



# Reformation in Geneva

**Transformation in Only One Generation**

## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Geneva crossroads of Influence</i></b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	<b>The Symbol of Geneva, the Jet d'Eau (water jet)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>The Background of the Reformation</i></b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>History of Geneva</i></b>	<b>4</b>
3.1	<b>The City</b>	<b>4</b>
3.2	<b>William Farel (1489-1565)</b>	<b>6</b>
3.3	<b>Jean Calvin (1509-1564)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4</b>	<b><i>The Influence of the Reformation</i></b>	<b>7</b>
4.1	<b>Reform of Education</b>	<b>7</b>
4.2	<b>Reformation of the Church</b>	<b>8</b>
4.2.1	The Church Order	8
4.3	<b>Reform of the Social System</b>	<b>9</b>
4.3.1	Deacons	9
4.3.2	The Refugees	9
4.4	<b>Reform of the Economy</b>	<b>9</b>
4.4.1	Capitalism versus Socialism	10
4.4.2	Interest and Credit	11
4.5	<b>Reform of the Defence</b>	<b>11</b>
4.6	<b>The influence of reformation in Politics</b>	<b>11</b>
4.6.1	The Glorious Reformation in England (1688-1689)	12
4.6.2	Courts	12
4.7	<b>Today the Bible is still the Foundation of Western Civilisation</b>	<b>13</b>
4.7.1	The Red Cross (Henri Dunant)	13
4.7.2	Human Rights Declaration	13
4.7.3	Neutrality	13
4.7.4	Institution of America, 1787	14
<b>5</b>	<b><i>Reformer in Geneva without a biblical thinking</i></b>	<b>14</b>
5.1	<b>The Enlightenment in Geneva</b>	<b>14</b>
5.2	<b>Voltaire (1694-1778)</b>	<b>15</b>
5.3	<b>Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)</b>	<b>15</b>
5.4	<b>Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>6</b>	<b><i>Summary</i></b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7</b>	<b><i>Appendix</i></b>	<b>16</b>

## 1 Geneva crossroads of Influence

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Geneva is one of the key places in the world. Its reputation of neutrality and its economic crossroads make Geneva well known around the globe. There are over 20 major international organizations located in Geneva including the World Trade Organization, World Health Organization, International Labour Office, World Council of Churches, Red Cross, and the Geneva Office of the United Nations. More humanitarian and diplomatic work is done in Geneva than in any other place in the world.

500 years ago Geneva was a very poor, dirty city and the hygienic situation was horrible. The beautiful lake was dirty and foul smelling. In the 16th century reformers preached that change would be possible. Geneva was transformed through the investment of the reformers in only one generation. Geneva became a beautiful and prosperous place, where people could live in freedom and peace. John Calvin is one of the most well-known reformers and is called the father of the modernity. He had the ability to turn around the thinking of the people; he laid the foundation for a new world.

“Post Tenebras Lux” is still the motto of the Reformation of Geneva. It means “After the Darkness, Light,” and is presented in several places, even in the UN building. It reminds people of the history of the Reformation and the amazing change of the whole society in just one generation.

That change could happen even today, through the transformation of our minds and our lives. Take a closer look at the transformation that happened 500 years ago, at the time of the Reformation.

### 1.1 *The Symbol of Geneva, the Jet d’Eau (water jet)*

This is the main symbol of Geneva that everyone knows. It shoots water 140 meters high at 200 km/h or 50 litres/second. Its force is 1360 hp. Originally the fountain was a blow off valve for the industries of Geneva. Every Saturday at 4 pm when the machines of the industry turned off, there was too much pressure in the pipeline and it was pushed out through a fountain in the lake. This became later the symbol of Geneva and was construction into a huge fountain to remind all visitors of the economic success of the industries after the Reformation.



## 2 The Background of the Reformation

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Let us travel 500 years back and have a closer look at the circumstances and the situation in this time.

The Catholic Church had not been a good steward to the people. The church had ruled over the people by oppressing them. The church was no longer for the people but the people for the church. People had to pay for their salvation. The Pope and his cardinals lived in prosperity but most of the population was very poor. Most of the land belonged to kings or to the Church. The people had to work for the Pope and the kings but the Pope and the kings didn’t care about them. This was an enormous injustice and people longed for transformation.

Martin Luther started the Reformation in 1517 with posting the Ninety-Five Theses at the Castle Church in Wittenberg. He claimed that the Pope and the Church were wrong in many of their practices and they had to stop doing these evil things. This message spread in a short time to all of Europe and the Reformation took its way.

Later the whole reformation movement reached Switzerland and also Geneva where the Reformation started to reform as well all spheres of society.

Calvin, the main figure of reformation in Geneva, became the father of the modernity. Calvin understood the relationship between church and state better than anyone else, including Luther and Zwingli.

