

*Tom takes us on a journey through the history of the city of Geneva as a model of what God can do when we work with God to disciple a nation. There are periods of great success to learn from and some important warnings to heed from the city's story, and from the ministry of its greatest discipler, John Calvin.*



## Calvin and Geneva: Nation-Building Missions

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Geneva, nestled at the foot of the Alps at the crossroads of several major traveling routes, has been a center of great influence, trading both goods and ideas throughout Europe. Today, this small city is actually the diplomatic capital of the world, as 70 percent of the work of the United Nations is done there, and powerful organizations such as the World Trade Organization have their headquarters there. Its story is a rich tapestry of all the elements of a blockbuster movie: violence, corruption, intrigue, and courage in the face of great risk and injustice. In Geneva we can learn important lessons on the process of discipling a nation, as well as vital warnings of what happens when the church fails in its mandate.

During the Middle Ages, Geneva was a wild town. The streets teemed with crowds, as people from all over Europe passed through on their way to France, Italy, Germany, or Austria. With more inns per capita than any other city of its time, Geneva was full of partying traders, petty criminals, political refugees, spies, and sailors from Lake Geneva. Drunkenness was common, and the houses of prostitution did a good business. The city fairs were particularly famous; during those events the town was wide open and filled with people.

However, as the sixteenth century began, competition from France markedly reduced attendance at the fairs, and the walls of the city fell into disrepair. People were poor, families were falling apart, and the future looked grim. Geneva was called the smelliest city of Europe.

Much of the responsibility lay with the church. All over Europe people were turning away, disgusted by the corruption and hypocrisy. The church was literally selling salvation, as people had to pay large amounts of cash to be sure of escaping Hell. In Geneva, the priests were not only immoral themselves, but were also running houses of prostitution. *In losing its purity, the church lost its power, and so squandered its authority and its leadership.* The people actually ran the bishop of Geneva out of town in 1530, and most of the city's nobles left with him. The spiritual and moral vacuum soon had major political and economic consequences. Geneva was in crisis.

Europeans were grappling with life-and-death questions: "How can we live? Is there a better way to take care of our families? Run the economy? Take care of the poor? What about school for the children? How should we defend ourselves? What responsibility does each citizen have?" As in many countries of the world today, solutions were needed for government, the economy, defense, schools, family life, and morality. The people were asking and the church had no answers.

### Stirrings of Reformation

As the church became increasingly corrupt and burdensome on people's lives, there were stirrings across Europe for a more biblical Christianity. The underlying beliefs of this Reformation movement were that the Bible must be the source of authority to shape every aspect of people's lives, and the foundation of truth for entire communities and nations. One vital step toward this goal was for the people to have the Word of God in their language and their homes. Sadly, but not surprisingly, resistance to this came from the church itself, which in turn incited the government to persecute these believers. Forced to flee their homes, they spread the movement around Europe as they relocated.

William Farel, the redheaded, hot-tempered French evangelist, came into the vacuum that was Geneva in 1531. His strategy was simple but very effective: go into a city, do some outrageous things, get everybody all stirred up, and then get run out of town. His overall goal: make sure that everyone was angry enough to be talking about this new religion of the Protestant Reformers.

Once, he stopped to go into a church service and got so upset about what the priest was preaching that he went up to the front, pushed the priest out of the pulpit, and began preaching himself. Another time he saw priests leading a procession with relics down by the side of the river, and he ran over and pushed both priests and relics into the water. He was literally run out of Geneva by the monks of the cathedral.

Farel always managed to get out just in time. A good sense of timing is crucial for that kind of ministry strategy!

After he was kicked out of Geneva, one of his coworkers, the Frenchman Froment, started a school to teach children to read by using the Bible. Many adults

wanted to learn how to read as well, so they also came to his school. He got so excited one day in 1534 that he came to the market square and jumped up on one of the market tables and started preaching. Some of the authorities came to listen, and at one point he got carried away and cried out, “We must reform the church in order to reform the nation!” That offended the authorities so much they arrested him and then kicked him out of town.

