



# A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

by Gordon Cloke, TGS Board Member

## What will The Geneva School look like one hundred years from now?

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It is a common and valuable practice for those in positions of leadership to formulate strategic plans that shape the goals and activities of an organization for a three to five year period. Often, this planning process is shaped by a broader statement of vision or purpose, and augmented with statements of mission, objectives and action plans. The Geneva School Board, working with the Headmaster and Deans, practices and embraces these methods. But what is it that determines and shapes all these formulations in the first place, that characterizes all of our programs and activities, and which will determine whether these values persist over an extended period—say one hundred years? From an eternal perspective, the answer is the Holy Spirit and the sovereignty of God. At a human or organizational level, it is a matter of identity—a set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known as a persistent entity.

What is it, then, that uniquely identifies The Geneva School, that represents what it was established to be, and what, Lord willing, it will become? By definition, it is a school—an organization seeking to provide instruction, but in doing so it should irreducibly exhibit the following three distinct, but intertwined and interdependent themes or characteristics:

- a commitment to authentic Reformational Christianity
- a passion for classicism
- a dedication to excellence: first and foremost in education, then in life

### **Christian Commitment**

The Geneva School unashamedly embraces and asserts the truth of God's Word and its application to all areas of human life and study. Our study of God at work is not relegated to devotional interludes or marginal electives—it permeates all areas of our curriculum and provides the worldview context for everything we do. It enriches our study of literature, deepens our understanding of the flow of human history, and enhances our understanding of chemistry, physics and calculus. We understand that human achievement in any domain is only possible or fully realized when it is undertaken in light of the gospel. This stance shapes not only what we know, but also who we are and how we live. One fruit of this belief is that we expect the school to be characterized by an atmosphere of grace and civility, seeking both to serve and engage the world. We also expect all our endeavors to be submitted, in all humility and fervent prayer, to God's providence and sovereignty.

### **Christian Commitment**

The Geneva School unreservedly affirms the theology of the Protestant Reformation, sharing its name, logo motifs and motto with Geneva, Switzerland, the major geographical locus of that historical movement: Post Tenebras Lux—After Darkness, Light. The Reformers, in confronting the errors and excesses of their day and shaping their beliefs and actions in submission to scripture, rediscovered authentic, historical and biblical Christianity (what C.S. Lewis referred to as “Mere Christianity”). The distinctive Biblical doctrines that re-emerged during the Reformation represent the only solid foundation for a serious, obedient pursuit of God and an education that embraces a complete (that is, Christian) conception of truth.

Looking beyond the modern “evangelical ghetto,” we therefore foster a sense of historical connectedness, seeking to establish continuity with our forebears in

Christ. We do so not only with the events and characters of the Reformation, but with believers (saints) of every age, with whom we share the same confession—that JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!



*The historic crest of the city of Geneva, Switzerland, birthplace of the Protestant Reformation.*

## **Classical Focus**

The method of instruction used at The Geneva School is designed to embody the tradition of teaching that originally took shape during the classical period and which has emerged consistently throughout history as the pinnacle of human achievement in the realm of education. The classical approach may be defined in terms of its characteristic content, method and result.

The content of classical teaching is most often associated with the study of Greek and Roman language and culture, or more generally in an emphasis on the great books, history or liberal arts. In fact, less intuitively but just as powerfully, the classical approach extends also to mathematics, athletics, science and theology, when they are taught in a holistic and interdisciplinary manner—not artificially separating the arts and sciences, but uniting them all within a Christian worldview.

The method of classical teaching embraces the trivium—a time-proven framework for achieving educational competency using a three-stage developmental approach. First, the basic facts and techniques of a subject are mastered (grammar); then the student is encouraged to focus on applying that knowledge in analysis, debate or problem-solving (logic/dialectic)

and finally, to critique, synthesize and innovate from that knowledge in a compelling manner (rhetoric). This approach, which has emerged throughout western history in association with academic excellence, is applied to the individual student, to the study of a particular discipline, and in the overall structure of the educational program at The Geneva School. Beyond the trivium, the classical method of teaching emphasizes participatory learning that engages all the student’s faculties—a trait sometimes described as “hands-on” or “incarnational”—and, while it seeks the best possible tools and materials, intentionally avoids over-dependence on text-books or worksheets. Classical learning is a matter of discipline and study, but, crucially, it is also experiential.

