, who were among the very first New Guinean heralds of the gospel. Soon it seemed like the whole of New Guinea had heard of "Tamate," the local name by which he was both affectionately and fearfully known.

The jungle had become his home, but the harsh conditions were to cost him the life of his hardy wife Jane, who died of a fever in 1879.

But Chalmers also saw long-term value in the systematic exploration of the country itself. His missionary travels were accompanied by and even occasionally guided by the need for a comprehensive and extensive documentation of the local landscape and cultures. He thus also made a notable contribution to the development of the geographical and anthropological knowledge of New Guinea. And if he was not quite to New Guinea what David Livingstone was to Africa, by 1881 he still thought he knew "more of the country and the people than any other foreigner."¹ In 1886, while on one of his only two furloughs, Chalmers was therefore able to read papers on New Guinea before the Colonial Institute and before the Royal Geographical Society. He was not a scholar or linguist, but did develop a reasonable command of numerous local languages, so much so that in 1881 he worked on translating the New Testament (Westcott-Hort text) into Motu for the British and Foreign Bible Society who finally published it in 1891.

As an outstanding national figure and one who had gained the trust and respect of the local people, Chalmers was also highly involved in the political processes of annexation and colonisation. But although government officials repeatedly hailed his invaluable service to the British Crown and offered him a government post, his role remained solely that of mediator. His main concern was to quench the emerging slave trade and to protect the local people from economic exploitation. Chalmers saw cooperating with the officials rather than opposing them as the most fruitful way to bring about justice in British New Guinea.

By the mid 1890s Chalmers was moving west in his focus, into even more inhospitable and dangerous territory, intent on establishing mission stations in the Gulf of Papua from which to reach the little known tribes

¹Richard Lovett, *James Chalmers: His Autobiography and Letters* (London: Religious Tract Society, [1902] 5th ed., 1903), p. 201.

of the interior, where the reputation of the natives was fearful. Chalmers sensed that this project would be his last, and he was to be proved right. In 1900 another preacher, Oliver Fellowes Tomkins, joined him, and together they sailed for Goaribari Island in 1901, not long after the death of Chalmers' second wife Elizabeth. On 7th April (Easter Sunday) Chalmers and Tomkins, with some South Sea mission boys and a teacher, anchored off the village of Dopima. Crowds of hostile natives boarded the boat and would not leave. It appears that in the hope of drawing them off the boat, Chalmers and Tomkins finally ventured ashore. There are conflicting reports about what exactly happened next. However, once inside a native house, it seems that Chalmers was clubbed to death from behind, and Tomkins was shot with an arrow while trying to escape. Certainly both were immediately eaten by their cannibalistic foes, and their skulls added to the hundreds that adorned the local spirit house.

And so died a great Christian hero and one who had for decades gloried in tribulations. Addressing the annual meeting of the LMS in 1887, Chalmers had valiantly declared, "Recall the twenty-one years, give me back all its experience, give me its shipwrecks, give me its standings in the face of death, give it me surrounded with savages with spears and clubs, give it me back again with spears flying about me, with the club knocking me to the ground, give it me back, and I will still be your missionary!"² Chalmers had shown astounding courage in the face of death dozens of times before. But this time he was to lay down his life. Although Chalmers left behind no children, despite his two marriages, in a spiritual sense he was father to hundreds of New Guinean children of light, who deeply mourned his departure. Robert Louis Stevenson rightly called him "The Great Heart of New Guinea,"³ and his legacy of Christian churches throughout Papua New Guinea remains to this day.

The Romantic Evangelical Evaluation

But can we or must we speak with only uncritical praise of Tamate? For some Evangelicals today, including some in the Reformed tradition,

²*Ibid.*, p. 277.

³*Ibid.*, p. 43.

Chalmers can do no wrong, and their evaluation of his life is only gleaned from the unfootnoted hagiographies of the early twentieth century. A stream of popular biographies immediately followed Chalmers' death, many of which were reprinted numerous times. Not only were these in the genre of Victorian romanticism in which heroes are painted larger than life and any faults or blemishes suppressed with the meticulous care of a beautician, but their issue immediately followed a noble martyr's death, and, even one hundred years on, one does hesitate to indulge in armchair criticism of a man who laid down his life for the gospel.

Chalmers once wrote in a letter, which ironically survived, "I have to destroy all my letters. Anything happening to me, my spirit would grieve when seeing others reading my correspondence."⁴ Some of the more embarrassing papers were successfully destroyed, both by Chalmers and by LMS directors anxious to avoid hurt and mitigate the damage Chalmers' legacy might do to the popular perception of missionary life. However, in God's providence much manuscript evidence concerning Chalmers' labours nevertheless survives.

More recent scholarly studies of Chalmers make use of these surviving manuscripts, and the result is a more realistic and telling insight into the man himself. One such study is that by Diane Langmore, who uncovers much material suppressed by his Victorian admirers. Although Langmore appears to have imbibed the secular humanist interpretation, discussed below, when she conjectures that it "might have been better for New Guinea had white man never come,"⁵ nevertheless, for the discerning reader, it is, ironically perhaps, Langmore's account which proves more "inspirational" than the suspiciously glowing Victorian eulogies. For it is

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵Diane Langmore, *Tamate - A King: James Chalmers in New Guinea, 1877-1901* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1st ed., 1974), p. 136. Another vital source for understanding Chalmers is John M. Hitchen's Ph.D. dissertation, *Training Tamate: Formation of the nineteenth-century missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers* (University of Aberdeen, 1984). However, access to this research was denied while preparing this brief introductory article, since Hitchen did not deposit a copy in Aberdeen University Library. The main sources of biographical information in this article remain Lovett and Langmore.

in the unpublished manuscripts and correspondence that the real Chalmers in all his humanity is revealed – a sinful, flawed and weak humanity, as well as a redeemed and victorious one.