Businessmen whose salvation was rooted in the Reformation had migrated to the city; they began small groups to meet for study and prayer. The simplicity and disciplined lifestyles of the Protestant reformers stood in stark contrast to the corruption of the church and nobility. City leadership fell to these new leaders; finally, on the 26th of August in 1535, the electors of the city of Geneva voted unanimously to become a Reformed Protestant city. They also agreed to the condition that they teach every child in the city to read. One implication of their decision was that the city came under the protection of the Lords of Bern, strong Protestants who continued to mentor the city leaders.

Once the decision was made, the Reformers proceeded to destroy all the stained glass windows and statues of the cathedral. They felt that the people had worshipped these images, and therefore they were considered idolatrous and needed to be destroyed.

However, in contrast to the Lutheran Reformers, they did not believe that all the citizens of a city should be considered Christians and served communion just because the electors had voted for the city to become Protestant. The French Reformers believed that every adult had to make a personal commitment to Christ to be saved. To ensure that every person had a chance to respond to Christ, there was a sustained, ongoing effort for many years to proclaim the gospel, even in the streets and marketplaces.

While the electors had been unanimous in their decision that Geneva become a Protestant city, intense debate went on among the population. It’s hard to appreciate just how big a decision this was for the city. As Catholics, they were risking excommunication and eternal damnation if this new religion was leading them away from God and his truth.

When the Reformation was finally accepted, it was evident that a pastor-teacher was the crucial need for the city. Farel knew that he was an apostolic evangelist but not the builder who was so necessary for the reconstruction of the nation. When he heard that John Calvin was in town, Farel immediately went to visit him.

### **Commitment to a City**

Calvin and Farel had both been students in the theological faculty of the University of Paris when the Reformation started to break out there. They had both been

Augustinian monks, and like many others who were reading the New Testament and deciding that the present church was not at all biblical in its practices, they had to flee France for their lives.

After Calvin left, he was shocked to learn that the authorities were proclaiming that the Protestants not only did not have the truth, they were just rebels against the church who had no coherent beliefs. Since no defense of the Protestant faith existed in writing in French Europe, this version of events was gaining acceptance. Calvin set out to clearly state what Protestants believed, and the result was the *Institutes of Religion*. He wrote it for the memory of his friends, as an apologetic in a time of intense conflict, and so that many others would turn to the Bible and to a living faith in Christ. To think of Calvin as an ivory-tower theologian is to seriously underestimate him.

In 1536, at age twenty-seven, Calvin was traveling through Geneva, and Farel found him in an inn down by the lake. Farel spoke to him about the situation in the city, and called Calvin to join him in rebuilding the nation. Calvin had weak health, and his only ambition at that time was to continue his studies. So he said to Farel, “No, I can’t do that. I need rest and I need to study.” Farel got very angry, pointed his long bony evangelist’s finger at Calvin, and thundered, “May God curse you and your studies if you do not join me here in the work He has called you to!” This threatened curse made such an impression on Calvin that he remembered it until the end of his life. He consented to stay, and committed his life to the work of God in Geneva.

Calvin cannot be blamed for hesitating to accept Farel’s challenge. Geneva was a very difficult place to minister for many reasons. The city government, influenced by the authorities from Bern who were of the German Reformation, believed that the church should be ruled by the government, including defining who was a member of the church and who could take communion. In contrast, the leaders of the French Reformation believed that there are different spheres within society, each with its own domain of decision making. They taught that the government held the right to provide for the people’s defense and levy taxes for the common needs of society, and the church was subject to its authority only in clearly defined areas.

For twenty years after voting to become a Protestant city, the authorities wanted decision-making power over the church. Calvin had to argue with them for all those years in order to establish the principle that the church should run its own affairs. He also wanted to establish the principle that the church had a primary *teaching* role in society and was to hold individuals and institutions, including the government, accountable to biblical morality. Calvin wasn’t always right in the way he saw things, but his noble attempt to rebuild the city on biblical foundations was history-making, and the first outside of Israel.