The outcome of classical teaching is students of all abilities, passions and backgrounds who have an authentic understanding of the subjects they have studied and how to apply them, both in life and in the continued lifelong study for which they are both equipped and motivated. When combined with our commitment to Christian character, this is why we speak of our graduates as virtuous scholars.

## **Vision for Excellence**

The Geneva School pursues excellence in all areas of school life, knowing that whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Looking beyond temporary circumstances, we fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18), and strive for academic, moral and personal excellence in all things.

As a school we first and foremost seek excellence in the classroom. If our efforts, be they ever so diligent and well motivated, result in an education that is unremarkable, we have failed in our main purpose. Teachers and students are therefore continually spurred on to higher achievement in their academic, athletic and spiritual pursuits, so that the whole world might be amazed at what God can do with faithful men and women committed to excellence.

As an organization, we seek excellence in leadership, administration and governance. Those responsible for directing the school are called to the same high standards, in their domain, that we demand in the classroom. Only if they achieve it will the school be able to sustain its success over an extended period.

As individuals we seek excellence in life and in all things, not only in our direct participation at the school. Only if the lives of those involved at The Geneva School are transformed in this way will we achieve our broader goal of transforming culture.

We reject, therefore, apathy, mediocrity and measures that are merely relative. While celebrating academic achievement and thanking God for His good gifts, for which we feel a burden of stewardship, we also reject the worldly pitfalls of intellectual, social or financial elitism. Looking beyond even excellence, we strive for the perfection to which the body of Christ is called (Matthew 5:48), and most of all for the perfect love which scripture commends as the highest good (1 Corinthians 13:13).

## **Sine Qua Non**

Taken together, these themes represent, in summary form, the necessary and sufficient conditions for the continued existence and prosperity of The Geneva School. Without any one of them, the school will cease to be what it was established to be.

- It could not properly emphasize excellence in classicism without a context of Christian truth.
- It could not embrace God's Word and a classical approach to education without doing so with a passion for excellence.
- It could not fulfill its quest for Godly excellence while rejecting the classical methods for doing so in education.

At any given time, including today, the school does not entirely fulfill its promise in all of these areas. The pursuit of excellence and perfection is never complete. We pray, however, that it will increasingly fulfill that promise as the school progresses from its current infancy to a greater realization of these values that we affirm. Even today, the school exhibits these characteristics, providing a wonderful foretaste of what it can become, and also an enormous blessing to all those who believe in what it is striving to do, and to their children.

The lifespan of a family's participation at The Geneva School can last a decade or more. Our success in serving those families year after year, decade after decade, if achieved in recognition of this identity, will serve to ensure that The Geneva School of tomorrow, or a hundred years from now, will recognizably be The Geneva School.

## **Name, Word and Object**

In framing these characteristics, I have intentionally avoided some of our standard words for expressing them—not because they are obsolete or objectionable, but in an attempt to demonstrate that it is the ideas that are crucial, and not the words themselves, which often end up being misunderstood and misapplied until they become almost void of content.

However, words are important, and I am also anxious to reclaim and revive our cherished vocabulary, so that the ideas they represent may be clearly understood and increasingly embraced by all those who come within the orbit of The Geneva School.

In this context, one type of word is particularly prominent: names. Names serve as tokens, representing and referring to the essence of who we are: our identity. It is our desire that the name of The Geneva School be ever more defined by the identity outlined above: being and becoming what it was established to be. Only then will the school achieve its broader goal: that of transforming culture—that God's kingdom may come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Ultimately, the school affirms and celebrates the fact that our individual and collective identity is to be found in Christ alone, a name higher than all other names (Philippians 2:9). It is for that reason that we love to sing together: *Non Nobis Domine, Sed Nominis Tuo Da Gloriam*—Not to us, O LORD, but to your name give glory

### **Psalm 115:1**

Not to us, O LORD, not to us,  
but to your name give glory,  
for the sake of your steadfast love  
and your faithfulness!  
*(English Standard Version)*