The Reformation brought the idea that everyone stands before God and that the Church does not stand between them. Everybody has access to the truth. Everyone has the opportunity to find out what is good or bad. Everything and everyone stood no longer under the Church but under God and His Word, the Bible. Man could live in freedom without chaos because the Word of God holds the society together. They didn't need the absolute control of someone. Neither the Church nor the state stand above their decisions.

Power could be separated because the Bible as an ethical absolute measure stood over them. People could not do what they want to do; they were responsible to the Word of God. Everyone can stand, with the Bible in their hand, and claim that things are right or wrong. Living in freedom was only possible because they had a general absolute measure or ethical standard which they were accountable too. It was a completely new idea in this time and it led the world to enormous development in every sphere of society. Social freedom without chaos was now possible. It was the beginning of our modern society.

Our western thinking about politics, the economy, and the whole society comes from this Biblical understanding. When we give up this foundation we will give up our Western civilisation. If we want to hold on to our freedom and order we have to turn back to the ethical standard of the Reformation.

Not everyone wanted to embrace the Reformation. Especially the West and South of Europe (France, Spain and Italy) were extremely against this new way. The people in power didn't want to lose their position and power. It led to enormous conflict in Europe.

In the cities of Switzerland the Reformation took its own way. Switzerland didn't have a king like all of other nations. The Reformation was not ordered by the kings; it was a decision from the bottom. The citizens and the bishops came together in the churches for a debate to decide if the Reformation was helpful and good for their people. There were four main issues linked to the acceptance of the Reformation. Firstly the churches must give the land back to the farmers, secondly the abolishment of peonage (like slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), thirdly the reduction of the taxes, and fourthly the right to a say in political decisions for all citizens. As we can see, reformation was not only a church issue; it affected the whole life.

The reformation in Switzerland ended not in the 30 Years War like in the other places in Europe. This war was a conflict between the Reformed and the Catholic Kings. It ended in huge destruction in all of Europe. It made an enormous difference in what political system a country had, and if the people had the opportunity to decide for themselves or if they were forced to believe what kings wanted. It ended either in freedom or in war. The Swiss made an agreement that every Swiss can choose his own faith. The people were not forced to believe what the authority believed; they were free. It was the beginning of the still today world-wide known Neutrality of Switzerland. The reformers understood this principle and were able to build a completely new society based on federalism that laid a new foundation of freedom in the world.

## **3 History of Geneva**

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### **3.1 The City**

Because of its position in the centre of Europe, Geneva was a long time ago very important for trade and politics. Caesar wanted to control the territory of Geneva and defeated the Celts (Helveticas) in 4 BC, as he asserted in his journal. The Celts became Roman, but in their thinking and their rituals they did not live the Roman way. There was still a lot of witchcraft and superstition. The Romans were not able to fully transform the animistic thinking of the Celts, and the civilisation took only slow steps. But in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD Europe turned to a new understanding of reality, to Christianity. Faith in a personal God who gave man re-

sponsibility to change the world to a better place was vastly superior to the animistic thinking of the Celts. That faith changed the whole society. Europe and Geneva became prosperous and successful. In 381 AD Geneva already had his own bishop.

In the Middle Ages Geneva became rich because of its neutrality. When the French or the Italians wanted to do free business without the control of the king they went to Geneva. The "Place du Bourg de Four" was called the crossroads of Europe because on that spot a main north-south commercial route crossed an equally prominent east-west trading route.



Crossroads of Europe

The Rhone River goes to the Mediterranean Sea, and a bit further north of Geneva a small river called the Orbe flows to the Aare, the Rhine and ends in the North Sea.

A lot of trade was done by ship and this made Geneva a crucial and important point for business and the exchange of goods. Geneva became a diplomatic and humanitarian crossroads of Europe.

King Louis XI of France in 1463 became jealous of the amazing growth of Geneva. He decreed the death penalty for all who would do business in Geneva again. Geneva lost its position and the traders didn't come any more. It was only the thieves and prostitutes who stayed back. Geneva became poor because there was less tax money and less people.

Through the Reformation Geneva became rich and successful again, a place where people could live in enormous freedom and peace. This thinking became the foundation of our Western civilisation and spread over the whole world.



Today we can see the history of the Reformation on the great Reformation Monument (1909 – 1917) constructed for the 400 year celebration of John Calvin. It reminds us of the huge transformation that took place 500 years ago. The giant wall dominates the large Parc des Bastions. The focal points are the 15 foot-tall statues of four Geneva luminaries: William Farel, the first to preach the Reformation in Geneva, John Calvin, leader of the Reformation movement and spiritual father of Geneva, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, and John Knox, Scottish preacher and founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland.