These differences between the two strains of Reformation theology quickly came into direct conflict. Two years after he came to the city, the Lutheran Reformation

authorities requested that Calvin and Farel give communion to the entire population. As French Reformation theologians, they refused, reasoning that since some of the citizens were living in open sin, they were not about to give communion to people who didn't even pretend to be Christians. The authorities insisted that they serve communion to everyone on Easter Sunday in 1538.

Calvin went to preach in the cathedral that day, and Farel preached in the second parish of the city. They both taught on sin and judgment, and proceeded to publicly excommunicate the entire population of Geneva. Then they left town, knowing their ministry was over in the city. Farel went back home to Neuchâtel, and Calvin went to Strasbourg to continue his studies.

The authorities at first said, "Good riddance," but three years later, at a point of desperation, they came to visit Calvin and his new wife in Strasbourg. They explained to him that the city was threatened with invasion, which would mean a return to Catholicism, losing everything they had worked for. They knew that Calvin had stronger, clearer vision for rebuilding the city than the rest of the city leaders, and he alone had the personal influence to rally the people to fight and withstand an invasion. They asked him to return and help save the city.

Calvin knew that the cost would be great, but he agreed and went back to Geneva. Changing a nation requires a lifetime commitment, and he gave the rest of his life so that Geneva would be a city that was as biblically based as possible.

### Geneva—Rebuilding a Nation

As the word went out that John Calvin had been named the head pastor of Geneva, Protestants all over Europe were electrified. He was well known because of the *Institutes*, and people knew that his ministry in Geneva could be a historic opportunity. In many countries the Protestants had been put to death or exiled and robbed of their lands and possessions. In others, such as England and some of the Swiss cantons, the Reformation seemed to be gaining a foothold. Geneva was unique, though, in that the deeply entrenched social order of church and nobility had been torn down, so in that vacuum there was a unique opportunity for the Reformers to rebuild a city on biblical foundations.

Geneva quickly became a city of refuge for the Protestants. Its streets were filled with Italians, Englishmen, and especially French. The population of the city, which was only five thousand before the Reformation, quickly doubled to ten thousand. They called it the "Protestant Rome," and "the city set on a hill." All the Protestants of Europe looked toward Geneva to see what would be built. This small city-state was the laboratory, the pilot project, for the vision of a nation built on biblical principles and living in peace, prosperity, and righteousness.

Even though the city was small, its influence spread far and wide. Two young men came to visit Geneva from Holland, were soundly converted, and went back to transmit this new message to William of Orange. Their visit is the reason that Holland became Protestant, as the king converted to the new faith.

Another example is found in Scotland. When Mary Queen of Scots began her persecutions, the number of Protestant refugees coming from Scotland increased dramatically. In 1556 the former prayer chapel of the bishop of Geneva was reconsecrated as the church for the English-speaking refugees. John Knox, who was also a refugee, was pastor of the congregation and preached in that church for three years. He studied what Calvin was doing in the city and took it back to Scotland; the influence of Geneva then went to Puritan England and from there to North America.

The strategy of the Reformers was based on three principles :

1. Preaching the gospel to individuals, so that people would be saved and start to be transformed, and the church would be restored to biblical purity;
2. Teaching the city, so that people would know how to live, the authorities would know how to govern, and all would know how to work in their different spheres; and
3. Accountability for individuals and the leadership in spheres of society, so that the teaching would not just be theoretical but applied in all areas of life.

The basis of rebuilding the nation was individual conversion so that the population would put its trust in God. The immediate second step was a systematic, daily, long-term strategy of teaching. The challenge was to build a nation on biblical principles, so Calvin and his team searched the scriptures and did their best to apply them to the crisis situations in the city. They taught in the churches, but they also pursued city leaders to bring biblical truths into society. Calvin had a legal background, so he approached the needs of the city as a lawyer, not just as a pastor. He had the gifts and training to see the issues holistically and understand the biblical principles needed to build society, such as defining the structure of the government and the role of the church. He taught across a wide range of issues. Examining several areas in some detail illustrates the depth and breadth of his thinking, and the impact his teaching had on the nation.

