



Geneva in Orlando

by Jonathan Aitken

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM GENEVA, SWITZERLAND, to Orlando, Florida—but not if you are pioneers in classical Christian education. In 16th-century Geneva, John Calvin started a religious and educational revolution in his city's schools. Its key ingredients were Reformation theology, the sovereignty of Scripture, the teaching of Latin, and an emphasis on dialogue, dialectic, and rhetoric.

Calvin's strategic purpose was to encourage young minds to grow beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge. He wanted to produce students who could use their intellects to reason, question, and challenge their contemporary world in the cause of Christian idealism.

If you think these purposes seem old-fashioned in 21st-century America, you would be wrong—at least in Orlando, where a recently founded Geneva School is flourishing. So is a network of more than 200 classical and Christian schools in communities across the United States. The growth of these connected establishments suggests an interesting new trend in education that is proving increasingly popular with parents and is helping pupils win good grades and lucrative scholarships.

My introduction to the modern reinvention of the Geneva School took place recently in the far from uncomfortable surroundings of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Orlando. Approximately 100 of the school's supporters, donors, and parents were assembled for a teaching weekend led by the renowned Manhattan pastor Tim Keller, whose book, *The Reason for God*, has stood high on the *New York Times* list of best-

sellers. John Calvin would have approved of the weekend's biblical theme, which had the title "Trees Walking." This was taken from the account of the two-stage healing of a blind man at Bethsaida described in Mark 8:23-25: "Jesus asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people but they look like trees walking.' Jesus laid his hands on the man's eyes again. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

Tim Keller's angle on this text was the thought that "our first contact with Christ leaves us only superficially changed. We have to develop a covenant relationship with him....Unfortunately the concept of a covenant relationship has been lost in our culture. It is a blend of law and love, enduring and binding, much more so than a personal relationship."

This teaching goes deeper than many of the instant conversion experiences you hear preached about in evangelical circles. Their goal (rarely defined) is often said to be the "personal relationship with Christ" that Keller indicated is spiritually inferior to the covenant relationship he has outlined. In my own lecture to the Trees Walking seminar, on the subject of John Newton's theology, I supported Keller's thesis on the grounds that Newton never claimed his own conversion on board an apparently sinking ship to be more than "the first faint streaks of dawn in my spiritual journey." He later wrote that "the maturing of a Christian soul is not of hasty shoots like a mushroom but may be compared to the slow steady growth of an oak tree."

Growing spiritual oak trees through education is a noble endeavor that requires originality of approach from both students and teachers. I was fortunate enough to be educated at Eton College, one of England's oldest classical and Christian schools, founded by King Henry VI in 1440 on land he could see from the battlements of Windsor Castle. Like many an Etonian I chafed under what seemed to be the excessive burden of studying Latin for five years. However, in later life I have come to acknowledge at least some truth in Lord Macaulay's dictum "No man can write a decent English sentence until he has first learned to construe a Latin one." I have also come to respect the valedictory words of my Headmaster, Sir Robert Birley, to the leavers' class of 1956, "I hope you will come to realize that the main purpose of your education at Eton has been to enable you to know when the fellow opposite you is talking rot." At the time we demob-happy schoolboys laughed at what we thought was a headmaster's joke. But in retrospect I know that these were words of wisdom. For the Christian classical education provided by Eton in the 1950s and the sound biblical teaching of its daily chapel services did indeed equip its pupils with sufficient skills of reasoning, analysis, argument, and presentation to win more than a few of life's battles against the rot-talkers.

THE GENEVA SCHOOL OF ORLANDO is not yet Eton, but its teachers and donors are leading it towards the same idealistic standards of excellence. Founded in 1993, Geneva grounds its 450 pupils in the foundations of Christian doctrine and classical disciplines. Compulsory Latin is taught from the third grade. So is the trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Beginning in seventh grade, philosophy (in the form of logic) is part of the curriculum, as is theology. History, literature, music, languages, and the arts all form essential ingredients of courses built round a core of Christian ideals and values. There are many interesting angles to the teaching, including an emphasis on learning poetry and Scripture by heart at an early age. But perhaps the most central principle of Geneva is the ancient imperative of classical education: students must be given the intellectual training that will enable them to think for themselves.

"Most American education consists of teaching how to pass knowledge-based exams," says Geneva's headmaster, the Rev. Robert Ingram. "We are different here. Of course we do not neglect knowledge but

we go deeper than substance. We strive to give our students the tools with which they can succeed at reasoning, analysis, argument, and presentation. We want to give them the ability to ask questions such as

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"What is this author saying and is it true? How do I know it is true? How can I defend the truth in a rhetorical battle to persuade others by presenting arguments that are winsome, attractive, and convincing?" Headmaster Ingram also gives priority to the teaching of Christian values and aesthetics, saying, "We help our students to discover what is morally good, aesthetically beautiful, and philosophically true."

Although still only 15 years old, the Geneva School of Orlando is blazing a trail of outstanding academic results. The top ten achievers in its graduating class last year won scholarships worth over \$100,000 each to such universities as Notre Dame, Duke, and Baylor. So it's no surprise that the school is bursting at the seams with applicants and planning an expansion that will take its enrollment to 1,000 students. Thanks to a strong board of governors led by James M. Seneff, Geneva will soon be moving to a new 52-acre campus costing \$25 million. It has helped to birth and nurture 15 sister schools and is the driving force in the 200-strong Association of Classical and Christian Schools across the nation. Geneva's motto, like that of John Calvin's original school in Switzerland, is *Post Tenebras Lux* (After the darkness—light). They are appropriate words of inspiration for a Christian challenge to the substance-based secularism of so much high school education in contemporary America.

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