The flag shows the relationship between the Bishop (the key of Saint Peter) and the free imperial city (the eagle of the Holy Roman Empire). It came out of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and symbolised that Geneva was part of the Holy Roman Empire since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but independent and ruled by the people themselves represented through the Bishop of Geneva. It was not under the kings or the emperor. Its citizens had a lot of freedom compared to the rest of Europe. Geneva has a long history as an independent republic and became the model of the modern world.



In 1814 Geneva became a member of Switzerland.

### 3.2 William Farel (1489-1565)

Open air evangelist and reformer William Farel, a young and passionate man from France, started to preach on the market place in Geneva that true change begins with God's truth and transformed lives. His strategy was to go into the city, do wild things to ensure that everybody heard the message of the Reformation, and then leave right away. For example, once he pulled the priest from the pulpit and started to preach himself. Once he pushed a priest into the lake. He got kicked out of the city, but in 1536 he was able to bring the people through conversation to the Reformation. In 1536 Farel brought the people of Geneva to accept the Reformation.



He spread the reformed thinking to a lot of places in the western part of Switzerland. For example, the citizens of Lausanne invited the famous reformer from Geneva to debate with Catholic leaders in the cathedral. Through the help of John Calvin the Reformation was also accepted in Lausanne after the debate.

### 3.3 Jean Calvin (1509-1564)



Calvin was born in Noyon, France on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July, 1509. He was born Roman Catholic, but when he was a young man he became a Protestant. Both Farel and Calvin fled from France under enormous pressure, and under cover they travelled through Europe. If they had been discovered they would have been killed (burnt at the stake). Geneva was neutral and so several of the French refugees went there. Almost all of the reformers in Geneva were refugees, mostly from France.

In 1535, at the age of 25, Calvin wanted to go to Strasbourg but for security reasons he travelled through Geneva. For this young man who wanted to change the world Geneva was not the right place to stay. It was a horrible city where no serious person would stay and of course nobody who wanted to do something serious for the world.

The Reformation brought a lot of freedom and threw the bishop and the clerics out of the city, but left the people in a vacuum and this led to chaos. Everybody did whatever they thought it would be right to do. When Farel discovered Calvin he immediately recognized that this would be the man who could bring reformation to order in the city. Farel knew Calvin. Calvin had studied law and theology and had an understanding of the political and church orders. Calvin claimed that he learned more about God in his study about law than in his theological study. Theology was a lot about rituals, church and going to heaven, but the study of the law had to do with what is right and wrong. It had more to do with how people can live according to God's will than all of the abstract discussions about rituals and indulgences.

Farel spoke very strongly to Calvin, pointing his finger in the air and saying "Your studies shall be cursed by God if you are not willing to help the people here". It would be a challenge for Calvin to stay in that awful city, but for him the strong voice of Farel was like the voice of God and finally he was willing to stay.

Calvin and Farel preached much about repentance and the need to change oneself and one's attitudes. They were kicked out of the city, because the people didn't want to change. Farel went to Neuchâtel and Calvin to Strasbourg where he learnt a lot from Martin Bucer. After three years the citizens of Geneva recognized that their disastrous situation had not improved after rejecting Calvin. A delegation travelled to Strasbourg to ask Calvin to return and help them out of the disaster they had created through living by their own rules. They recognized that Calvin would be able to bring back this situation to order. He agreed and

from that time on (1539) Calvin stayed in Geneva until his death in 1564. We're not sure where he was buried because he didn't want his grave to have a name on. He wanted the people to honour God, not him.

Calvin had always suffered from bad health, from asthma, dyspepsia and repeated colds. He married Idelette van Bure who gave birth to a son. His son didn't survive childhood and Idelette died right after the birth of her son. The Pope and Calvin's objectors saw this as a curse of God. Calvin replied to the Pope: "Haven't I ten thousands of children in the Christian world? And how many has the Pope?" Pope Pius IV said about Calvin: "What the power of this heretic is, is that money means nothing to him". He died in humility in Geneva on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1564.

Calvin's main goal was to write a book, called "Institutio", about the Christian religion. Through his writing he wanted to convince the King of France of the Reformation, but this never happened.

#### **Quote of John Calvin:**

*(Interpreted from German; a loose translation)* I had many weaknesses which you had to carry, and all that I did is basically of no value. Bad people take it for my downfall, but I say again that all of my works are not of value and I am a distressed wretch. You are my witnesses that my endeavour was always to look for the good. Therefore I ask you that you forgive my wrong doings. If there was something good then please take it and follow it.

## **4 The Influence of the Reformation**

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### **4.1 Reform of Education**

Calvin saw that people who are not able to read and write depended on others. Democracy or the separation of powers could only function if people had the knowledge of how to handle it. Calvin taught that people need to be educated before they can take responsibility.