One example of applying the principles of the Word was when the Reformers called on all the populace to come and rebuild the broken-down city walls. Calvin told the citizens that while they must trust in God, they were also responsible to do everything they could to protect themselves. They could no longer hide behind a nobleman or the church to protect them; they needed to rebuild the walls, arm themselves, and resist the oppressors who were threatening to invade from outside. The

pastors were there too, joining in the stone-by-stone reconstruction of the walls. Calvin taught them to be responsible and work hard to defend themselves, but he also insisted that only God could protect Geneva, and he exhorted the population to put their trust in the Lord for protection.

This teaching resonated well in the city. The people knew Switzerland had begun by citizens uniting and arming themselves against imperial armies. Calvin taught that this was profoundly biblical; in fact, until just recently, every Swiss male was required to serve in their citizen army and kept his automatic rifle and ammunition at home. While the Swiss maintain political neutrality in the conflicts between other nations, they have always been ready to defend themselves as a nation.

Another of Calvin's principal ministry concerns was the family. Many of the men of Geneva were irresponsible, prone to drunkenness, and dishonest. The disorder in their lives was one of the causes of the poverty and immorality of the city. So the Reformers began teaching the people about individual responsibility, which meant first of all caring for one's family. Each head of household must work hard, pay his bills, give his tithe, and save his money.

But this was not just a teaching about how to have prosperity. Calvin taught that your work was your worship. We tend to believe today that work is what you do until Sunday, when you go worship. But Calvin taught that every believer has a holy vocation, not just "full-time ministers." For example, if you are a shoemaker, that is your vocation. So you have to work as unto the Lord, since you are presenting that work to him as worship. Clearly, if your work is your worship, then it has to be done with the utmost integrity and excellence. In fact, a hundred years ago when Max Weber, the great German economist, was looking for the sources of the prosperity of the West, he pointed to Calvin's teaching in Geneva.

Another of the sources of Geneva's prosperity was Calvin's teaching concerning financial principles. Calvin told the bankers they couldn't charge high interest rates, as that was the sin of usury in the Bible. He fixed the interest rates at 4 percent so that the bankers could have a fair return on their money, but people could still afford to borrow and invest. The 4 percent interest rate lasted for four centuries in Switzerland, and this practice was one of the long-term sources of Switzerland's prosperity.

One of the most amazing things that happened in Geneva was in education. The citizens of Geneva had committed to educate their children as part of their decision to become a Protestant city. This commitment was the result of their theology that each person was created in the image of God and that each one could be in relationship with God directly and only needed to read the Bible to know how that was supposed to work. This was a real first in the history of the world—all children of a nation being taught to read, even the girls. Sadly, the people who train educators today have forgotten that literacy for all is a biblical idea.

Calvin also taught about caring for the poor. An organization was established which cared for newly arrived Protestant refugees, widows, and orphans. Anyone who *could* work *had* to work; the poor were considered accountable too (a principle forgotten in too many countries today). It is said that all Protestant charities have their source in Calvin's organizations in Geneva, since they were copied and adopted in all the Protestant countries.

In an attempt to bring accountability to deal with the crisis in the family, the Reformers established a kind of citizen's tribunal, organized by neighborhood. Any man who beat his wife, or any mother who neglected her children, would be brought before a jury of neighbors and called to account.

Today the excesses of these tribunals are better known than the good they did, and it is true that they provided an easy way for mean-spirited people to settle accounts with neighbors they disliked. But Geneva was in crisis, people did not know how to care for families or work or live morally. Invasion threatened, and Calvin knew that if the city was to survive, he had only a narrow window of opportunity to teach the populace to become a united, disciplined citizenry, able to care for and defend itself.

