Geneva: city of the reformation

By Simon Watkinson

When Geneva became the last canton to join Switzerland in 1815, it did so with a turbulent history. This was partly due to its geographical position. Surrounded on all sides by France, except for a 3.5 kilometres border with what is now the Swiss canton of Vaud, the citizens of Geneva had experienced a good deal of oppression, especially in the 400 years before the beginning of the Reformation in the 1530s.

In the 12th century, Geneva's ever-expanding merchant class became increasingly frustrated with the restrictions imposed upon them by the Roman Catholic bishops of Geneva who, after absorbing the powers of Geneva's feudal counts, had ruled the city since 1124. So in 1285, the citizens of Geneva wisely negotiated the protection of the Counts (later Dukes) of Savoy and this led to their gaining considerable rights of self-rule by 1387. However, these cunning dukes manipulated the bishops and almost succeeded in dominating the city by the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Reform

The enraged citizens of Geneva then made allies of the Swiss cantons of Fribourg and Bern, expelled the Bishop in 1533 and tentatively accepted the Reformation preached by Guillaume Farel in 1535. Then, in July 1536, Farel pleaded with persecuted French Protestant theologian John Calvin (1509–1564) who was merely passing through Geneva on his way to Strasbourg and had only in-

tended to stay one night to help him with the work of the Reformation in Geneva. Perhaps Geneva's role in the Reformation was destined, as Calvin later said that he felt that the hand of God was stretched down from heaven, that it laid hold of him, and fixed him irrevocably to the place he was so impatient to leave. The seeds of Geneva's Protestantism, which would change this city and the world, had been sown.

Expulsion

Initially, Farel and Calvin tried to institute a number of sweeping changes to the city's governance and religious life, such as a newly-drafted catechism and confession of faith, which they insisted all citizens must affirm. However, the Genevans could not at first accept these austere reforms and departures from established church customs. As a result, both Farel and Calvin were banished from the city in 1538. Calvin went to Basel and then on to Strasbourg, where he served as a lecturer and pastor to a church for French Huguenots. During this time, Calvin was influenced by Martin Bucer, who advocated a system of political and ecclesiastical structures along New Testament lines.

Intervention

When a Catholic cardinal wrote to the city council inviting Geneva to return to the mother church, Calvin seized his opportunity. His written response on behalf of embattled Genevan Protestants helped him regain some of the respect he had lost, and in 1540 the Geneva

city council welcomed Calvin back. With the authority to construct a government based on the subordination of the state to the church, Calvin would make his home in the city and preach regularly at St Peter's Cathedral.

Transformation

Calvin wanted to establish the moral legitimacy of the church, reformed according to his programme, and also promote the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities. Central to this reform was the Consistory, an ecclesiastical court of elders and pastors whose purpose was to maintain strict order among the church's officers and members. Offenses ranged from propounding false doctrine to moral transgressions, such as wild dancing and bawdy singing. Typical punishments were compulsory attendance of public sermons or catechism classes.

Interestingly enough, documentation of Consistory proceedings shows its considerable concern for domestic life, and especially for women. For the first time, men's infidelity was punished as harshly as that of women and the Consistory was intolerant of spousal abuse. The Consistory was also responsible for sending out many missionaries to France and to countries as far off as Brazil.

The significance of the Consistory is that it helped to transform Geneva into the city described by John Knox Scottish reformer and founder of the Church of Scot-

land as "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the Apostles". So Geneva became famous as a model of an ideal Protestant city and reformers from all over Europe came to Geneva to learn from Calvin and his colleagues. Geneva's role as the "Protestant Rome" is commemorated in its large Reformation Monument.

Benevolence

While Calvin's theological contributions have had a global influence, his legacy to Geneva can be seen in other areas. Knowing the social and economic benefits of business, Calvin was instrumental in establishing and developing a successful silk industry in Geneva, which prospered many of its citizens. He also founded a hospital for the poor in 1559. Placing a high importance on the education of Geneva's youth, in this same year Calvin founded the Collège Calvin, now the oldest secondary school in Geneva, and also the Academy of Geneva, a model for other academies around the world, and which would eventually become the University of Geneva. These institutions attracted many students to Geneva.

Legalities

Though Geneva's political constitution had been fixed before Calvin's arrival, he was involved in the codification of Geneva's civil law, which was drawn up in 1543. Geneva-born philosopher J.J. Rousseau, who had penned his hostility towards Christians, wrote on this feature of Calvin's work in his *Social Contract*: "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognize the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much honour as his *Institutes.* Whatever revolution time may bring in our religion, so long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence."

Contribution

After John Calvin's arrival in Geneva, the city gained in importance in Europe and was seen as the epicentre of the Reformation. Undeniably, the character of Geneva changed considerably under Calvin, not only because of the new form of government he introduced, but also because of the huge influx of refugees, from countries such as France, Italy, the Netherlands and England, as the persecution of Protestants increased in Europe. These immigrants naturally tended to be supporters of Calvin, and so caused resentment among many native Genevans, who saw them as a threat to their own power and influence. However, in 1555 an uprising against them was crushed, making Calvin's system secure. Promising refugees were trained for the ministry and spread Calvin's teaching. Among his most important followers was John Knox.

Since the refugees included many printers and publishers, they also helped spread the new religion by printing biblical texts and works of theology, in both Latin and French. One of the printers who fled to Geneva was the celebrated French lexicographer and grammarian Robert Estienne, who with his son Henri played an important role in standardising the French language. The arrival of folk fleeing religious persecution also included many who made a lasting contribution to the city, whether as skilled craftsmen, bankers or in other fields.

Safe haven

Little could reduce the flow of refugees converging on Geneva, and the number of people receiving aid almost tripled in one year: from 1,547 in 1684 to 4,235 in 1685. Furthermore, the city's inhabitants increased from 16,000 in 1690 to nearly 19,000 in 1710. With its population swelled by Protestant refugees, notably Huguenots, Geneva soon became a cosmopolitan intellectual centre. During the 1700s, when Calvin's stern theocracy softened into aristocratic rule, the city's intellectual life soared to dizzy new heights. Voltaire settled there as did aristocrat H. B. de Saussure. Author and politician Jacques Necker and Albert Gallatin, who emigrated to America in 1780 and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1795, were among Geneva's most famous sons of the eighteenth century.

Thanks to Calvin and Geneva's conversion to Protestantism, by 1757 Geneva had gained a reputation as a place that was a model of reason, wisdom and tolerance. It is not surprising, then, that in 1864 Geneva was made the seat of the International Red Cross. It was also the seat of the League of Nations (1920–46), which in 1945 became the European headquarters of the United Nations. Geneva is also headquarters for the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and perhaps most fittingly, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

When interviewed recently, Reverand Ian Coffey, well-known speaker, writer and former Senior Pastor of Crossroads Evangelical Church in Ferney Voltaire, highlighted the lasting impact of Calvin's activities on Geneva and beyond:
"John Calvin was an influential figure in the Reformation that swept Europe. His contribution was amplified by his astonishing ability to commit his thoughts to paper. To the present day his Institutes of the Christian Religion remain a benchmark for Protestant Christians. His commentaries on Bible books and closely argued theology remain in constant use by scholars and pastors alike. In spite of the attempts of some to denigrate him, John Calvin remains a giant intellect within the Christian Church. European history cannot be properly understood without a fundamental grasp of what Calvin and his fellow reformers achieved. Theirs was a struggle in part religious, in part political. Democracy has its roots in Protestant theology. His lasting legacy to the city of Geneva is that it remains a place of refuge and a centre where issues of liberty and tolerance continue to be discussed. Long may that legacy linger." ●