Not only do we see him in acrimonious disputes over fellow missionaries' attacks on his love of tobacco and whisky, and over his bitter attacks on their more conservative evangelistic strategies and refusal to join him in his ascetic heroics, and in petty disputes with professional explorers over who discovered what, but we also come face to face with dubious church principles and Arminian proclivities. While his contemporaries

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were more alarmed about Chalmers’ “Bohemian” lifestyle (his word⁶) and generally more progressive ethics, it was Chalmers’ doctrine that should have troubled them the most. This he had imbibed in his teens from his Arminianising UPC pastor and lifelong friend, Gilbert Meikle, and from reading Wesleyan theology at college. Chalmers was consciously

reacting against what he felt was the terrible austerity of Highland Calvinism. Not being himself a serious student or theologian, and labouring amongst illiterate tribesmen whose whole theological vocabulary he could have etched on the shell of a betel nut, this aspect of Chalmers’ ministry might be played down by some. However, there is evidence to suggest that Chalmers’ whole message majored heavily on a universal love and fatherhood of God, to the practical neglect of total depravity and divine wrath against sin.⁷

But it is in beholding Chalmers’ clay feet that one is reminded that, although he undoubtedly stood as a giant among men, nevertheless he

⁶Quoted in Langmore, *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁷Lovett, *Op. cit.*, pp. 25-26, 39-40, 165, 211, 275, 445; Langmore, *Op. cit.*, pp. 2, 14-15.

was "subject to like passions as we are." It is when we get a glimpse of his inner doubts and bouts of depression, his struggles and temptations, his unreasonableness and impulsiveness, his errors and aberrations, that we are faced with the encouraging fact that God uses us to establish His Kingdom, not once we have become perfect in doctrine and practice, but when we have been made willing in the day of His power.

The Secular Humanist Evaluation

Yet the evangelical hagiographic construct is not a tenth as damaging as the assessment of Chalmers by some of his British descendents. An investigation of Chalmers' activity was conducted by Daru Rooke for RDF Media and broadcast by the BBC as part of "The People Detective" television series on 19th April, 2001.⁸ Charlotte Sainsbury, a descendant of Jane Chalmers and 43-year-old mother from Wiltshire, travelled to Papua New Guinea to make contact with the local people for whom, by way of strong oral tradition, the death of James Chalmers is still a vivid reality. Immediately, on the basis of her great-great uncle having civilised them – a word the local people use unashamedly – she was offered all that they possessed, and hailed as the rightful owner of their islands. But while former cannibals now deplore Chalmers' murder, and worship the one true and living God with deep thankfulness for Chalmers' labours, the descendants of Chalmers apparently turn up their post-modern noses, disgusted that he should have had the audacity to view his own religion as superior to theirs. Quietly glossing over the fact that a cannibalistic "lifestyle" could perhaps be construed as involving an infringement of "the inalienable human rights" of the soup of the day,⁹ these humanists are appalled that he should have committed the unforgivable sin of transforming their culture through the preaching of the uniqueness of Christ and His lordship over the evil spirits of animism. Today Chalmers is something of a national hero in Papua

⁸A book was also published to accompany this series: Tom McGregor, *The People Detective* (London: Harper Collins Entertainment, 1st ed., 2001).

⁹Epistemologically self-conscious humanists explicitly defend cannibalism as an acceptable lifestyle. For example, see those quoted in Thomas Schirrmacher, "Cannibalism and human Sacrifice vindicated? Part I," *Christianity & Society* 10(1) (2000): 11-17, pp. 14-15.

New Guinea, even of apostolic proportions. Yet for his sending country, this martyr has become something of an embarrassment: the deserving victim of his own arrogant absolutism and dogmatic refusal to concede that eating one's neighbour is as legitimate as loving him; that worshipping sticks and stones is as salvific as worshipping the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The study of Chalmers' transformation of heathendom through the Word of God is therefore a most instructive exercise. It underlines how culture is fundamentally a manifestation of the religion of a people. They that hate God love death (Prov. 8:36), and therefore just as to embrace Christianity is to be lifted up from savagery and cannibalism, so to reject the Christian world-view is to return to a culture of death. And this is precisely what we in the neo-pagan West are witnessing. The internecine murder of the humanist tribes is done behind the closed doors of hospitals and laboratories – first built by Christians to preserve human life – rather than in the open forest. But nevertheless, abortion, euthanasia and embryonic experimentation constitute just another form of the consumption of one group of human beings for the pleasure and convenience of another group of human beings. It is high time for Papua New Guinean missionaries to come to our shores and to confront the new cannibalism, as well as the uncannily concomitant reversion to nakedness, tattooing and body piercing. For the remedy remains ever the same. Secular humanists as well as New Guinean cannibals need, along with the Thessalonians of the Apostle's day, to turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God. There is no salvation in any other than Jesus Christ, for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. That is our message. That is what we must preach to the ends of the earth. And to Christ alone shall the obedience of the nations be.

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