Calvin taught children to read and write by using the Bible. Those children later became the rulers of the city. For the first time in history women were able to go to school. The reformer taught that women would be a great help for the society if they were educated. The families were taught to set aside money for their children's education.

French, German, Greek, Latin and Hebrew were taught in the school as well as grammar, logic, and rhetoric. After seven years of schooling, pupils could continue to attend the lectures and exercises in the Academy.



Young refugee pastors were educated and sent back to bring the thinking of the Reformation to their home countries. Often they lost their lives under enormous persecution because the kings and the Pope opposed them.

The school Calvin founded was named the Academy, which today is called the College de Calvin. The two original buildings are still part of the campus. In 1872 the Academy founded by Calvin was transformed into a university and relocated to the Parc des Bastions where it is still today.

Many famous universities in the world trace back to the refugees who were trained at the Geneva Academy, such as Yale (USA), Harvard (USA), Heidelberg (Germany), Leiden, Antwerpen, and Amsterdam (Netherlands).

## 4.2 Reformation of the Church



Underneath the Cathedral of St. Pierre there is a Celtic excavation area. The Celts had an altar for their gods at the place where the cathedral stands today.

The back of the cathedral is built in the Roman (1160) style. The main building is Gothic. The iron tower is newly built because the original burned down.

The Auditoire of Calvin next to the cathedral was the first English church in Geneva. John Knox (1514-1572) was the pastor. From here the message of the Reformation spread to the English world through Scotland, England, Holland, and then to North America. The whole English-speaking world was taught by the Reformation in Geneva. The Scottish Church is the modern day English speaking Reformed Presbyterian congregation that meets in this building today. The thinking of Geneva became the foundation of the Presbyterian, the Puritan, and the Anglican churches. The Anglicans stayed in the form of the Catholic mass but reformed their theology, theology from John Calvin.

The printing industry in this time made it possible for Calvin's sermons and other writings to be rapidly dispersed throughout France and elsewhere within a few weeks. Geneva's later printing industry served other reformers of society such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Lenin.

### 4.2.1 The Church Order

The teaching of the Reformation was that man must change his own attitude first and must be renewed in his heart through the teaching of the Bible.

In the church the power was divided among the pastors, doctors, deacons and elders, who were there to discipline the believers and were elected by every district. The church was ruled by their authorities, which consisted of the pastors and 12 laymen, controlled by the state council. All of these were engaged to a moral standard of the Bible and Calvin demanded high integrity and honesty. Priest, farmer or king, everyone must give account for his acts and will be punished if he has done evil things. The Reformed church in Geneva was the first adequate democracy based on the separation of powers and based on a constitution.

Calvin thought that the Bible was not only to care for our sins but is also there to create order in society. The Bible has more to say than just salvation. It has three main functions: firstly it leads man to know that we are sinners; secondly it gives man the principles for the state and civil laws; lastly it shows man the way to salvation. Calvin was called the advocate of the Old Testament.

He claimed that Jesus only took the ceremonial laws away, not the civil laws that are commanded in the Old Testament. For Calvin the Old Testament was the foundation of living together and building civil order. Without the Old Testament man cannot understand how he can live or even understand the New Testament.



The Church and the government worked together. They had different spheres of authority, but both of them were standing under the authority of the Bible. It was always a question who had which authority, but Calvin was able to bring it into balance. There is a famous painting showing the balance of city and church leadership in the museum of the Reformation in Geneva.

Calvin lived very strictly. He never held a position in the government but he influenced it significantly.

He taught that no church was allowed to become the State church. Otherwise the other churches would be less valuable. Calvin was interested in a synod of the Churches in Europe. He put a lot of effort into it. He tried to settle the conflict between other reformers and people and to bring an understanding in working together. For example, he tried to calm down the emotion of Luther and the Swiss reformer about the Lord's Supper.

Calvin wrote more than 2000 letters to try to teach the people to understand God's Word and bring the people together again.

### **4.3 Reform of the Social System**

#### **4.3.1 Deacons**

Before the Reformation the monks and the monasteries were responsible to care for the sick and poor people. Yet under Calvin's Biblical thinking everybody was responsible; everyone who is in need had to go first to his family or to his neighbour to ask for help. The poor had to give an account to their neighbour who supported them. The rich had to learn to care for their family members and neighbours who were in need. It was a system of accountability and relationship. When people didn't want to change or obey they didn't receive any help. Man had a duty and not only a right. This reduced the costs of the social system enormously and helped that many people got out of poverty.