Accountability was woven into the government structures as well. The Reformers were convinced of the sinfulness of mankind, especially since they had had personal experience of the corrupting power of undifferentiated authority. In other words, the King of France, as an absolute monarch, could and did decide to put Protestants to death. They knew that any leader or structure that cannot be held accountable will slide inevitably into sin, so they built a separation of powers into the government, where power is divided among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. The judiciary is especially important and must be free and independent.

A further division of powers takes place between the national, or federal, government, and the cantons (or states) that make up the nation, and the towns, giving us a system of government called *federalism*. The Swiss system of federalism provided the model for the Americans who designed their government in the late eighteenth century, since they also mistrusted an all-powerful central government because of their experience with the King of England. Albert Gallatin, who actually wrote much of the American constitution while working for Thomas Jefferson, was born and educated in Geneva.

The church also had a defined role in the nation, teaching principles of justice and morality and calling the people and the government to account if the principles were violated. In later centuries the church backed away from this role, and the accountability vacuum that was left has been filled in most Western nations by the media.

Economists today know that any country that practices hard work, favors the family structure, has reasonable interest rates, and lives by systems of law and account-



ability will have prosperity. The economic level will start to rise within the first generation, as was the case in sixteenth-century Geneva. Now institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank teach these principles to the nations, but it was Calvin who first took these biblical teachings and applied them in an early modern context.

### Revival to Reformation

What happened in sixteenth-century Geneva was really about teaching the nations how they should live, which is the difference between revival and reformation. In revival, lots of people get saved, new churches are started, and the Christians get committed. But revival often stops there.

In reformation, the same first steps of conversions, church-planting, and commitment take place. But then someone realizes that people don't know how to live their lives by biblical truths, and they need to be taught. Then the reformers examine every part of the life of the nation, looking at it to see what could be a biblical alternative to the cultural way of doing things.

John Calvin was not just a theologian. He studied and taught the Bible in order to rebuild the nation, so he was essentially an apostolic nation-builder. He forged a biblical worldview, not because he liked to discuss philosophical issues, but so that his adopted nation would survive. Calvin, like the apostle Paul, was essentially a missionary. Missionaries who are interested in completely accomplishing the will of God will be committed not just to the saving of souls, crucial as that is as a first step, but to teaching the nation. People who are actually doing the work of God in the nations often write the best theology.

Calvin was a master communicator and effectively used the technology of the day. He preached weekly in the cathedral and also taught daily in the former chapel next to it. He taught about the biblical instructions for every area of life. All over Europe, people were grappling with the same questions being faced in Geneva, and were looking for ways to live out biblical truths. There was such Continent-wide interest in what Calvin taught that a scribe would sit in his class and take notes, afterward taking them directly to Calvin's printer. The notes would be typeset, printed, and on their way around Europe within the week. We can hardly publish this quickly today, even with computers and the Internet! Calvin and his team were completely committed to teaching the nations.

The towns and villages round about were also asking Calvin and Farel to send pastors and teachers so they could start to live the Reformation. But there was nobody to send. Calvin's lieutenant, another Frenchman named Theodore de Beze (or "Beza" in some English histories), had started a training academy for pastors in Lausanne, but there was a split, and part of that academy was moved to Geneva in 1559. Calvin

taught young ministers in training from an alcove in the chapel. The chapel, renamed “Calvin’s Auditorium,” remained the place of training for the future ministers of Geneva for two centuries. It was the birthplace of the University of Geneva.

When Calvin and the French apostolic team came to Geneva in the sixteenth century, a powerful teaching anointing was forged in the Spirit. But three generations after the death of the apostolic leadership, the Protestant church started to become more and more formalized, cold, and dead. Injustice was first tolerated, then institutionalized, as political power fell back into the hands of a few families. Education was available only for the children of the well-off, and the poor went hungry. Some of the same trends happened in the Protestant church that had happened in the Catholic Church centuries earlier: it lost its purity and power.

