

A Calvin Pilgrimage The Worship of Dead Men's Bones?

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History is filled with ironic contortions. Consider the bungling of Scottish moderns placing a life-size bronze statue of John Knox in the ambulatory of St. Giles, Edinburgh—the very church in which Knox preached against idolatry. Or consider John Calvin decrying simony when funding for his entire education had come from benefices his father had finagled for his son.

Or consider thousands of Calvinists descending on Geneva July 10, 2009, to commemorate the 500th birthday of the man who considered the medieval sacrament of pilgrimage to be one of the “faults contravening the Reformation.” Is this yet another instance of self-contradictory theological buffoonery, a quest for merit tallied by stamps in the passport?

Tempting as these conclusions are to critics, I think not. As he lay dying, Calvin insisted that his body be buried in an unmarked grave. Some believe this was Calvin trying to avoid being the object of what he termed the “fictitious worship of dead men's bones.” I'm inclined, however, to think that his dying request is yet another myth-buster; he didn't want his bones enshrined because Calvin was so taken with the glory of Christ that the veneration of John Calvin never occurred to him. And for such humble piety alone Calvin would be worthy of our perennial attention.

Sanctification by Imitation

Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, in whose arms Calvin died, wrote of him on the final page of his account of Calvin's life, “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years... I can now declare that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character, an example which is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”

Seventeen times in the New Testament we are told to imitate exceptional men as they seek to follow Christ. Calvin is a man worthy of imitation. There's no idolatry in giving double honor to men who serve faithfully, who employ their considerable gifts in devoted service to Christ and his Kingdom. Hence, a tour in commemoration of the 500th birthday of John Calvin is no superstitious medieval pilgrimage.

There's no intrinsic conferring of grace to be had by going to Geneva or, for that matter, Jerusalem. If, however, one wants to find inspiration to live a more godly, Christ-honoring life,

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to hone and employ skills to be more useful in the cause of the gospel, or if one desires to expand his appreciation of the sovereign working of God in history, using vacation dollars to follow Calvin around Europe for the days surrounding his 500th birthday could be time and money well invested.

For those cutting back on vacation spending, or who have already committed those dollars for a trip to Hawaii, join me in the next few paragraphs for an imaginary tour of some of the most important sights in the life of one of the most important Christians since St. Augustine.

Calvin in Noyon

With a squealing of rubber, your plane touches down at Charles de Gaulle Airport. Bleary-eyed from the ten-hour flight, you pick up your rental car, check the map, and head north on the A1 motorway; if traffic is not too heavy, in fifty-seven minutes you arrive in the town of Noyon where John Calvin was born July 10, 1509. Following the signs to the Cathédrale, you arrive before Calvin's birthplace. Flattened by German artillery in World War I, and rebuilt according to original drawings in 1927, it is now the Musée Jean Calvin.

Entering the half-timbered house is like stepping back to the days of the Reformation. Amidst 16th century oil paintings, you see the 1534 *Placard contre la messe*, a poster against transubstantiation. My two favorites of the collection, however, are the Olivetan Bible, translated into French by Calvin's cousin, with a forward written by Calvin, and a first edition of Calvin's incomparable *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

From there you walk to Noyon's imposing cathedral of Notre Dame, rebuilt after a great fire in 1131, later repaired after bombing took its toll on the west towers during World War I. You can't help pausing to wonder at the medieval magnificence of the flying buttresses fanning out in three broad terraces on the east end of the grand structure.

Calvin's birthplace cathedral has long been a pilgrimage destination for the faithful who care to venerate the bones of St. Eloi, the 7th century goldsmith turned bishop, a coveted medieval career path. It was here that Calvin on May 21, 1521, received his prelatial haircut by Bishop Charles Hangest. Along with his chic new tonsure, twelve-year-old Calvin was given the chaplaincy of Le Gesine and soon after the priesthood of Pont L'Eveque, a nearby village, his father's birthplace. Both of these clerical appointments carried valuable benefices which would pay for Calvin's considerable education in the years ahead.

There is much more to see in the region, including Gallo-Roman ruins, a renaissance manuscript museum, and the nearby Armistice Museum where treaties ending both world wars were signed. But on Calvin's trail, Paris beckons.

Calvin in Paris

When the Bubonic Plague swept through Noyon in 1523, fourteen-year-old Calvin was hustled off to the University of Paris, the renaissance “Metropolis of Letters.” Thanks to Napoleon, who wanted to rid the city of medieval houses and narrow streets, too easy for revolutionaries to barricade, much of Paris as Calvin knew it has been replaced by wide boulevards and broad promenades. Nevertheless, Calvin spent considerable time here, and there are several important sites to discover.