The social responsibility today is no longer with the people but with the state. This can be very dangerous. It led to a similar situation as in the time before the Reformation where the Church was responsible but they didn't have any more money or resources to do it. Before the Reformation the people could delegate it to the Church, but they lost their freedom and their self responsibility and it ended in a disaster and in enormous costs for the Church which they couldn't pay any more.

#### **4.3.2 The Refugees**



The French named the refugees who accepted the Reformation "Huguenots". Many fled to Geneva because it was a neutral place to be and live out their faith. Calvin saw the potential that these people brought to Geneva. He integrated and educated them. They were very much influenced by the ethics of John Calvin. The French made a big mistake in their history by driving them out of their country or killing them. Switzerland reaped a great blessing for reaching out to bless 16<sup>th</sup> century refugees. The city gate of Geneva bears the sign "City of Refuge".

Advancement and prosperity came to Geneva partly as a result of welcoming refugees, as many of them were skilled craftsmen and scientists. They became a strong pillar of the economy in the city and later on in the whole world. In Calvin's days, Geneva was a walled city with limited space. The influx of the Huguenots and other refugees created a housing crisis. Encouraged by Calvin, the city governors and the property owners worked together on a plan to suspend the building code that limited the height of buildings to four stories, and to instead allow a fifth story to be built. The space that was provided was used to house refugee families. As a lasting testimony to this collaborative social action, the added floors reflect the architecture of this time. This distinctive top story difference can still be seen all over the city.

### **4.4 Reform of the Economy**

Calvin understood the situation of the poor, both the social aspect as well as how the financial market functioned.

Unlike the Catholic Church, Calvin didn't think that money and private property were bad things. Man could enjoy the wealth and the beauty of the world. The problem was not money itself, but it had to be used in a just way. Wealth is a gift from God and not of one's own effort. Calvin taught that people's work and business were part of their worship. We are not allowed to use it as we want to. We are responsible to share our wealth and bless others with it. God tests the hearts of the rich and the poor. The rich must open their hearts to the poor and the poor shouldn't steal and become rebellious.

Before the Reformation, farmers worked for the king and the king was responsible for them. If people work for others, the work would probably not be so effective. The farmers didn't work as hard as they should; therefore the kings oppressed the farmers. There was injustice on both sides. The king had to support the farmers and they did a bad job. They had many feasts and the king had to pay for it, but was no longer able to do so. The feudal system was at its end. The people needed a new order.

The Reformation enabled businesses to grow. People no longer worked for the king or for the Pope but for themselves. The free market brought enormous growth.

The sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) said that the spirit of capitalism came from Calvin, but this is not true. It was capitalistic thinking but not capitalism. Calvin taught that capitalistic thinking and social responsibility had to work together. He taught that free business was possible but only under a command law. The law of the reformer was over the people. It was initiated from God and let the people live in freedom and in order.

#### **4.4.1 Capitalism versus Socialism**

The Enlightenment two hundred years later brought the idea that freedom of business and making profit is the most important aspect. The highest goal for a society was to develop itself and get rich. It brought the world into the time of industrialisation where a lot of injustice took place. Many people were oppressed, worked for hours, and lived in horrible social conditions. The Reformation in contrast brought the view of development, but always with a social responsibility to help people with less ability. However, as the people forgot the teaching of the Bible the view of society became biased.

The Enlightenment would not have been possible without the thinking of the Reformation. It was built on the Reformation. But through losing the Bible the world also lost the social aspect.

The backlash reaction was socialism. This was the thinking in which all problems in society were thought to be able to be solved by society. Socialism sees private property as being the source of evil in the world. Therefore, to claim that God gave man something that then belongs to man and that he has to take ownership of it and multiply it is to say that God Himself is the source of the enormous injustice in society. The great philosophers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Darwin and Marx, claimed that man had to turn away from religion and from its old unjust system and turn to socialism based on atheism.

The people of the Reformation were focused on reaching and building new resources. They believed in an open system where God the Creator can give more resources so that there is enough for everyone. The beliefs of the Enlightenment turned into thinking that we are living in a closed system where we must distribute what we have. Socialism focused on the distribution of resources and neglected the building of new resources. This led in the end to the enormous disaster of communism.

This shifting of worldview turned the whole society upside down. Today we still live in the tension of these two views: capitalism versus socialism. History shows us that without the Bible the economy lay always on one of the two sides, but both of them ended in disaster.

#### **4.4.2 Interest and Credit**

Before the Reformation the Catholic Church had forbidden taking financial interest. Afterwards, when interest was allowed, the rich people were willing to lend money to people who wanted to start a business. They received a profit from lending money which encouraged them to do so. Now it was possible to get capital, which was impossible before the Reformation. Before the Reformation it was only possible to build up something if people already had capital. To start something new was only possible for the rich people. The trench between rich and poor got bigger and bigger and it always ended in more poor and less rich people. The growth process was held back and the potential of many people was not used. This whole situation was turned around and businesses started everywhere.