### **The Enlightenment: Reason Reigns Supreme**

The Enlightenment, a new movement that is still affecting us today, began at that time as history repeated itself. Faced with the corruption of the church, people were again actively looking for a new way to live. When the church abdicated its role of teaching the nations, others picked up that mantle. The Enlightenment was brought on by a set of specific teachings, as a few men and women decided that the nations needed new teaching, a new light. The Enlightenment shaped the faith of the church for generations to come. Not only were the nations taught from Geneva, but the church in the nations was also taught from that city.

One of the principal fathers of the Enlightenment was the French philosopher Voltaire. He often came to Geneva, because his printer’s workshop was located there. After he was exiled from Paris, he bought a chateau just outside of Geneva. During the years he lived there, his home was known as the intellectual capital of Europe.

Under his influence, the church accepted the teachings of the Enlightenment, which included that the supernatural did not exist, miracles don’t happen, Jesus Christ was not really divine, and the Bible was not really inspired. Also, humans could and should discover truth without divine help, science was the new religion that would save humanity, and peace and prosperity depended on human efforts alone. God, then, was no longer really necessary, except as a distant, impersonal First Cause who got things going and then withdrew from the earth. The idea that the church should only worry about the souls of people instead of every aspect of their lives and society came from the influence of Enlightenment thought on the church.<sup>1</sup>

In Geneva, we see an important warning to heed: the church tries to speak to the culture, then in learning the language, accommodates the culture, then finally becomes captive to it. It is a lesson we must pay careful attention to today. In our efforts to be “seeker friendly,” we must not lose our mandate to shape the culture instead of be shaped by it.

## Romanticism: Experience Reigns Supreme

Reaction to the ordered, disciplined rationalism of the Enlightenment came quickly in the form of Romanticism, or elevating experience over reason as our ultimate definition of reality. In the second wave of French Protestant refugees, a clock maker named Rousseau arrived in Geneva and had a son named Jean-Jacques. This son reacted strongly against the church of his time and against any idea of law or sin.

It was no coincidence that Rousseau was born and lived the early part of his life one street away from what had been Calvin's house. He took up the mantle Calvin had created for teaching the nations. Rousseau is still one who teaches the teachers of the world. In practically any nation, including the Asian nations, you cannot become a school teacher unless you read what Rousseau said about teaching children.

The Romantic movement, fathered by Rousseau and others, still strongly influences the church today. The ideas that the church is there for my self-fulfillment, that my experience of God is the most fundamental reality in my life, and that whatever is spontaneous is more spiritual than what is planned, come straight from Rousseau's teaching. He also taught that we are not really sinners, but our problems come from our environment, specifically the structures and institutions of society. When we are surprised at sin among Christians, we demonstrate that we are more influenced by Rousseau than by Calvin.

## Back to the Bible

This war of ideas in the eighteenth century highlights the fact that there are essentially two ways to think, whatever the worldview, world religion, or culture: rationalistic and romantic. Jesus warned against these two temptations, represented in the Pharisees and the Sadducees (see Mark 8 and Matthew 16). Sadly, these two views are still foundational to much of our Christian theology today, even though Jesus warned us about these faulty beliefs two thousand years ago.

The romantic temptation (of the Pharisees) is to believe that God's power is submitted to my desires for health, wealth, and prosperity. The rationalistic temptation (of the Sadducees) is to believe that God and his ways are subject to my reason. As the eighteenth century progressed, these two ways of thinking were taught through art, music, architecture, and philosophy. They were also concentrated and diffused through the university systems, and, consequently, powerfully disciplined the nations and the church. Geneva was one of the high places for the transmission of these teachings to the nations.

In the theological corruption of the eighteenth century, a student could study in Calvin's academy to be a Protestant pastor for three years and never read the Bible (except when Hebrew was studied and a few Psalms would be assigned). For three

years a student would study almost entirely Greek and Roman philosophy. The whole church was filled with the influence of rationalist, Enlightenment philosophy. In the early nineteenth century, a Bible was published in Geneva which, like the Jehovah's Witnesses' bible today, changed the references that said that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

The changes in thinking were reflected in the architecture itself. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, in the late eighteenth century a neoclassical portico with Greek columns was added to the cathedral where Calvin had preached.