Check into a quaint hotel in the Latin Quarter then take the Metro to the Louvre, in Calvin’s day the royal palace of Francis I, monstrous persecutor of the Reformation. Strolling east along the River Seine, you encounter St. Germain l’Auxerrois, royal chapel of Francis I. Bells from this church tower signaled the slaughter of French Calvinists, August 24, 1572, the bloody St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. Walk down the Rue de Admiral de Coligny, named for Huguenot leader and Reformation martyr, and then promenade along the embankment of the Seine, recollecting its waters running red with the blood and clogged with the bodies of Calvin’s spiritual offspring, including Coligny and thousands of Huguenots. Watch closely for the narrow street called Rue Vallette in Calvin’s day, where he lived with his uncle Richard while studying at the College de la Marche.

Spend a few hours in the Louvre, one of the most extensive collections of art and antiquity in the world; all the while recollect that within its walls lived Francis I, to whom Calvin eloquently appealed in his preface to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and that from the *Louvre* he commissioned his royal spies to search and destroy Calvin and the Reformers. Further consider that within these very walls, Francis’s sister, Margaret of Valois, heard gospel preaching, wrote devotional poetry, and sang French Psalm versifications by Clement Marot, later Calvin’s poet-in-residence in Geneva.

Leaving the Louvre, cross Pont Neuf onto the Île de la Cité, and stroll several blocks to the Gothic masterpiece, Notre Dame Cathédrale. Built on the ruins of a pagan Roman temple, this church has played center stage throughout French history. On its chancel, kings and emperors were coronated; later its Christian symbols were ransacked by revolutionaries who dubbed it the Temple of Reason. Through the centuries pilgrims came in hordes to venerate its purported relics, including Christ’s crown of thorns.

It is unimaginable that Calvin, devoted as he was in his youth to “popery and superstition,” did not enter its vast nave and marvel at its vaulted splendors; and he may have even trudged the 387 steps up the north tower to gaze out over the city. Before the grand edifice Calvin undoubtedly witnessed the burning of “heretics,” young followers of *Sola Scriptura* taught by Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples, professor at the university, preacher of sovereign grace, and early translator of the French Bible from the Vulgate.

Further down river, at what is today called the Place de la Ville, Calvin, as underground pastor, witnessed the burning of one of his own parishioners, Pointent, who died giving glory to God. Across the river at the Place Maubert, now a fashionable Left Bank market, rose the smoke of Calvin’s converts. In 1557, he wrote an encouraging letter to seven who would burn September 4th at Maubert.

Young Calvin quickly was promoted to the prestigious College de Montaigu, where Erasmus had studied and where Loyola would follow him. Erasmus records that under the severity of the master of the college several gifted young men became “blind, mad, or lepers” as a result of the bad food, tedious hours, and beatings. A plaque at nearby College St. Barbe claims that Calvin studied there; either way, in the halls of the University of Paris Calvin distinguished himself and honed his intellectual skills, ones he would so ably use for the glory of Christ in his future ministry.

There is a great deal more to experience in Paris, the tombs of Voltaire and Napoleon, the Eiffel Tower, the Arch of Triumph, crepes and concerts, museums and more. Calvin was eventually forced to flee the city because men like Noel Beda, doctor of the university, were determined to “banish from France this hateful doctrine of grace.”

Fugitive at Large

In 1528, Calvin’s father ordered him to leave Paris and take up the study of law at Orleans, and from there to Bourges, where there is a breath-taking Gothic cathedral. Here Calvin likely experienced his “sudden conversion.” Under the spiritual influence of his cousin Olivetan, and his Greek professor Wolmar, the prime motive of Calvin’s existence came to be, “zeal to illustrate the glory of God.”

After the death of his father in 1533 Calvin, now conscience-stricken at abuses like simony, forfeited the income from his benefices and returned penniless to Paris. As guest of a hospitable Christian merchant at the House of the Pelican, on the Rue St. Martin, Calvin may have begun work on the *Institutes*. After contributing to a convocation address at the university, wherein his friend Nicholas Cop publicly declared Reformation truth, Calvin was a hunted man. Disguised as a vintner, Calvin fled Paris, spending the next several years on the run, assuming various names, always searching for quiet places to continue his study of the Bible.

Check your map and gas up the rental car. He appears in Angouleme, where he may have written a large part of the *Institutes*, in Poitier where it is said he first served the Lord’s Supper, both bread and wine, in the caves of St. Benoit, in Nerac where he met with venerable Lefevre, in Lyon where five young converts were later martyred for their faith; he appears in the court of Renee of Farrara, godly duchess and supporter of the Reformation, and in the court of Christian queen, Margaret of Navarre.