Calvin only allowed taking interest from people who started a business with the intention of earning money with it. To take interest from poor people who needed money to survive was not allowed. The highest advised interest rate was 4%, which remained in effect for 400 years. Calvin managed to wake up the potential in the people; he gave them a platform where their abilities could grow. It brought superiority over the places that didn't accept the Reformation, which it is still visible today in many parts of the world. For example, we can observe the economic superiority of North America over South America. Both of them have resources, although South America has even more. But the reformed north became more prosperous than the south. Why? The reformed places lived in a freedom to do business, take credit, and develop all spheres of society. The people were freer to bring their creative ideas and were not under the control of the church. This brought a stronger development and in the end economic superiority over the non-reformed places.

#### **4.5 Reform of the Defence**

Before the Reformation only the king owned weapons. This could become very dangerous. As history teaches us, a man with too much power can be dangerous. When there was a conflict, the king looked out first for himself and oppressed the one who had no weapon to defend him.

Calvin taught that everybody in the city is responsible for defence. "In one hand a weapon, in the other hand a shovel." Even women were responsible for defence. It became a new understanding of the military in the whole world.

There was a conflict between the Savoy, the French and the "Eidgenossen" (Confederation) about Geneva. Because of its civil army that had come out of the thinking of the Reformation, Geneva could defend itself and remained independent. Every year the Genevans celebrate their independence on the Escalade de Geneva (1602). Geneva won the war because a woman poured her soup over an enemy who was under the city wall and she thereby had time to warn the citizens.

To separate the powers and give weapons to many can only work on the basis of an ethical standard that all people agree to. It was possible through turning back to the Bible, a book that everybody had access to. The Reformation of Geneva was strongly influenced by the "Confederation". They had had this idea of civil army since their founding in 1291. Switzerland has this system to this day. Every Swiss man who can go to the military is a member of the national army. They all have a gun at home and have to do a certain number of services.

#### **4.6 The influence of reformation in Politics**

The thinking of the Reformation turned the world upside down. A totally new understanding of politics grew in this time. The idea that everyone is directly under God and accountable to His Word brought the political application of separation of powers built on the common ground of a constitution. It brought an absolute standard whereby everybody can test what others do.

The Reformation brought the Biblical concept of a voting system where the population could decide who their ruler should be.

Everyone had the responsibility to bring order into a city. This led to a federal system where the political power is with the people. A society can only function when people take self-responsibility, and the reformer was able to build such a system. Today Switzerland still has one of the most distinctive federal systems in the world. It gives the people responsibility and demands accountability.

The Reformation showed that centralisation took away responsibility from the people and made them dependent.

Today we can see all over the world that politics is returning to the order that is had before the Reformation, where people were under the control of the church. The world needs more control because the people are no longer able to carry enough responsibility. When man is no longer responsible before God and a common standard then he will only look for his own standard and is left with what would fit best for him.

We can observe more and more the lack of a common worldview. We learned from the past that when everyone does what he wants to do it ends in chaos. And then man needs more and more control.

Probably this time the control will not come from the church but from the state. Could it be that our time will lead the people to a similar situation of injustice, as dictators show us all over the world today, because we are losing a common worldview?

Geneva was never a theocratic place. The state and church were separated, but both were standing under the same law. Before the Reformation the church stood over the whole society and it led the world in the crusades and into a situation of injustice. The separation of powers between state and church made the western world strong. For the reformer it was clear that church and state should stay side by side, but both under the same worldview: the order of God.

#### **4.6.1 The Glorious Reformation in England (1688-1689)**

The Glorious Reformation is a good example of reformation in politics. King William of Orange voluntarily gave his power to the parliament, unlike later in the French Revolution where it was taken from the king by force. This revolution in England was built on the thoughts of the reformation mainly from Geneva. God's Word touched the reformer in that power have to be separated but not by rebellion. When man acts in rebellion against injustice he would not be better than the people who did wrong. The Reformation didn't destroy that which didn't work well; it renewed it.

Today England is still an institutional monarchy where the power to pass a law is with the parliament and not with the king. The main issue of reformed thinking in politics was not democracy but the separation of powers. The question was not if a nation is a democracy or a republic, the question was who had the power and whether or not the power was separated.

#### **4.6.2 Courts**

There were small courts in every district in Geneva that would take appeals. This was bottom-up ruling similar to the thinking in the Bible. Moses looked for men to judge the people, setting them over groups of 1000, of 100, and of 10. It was the beginning of the understanding that we need to have a court that is independent from the state (judicative).