In 1815 a young Scotsman named Robert Haldane came to Geneva. After visiting for just a few days, he walked around the city with a theology student prior to departing. This young student was getting ready to become a Protestant pastor. As Haldane spent the day with him, he was appalled at the student's lack of knowledge of the Bible and his absence of relationship with God. So Haldane decided to stay, rented an apartment in the Old Town, and started holding Bible studies.

Haldane invited the theology students to come, and they were very interested because they had never been to a Bible study. He found out later that most of them had never even read the Epistle to the Romans! They started to get converted, and then some of their professors did as well. Revival started right in the city of Geneva. There were hundreds of people who were saved and then thousands more as revival went into the neighboring canton of Vaud.

Some of these new converts stayed in the Reformed Church and others started new churches. They are still called the Free Churches of Geneva. These churches had an incredible vision for missions. For example, they had a plan to reach every town, village, and farmhouse in France from Geneva. They would recruit farmers from the Jura Mountains who couldn't work in the winter, fill their backpacks with New Testaments, and send them door-to-door in France. They visited every house in France. They also sold a calendar that had agricultural advice and a Bible verse on it for every day. France in the nineteenth century knew the Bible better than France of the twentieth century because of the revival that started in Geneva and then went into France. Many of the missions to the French-speaking countries of Africa and the Pacific were begun out of Geneva.

One young man, Henri Dunant, from the principal church of the revival, seemed to be mostly interested in making money. He often organized investment schemes, going to North Africa to try to find mines that people could invest in. As he was coming back from one of these trips, he visited a field covered with wounded and dead soldiers from a battle that had just taken place between the French and Austrian armies. He was told that if anyone went out to try to help or even bury them, they would be shot at by the other side. He decided to do something about it, so he gave his testimony about that visit in the revival church.

He also published a pamphlet, *A Visit to Solferino*, which pricked the conscience of Europe. Henri and some of his friends founded an organization which later became the International Red Cross. A few years afterward they called the nations to Geneva, where the sixteen greatest powers at that time signed the treaty we know as the Geneva Convention.

This treaty is based on the biblical principles in the first part of the book of Amos, which show that God is very concerned with the just conduct of war and especially the righteous treatment of prisoners. The reason we are prosecuting war criminals from Serbia today is because the nations were taught from Geneva in this area. Sadly, this was the only area in which the Revival of Geneva produced teaching for the nations.

In terms of influence on Swiss laws, the Reformation has a bigger impact even today than the revival ever did, though the Reformation happened almost three centuries before the revival. In giving us the Great Commission, Jesus said there must be individual conversions (Mark 16:15) and this should lead to discipling the nations (Matt. 28:20), so revival alone accomplishes only half of the task he entrusted to us. Apostolic leadership must take the zeal of new converts and teach them the implications of their faith in every area of their personal lives and the spheres of society in which they serve.

Revivals happen regularly in the history of the church. True reformation is a costly and lengthy process, so perhaps this is why it is so rare. It may be that the enemy so feared another reformation in Geneva in the nineteenth century that he took very specific steps to bottle up the revival by bringing in the Enlightenment teachings. Under this influence, the revived church did not believe that it had much to say about government, poverty, or injustice. The church retreated, leaving a vacuum for the teaching of the nations.<sup>2</sup>

Adding to this, a new teaching in the church said that there was going to be a rapture any minute, so be sure you are ready and try to save all the souls you can. These are good teachings, but if studied exclusively they can lead to Christians not being concerned about the affairs of the nation. The believers of that day withdrew from the universities, from political life, and especially from the media. Years later they were amazed that all these places were filled with pagans.

Geneva continued to hold the mantle of anointing to teach the nations. Early in the twentieth century, a young revolutionary came to study in the city. He spent two years studying and writing in the University of Geneva library. Much of the organization and preparation for his revolution took place there. In the process, he picked up the mantle of the teaching of the nations.