The Reformation brought the necessity to have a court that is independent from the state and the church. The court stood directly under God according to the Bible, just as the state and the churches did. Paul Roberts painted a picture in the old Supreme Court of Lausanne called “the justice of the nation”. Every judge who goes into the court has to walk by this painting and is reminded of Biblical justice. The woman of justice painted on the picture points to the Bible with her sword; to the common law that decides between right and wrong.



## 4.7 Today the Bible is still the Foundation of Western Civilisation

### 4.7.1 The Red Cross (Henri Dunant)

A young banker named Henri Dunant was part of a strong Calvinist family in the middle of 19th century Geneva. He was a member of a church that met in the building that currently houses a French and English congregation and has hosted other ethnic congregations. Seeking a meeting for his business with Emperor Napoleon, Dunant arrived in Solferino, Italy. The day after he arrived there was a major and bloody battle. He was so moved by the lack of attention to the wounded that on his return to his church in Geneva he gave a report. Touched by the teaching of the Bible, a movement, led by Dunant, started in Geneva. It produced the first document of the Geneva Convention and the organization that later became the Red Cross. One man with conviction and compassion set up a network of influence that has helped millions in the past 150 years! His labours exceeded his initial vision and he became the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.



### 4.7.2 Human Rights Declaration

René Cassin (1887-1976) was the author of the Declaration of Human Rights. He received the Nobel Peace Prize and in 1948 the General Assembly of the UN in New York signed his Declaration. He wrote an article with the title “From the 10 Commandments to Human Rights”. Just like the reformers, he thought that human rights must have a deeper foundation than just humanistic thinking. He wrote that through thousands of years the moral authority of the Bible has not changed and is still relevant in our days.

*Centuries have passed. Judaism has, throughout unparalleled trials, preserved its passion for justice and its desire to contribute to the defense of the rights of men of all races and origins, along the lines of the very principle with which it was entrusted two thousand years ago. The Ten Commandments, the first Code of the essential duties of man, have suffered many an outrage in history and continue to suffer. Their moral authority remains intact<sup>4</sup>.*

### 4.7.3 Neutrality

Thanks to the reformers, Switzerland could handle the conflict between Catholic and Reformed Churches well. Switzerland didn't take part in the Thirty Years War. Through this war the whole of developed Europe was destroyed and thrown back for a hundred years.

Switzerland was not involved in the First or the Second World War. It almost never had a king or a revolution like the surrounding nations. Switzerland became very strong in its economy and politics, and became very interesting for the whole world. Today a lot of international organisations are located in Geneva. The UN is doing 80% of its work there.

The teaching of the Reformation has much to tell us today. It is the foundation of our society. When we don't understand the reformers and the Bible, we will not be able to understand Western civilisation.

#### 4.7.4 Institution of America, 1787

Thomas Jefferson became the father of the American institution. He strongly was influenced by the Puritans who brought the idea of the separation of power based on a constitution from the reformation in Geneva. It became a model for the whole world as America gained economic superiority in the world.

## 5 Reformer in Geneva without a biblical thinking

Western society is built on the Reformation, but through time the foundation of the Bible, the constitution of the Reformation, was lost. The absolute standard beyond man was lost and more and more man with his ideas became absolute.

John Locke (England, 1632-1704) demanded a separation of power built on the sovereignty of the people. In the end the power should be by the people. It was not built on the ideas of the Reformation. The reformer thought that the absolute is God represented by the Bible, but now man became absolute through holding human rights as the highest value. The absolute of the common worldview was lost and ended in a class struggle as Marx predicted.

Charles de Secondat Montesquieu (France, 1689-1755) demanded in his writing „De l'esprit des lois“(1748) the separation of power and the sovereignty of the people built on humanism, which ended in the French Revolution.

Although all harvested the fruit of the Reformation, the seed was stifled. Philosophers such as Rousseau and Voltaire brought the people more and more away from Christianity. In 1707 Pierre Fatio wanted to reform Geneva on the same secular thinking, but he was burnt at the stake. However, later Geneva also became influenced by the new philosophy as well as the rest of the western world, and turned away from the reformed thinking. They wanted to have the fruit but no longer wanted God, who was the foundation and the Giver of the fruit.

### 5.1 The Enlightenment in Geneva



In almost every village in Switzerland there is a church. It is normally the highest building and its tower points to God. The bells ring almost every hour to remind the people that there is a God. When we go into a Cathedral normally our eyes go up. Look; the architecture of the Church points to God. It always reminds the people of the sovereignty of God.

The front of the cathedral, the entrance, is in neoclassical style. It was built 250 years ago to portray the new worldview of Geneva. The Church, especially the Gothic style, always points upwards to heaven and to God. The Greek style accentuates the horizontal.