His name was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Until 1989, 80 percent of the world's population was being taught by his ideas, known as the Marxist-Leninist system. It was

not a very intelligent system and it didn't even work very well. But it was a unified, overall system and any country could adopt it. It told them what to do about their schools, economy, army, political system, about every area of life. Nations on every continent adopted this system because they didn't see any other comprehensive system as an attractive alternative.

### Lessons in Reformation: Geneva's Legacy

In one generation during the sixteenth century Geneva was totally transformed. What can we learn from its story on the vital subject of nation disciplining?

- The church responded to the moral and spiritual vacuum of the day with preaching the gospel to bring individual conversion over an entire generation. This was coupled with intentional teaching on how to live the Christian faith in every area of personal life and society.
- The church prayed and searched the Scriptures for biblical truths to shape every sphere of society, and was proactive in bringing this teaching and moral accountability to the leaders in every area. The church did not hide in its buildings but was a very robust presence throughout the city.
- The church leaders continued to seek God together with leaders from other nations on what God was doing around the world in this area of disciplining every area of life in his ways.
- The church was deeply committed to the poor and needy, caring for immediate physical needs and training in skills to enable the poor to live godly, self-sufficient lives.

To reap all the benefit from a study of Geneva's story, we must also take an honest look at the mistakes that were made so we can work to avoid them in the future. One category of error had to do with crossing the biblical lines of authority, or domains. Every conflict in society can be traced back to the question of domains: who has the right to make the decisions in any given sphere. In Geneva, several examples illustrate this important principle:

- Neighborhood tribunals were intended to help disciple families, but instead, they demonstrated the negative effects of the church overstepping its bounds and exercising an inappropriate degree of authority in people's personal lives.
- One tribunal punished an individual who wouldn't convert, publicly disqualifying the person from a role of leadership in another sphere. These actions highlight two areas of error. The church is to be an influence for salvation, not

exert control over the personal right to choose. The church has a teaching role but is not to exercise direct control over the other spheres of society.

- There was a rigidity in applying scriptural principles, which led to legalism on external issues like dress or leisure time activities, for example.
- The church focused almost exclusively on the application of biblical truths to their city, demonstrating a poor understanding of missions, thus missing the opportunity to extend God's kingdom even further during their day.
- As the years went on after John Calvin had passed away, faith became overintellectualized.
- Although he preached about the priesthood of every believer and detested the Catholic practice of looking to a priest for salvation, Calvin still left too much authority in the person of the Protestant pastor. For centuries afterward, pastors were still seen as the ones who could have a ministry; it was not an avenue for every believer.

Today, the nations are looking for answers. Moreover, it is the commandment of Jesus Christ and the calling of the church to teach the nations. If we step back from it again, we will leave another vacuum.

Whenever the church leaves a vacuum, the enemy is very happy to fill it. He is probably working on another system for the nations even now. If it is like his other recent efforts, it will be a mixture of nationalism, racist scapegoating, economic hope, and fearmongering. But the next version might well include supernatural power, and it will be freed from the residual morality that existed in the twentieth century. It will not be nice.

Will the church be ready with an attractive, intelligent, biblical alternative for the way nations can live? The lessons of Geneva will help those who rise up to take on this challenge.

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## Notes

1. This emphasis on the power of the human mind is often called Rationalism, and gave birth to Modernity, the condition of the last two or three centuries. For an authoritative summary of how Modernity influenced the church and missions, see the chapter on the Enlightenment in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

2. See Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi's book, *Carey, Christ and Cultural Transformation*, revised ed. (OM Publishing, 1977), for a fascinating study of the Reformation-oriented pioneer mission work of William Carey and the first wave of missionaries to India who were inspired by the teachings of the French Reformation out of Geneva. Mangalwadi contrasts this first wave of missions, which changed the history of India, with the more revival-oriented second wave, which in his opinion was not nearly as effective.

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