The Greeks in ancient times freed themselves from their gods. Man became free to become everything he wanted. The architectural style of the Greeks accentuates the independence from their gods, still visible today in the buildings in Athens, a style known as Hellenism. With the Enlightenment this worldview came back. The deliverance was no longer from the gods of the Greeks; it was now from the Christian God. They thought that they didn't need God anymore, and they wanted to show this through the most important building in the city.

## **5.2 Voltaire (1694-1778)**

Voltaire too lived in Geneva and printed his philosophical writings in this town. During his stay in England he saw the Glorious Revolution and wanted the same for France. However, he didn't have a Biblical understanding, and it ended in the French Revolution. "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" (equality, liberty, brotherhood) was the voice of the French Revolution, but it turned into terror. The Revolution devoured its children. They killed the king and threw out their authorities, but left the people in a vacuum. It turned into a chaos where everyone did what he thought was right. It was not possible to separate powers on a human foundation. Because the people were not able to deal with one another as the authorities were no longer there, Napoleon came into power and centralised everything for his own sake. Unity, equality and brotherhood were over and it turned in a dictatorship where everyone was controlled. After Napoleon's horrible disaster he was banished to an island and the whole of Europe had to be rebuilt in the Congress of Vienna.

## **5.3 Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)**

200 years later Rousseau grew up in Geneva, just one street away from Calvin's house. He too wanted to change society, but from a different view of reality. Rousseau did not have a Biblical worldview. He thought that man is good by nature. Environment and the bad authorities around man are what make him bad.

Rousseau's solution for society was total freedom from all authorities. Both Calvin and Rousseau wanted to solve the problems of society, but in an opposite way. Rousseau hated the idea of sin. He said that he was the new man totally free, living in nature and that he could do whatever he wanted to do. He was against any institution in society and wanted to destroy every structure or organization, especially the families.

Rousseau's ideas for a perfect society never became reality. His thoughts came from Plato and led to Napoleon and further into communism. The French Revolution and especially Napoleon wanted to bring Rousseau's ideas into reality. Up to this day he is still mentioned in a lot of books and people believe in his ideas, but it is only a philosophy or a dream that never worked out in reality. Where people tried to build a society with his worldview it turned into a disaster. It did not work because it was built on the idea that man is good. The Bible says that man is a sinner and this seems much more realistic.

## **5.4 Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a man named Vladimir Lenin appeared in Geneva. He was a man who turned the world upside down. His thinking came from Karl Marx who had proclaimed the complete emancipation of man. The dusty thinking of the Middle Ages must be removed and replaced by a new view. Marx said that until now we spoke about a better world, but now we have to do it, building a new world of socialism. A new man is born out of himself. Lenin took this word from Marx seriously and brought it into reality in Russia. He printed his revolutionary ideas in Geneva and sent them to Russia. Communism promised freedom and human rights, but the promise never became actuality. In the beginning they promised a justice system where every person had the same rights, but the reality was much different. Instead of this promise, terror and Gulags came. The Russian Revolution ended in an enormous disaster, just as the French Revolution. 66 million people were killed under the dictatorship of Lenin and Stalin because they didn't want to believe in communism and didn't want to give up their property or responsibility. The idea that the state should have all power and responsibility never worked out. It patronized man and destroyed self-responsibility and innovation.

## 6 Summary

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The Reformation was not only about the church; it affected and reformed the whole society. It was not perfect, but it brought a major change. It set the people free from hierarchical bondage to the Pope and to kings and laid a Scripture-based foundation for democracy and freedom. It turned poverty into prosperity in just one generation with an impact that is still felt in some aspects today. However, through time the western world lost more and more its foundation of Christianity and the teaching of the Bible. If the west will completely lose its heritage of the Christian faith then it will lose its Western civilisation with its freedom and wealth.

It seems impossible to build a society without a law above man; a common worldview and a God who calls man to account. Without God man will become god, and it will end in huge disaster as history tells us. Without God man ends up in a huge power game of the “survival of the fittest”. The view of the reformer is the logical explanation of how a society can exist in freedom and without chaos.

Christians are not better than other people, but they have a better system that helps man not to become corrupt. The Christians were able to build a better system out of their worldview, one that seems to fit best with reality.

## 7 Appendix

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1. Based on the German version “Reformation in Genf ,Eine ganze Stadt wird reformiert“ (<http://www.sbcw.ch/sbcw/files/Reformationstour.pdf>)
2. “From the 10 Commandments to Human Rights”, by René Cassin ([www.udhr.org/history/tencomms.htm](http://www.udhr.org/history/tencomms.htm))
3. Christianae Religionis Institutio (Institutes of the Christian Religion), by John Calvin
4. IHΣ Jota Eta Sigma is the sign for Christianity based on 2 Corinthians 3:5
5. The emblem of Geneva is similar to its flag



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