In 1536, he appears in Basel, the “Athens of Switzerland,” where he presented the completed first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “a masterpiece of apologetic literature,” to the printers Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lazius. With its publication, Calvin’s hopes for a quiet scholar’s life vanished. He now emerges as “the Theologian of the Reformation.”

Two years later, at the invitation of Martin Bucer, he would preach and minister to the French congregation in Strasbourg, where he met his wife, Idelette de Bure, widow of a convert of Calvin’s, whom he termed “the excellent companion of my life.”

After another stealth visit back to Paris in 1536, Calvin found his route blocked by a battle between the armies of Francis I and Charles V near Champagne; and so he took a detour, intending to stay one night in Geneva... just one night.

Calvin in Geneva

Calvin was about to get boots-on-the-ground schooling in the sovereignty of God, an object lesson in the truth, “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” Fiery Reformer, William Farel, who had in May of 1536 triumphantly debated with the papists in Geneva, was not about to let the gifted author of the *Institutes* out of his grip.

“Do you care to heed the will of God in this matter,” Farel demanded, “or your own will? If you refuse, then I denounce unto you, in the name of God Almighty. On your rest and studies shall no blessing fall, only fearful cursing and flaming indignation.” Calvin stayed. Later he took as his personal motto, “My heart I offer thee, O Lord, promptly and sincerely,” and so he did throughout many trying years of labor for the glory of Christ’s Kingdom among the “tearing wolves” of proud, prosperous Geneva.

Much of Geneva is a bustling international city with not a few obnoxious architectural experiments, but imagine climbing the cobbled streets of the old town past the Auditoire, the medieval hall where Calvin taught refugees, equipping them to return to their countries as missionaries—and for many of them—as martyrs. Founded by Calvin, the Academy, now the University of Geneva, began in this hall.

Geneva’s cathedral, Saint-Pierre, where Calvin preached many of his 4,000 sermons, fell victim to an 18th century rookie architect who decided the west entrance needed neo-Greco-Roman columns. It tempts one to wish Switzerland had entered World War II and that the architectural monstrosity had gotten what it deserves.

Divert your eyes and quickly enter the nave. Now make your way to the pulpit on the north side of the aisle and imagine lean Calvin in his black Geneva gown, carrying only his French Bible, reverently mounting those same steps. Imagine the thrill of listeners, hearing the life-giving Word as their pastor expounded the sacred text—wonder of wonders—in their own language.

Put yourself in the place of gospel-starved Genevans and refugees hearing Calvin teach the Word of God. Of this high calling, he wrote, “No man is fit to be a teacher in the church save only he who...submits himself... [to] be a fellow-disciple with other men.” Calvin preached doctrine but never as an end in itself. “Doctrine without zeal is either like a sword in the hand of a madman, or... else it serves for vain and wicked boasting.”

Further imagine attending a service and hearing French Psalmody echoing off the stone vaulting as it did in Calvin’s day. Imagine his music director, Louis Bourgeois, setting Calvin’s Psalm versifications to enduring melodies such as *Old Hundredth* and *Rendez a Dieu*. Consider the great debt all Christians owe to Calvin for recovering congregational singing in worship.

Little wonder John Knox called Calvin's Geneva "the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles."

Continue down the aisle of Saint-Pierre and stand at the chancel where slight, unarmed Calvin barred sword-wielding libertine, Philibert Berthelier, from the Supper. "These arms you may lop off... my blood is yours... But you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God."

Take a day trip to charming Lausanne, winding past cliff-hanging vineyards and lakefront Chateau de Chillon. Consecrated in 1275, Lausanne's cathedral, a gem of Gothic architecture, hosted a theological debate, October 2, 1536. Though often urged by Farel, Calvin said nothing for three days. Then Catholic apologists taunted the Reformers for presumed ignorance of the early Church Fathers. Against an army of papal apologists, twenty-eight-year-old Calvin rose and delivered a lengthy defense, reciting copiously and entirely by memory from Augustine and the Church Fathers, proving that transubstantiation was a corrupt innovation. "But why do I seek proofs from men?" said Calvin. "The Scripture alone is sufficient."

When Calvin had finished, imagine one of the most eloquent defenders of Rome stand to his feet, denounce his errors, and apologize to all those he had led astray. "I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and his pure doctrine alone!" Revival spread throughout the city where Theodore Beza would gain ministerial experience for carrying on the work in Geneva after Calvin's death.

Back in Geneva, Calvin was banished by libertines who cared nothing for the Bible and the glory of Christ. After three delightful years in Strasbourg, where he married Idelette, "the best friend of my life," Calvin was persuaded to write a response to a letter by Cardinal Sadolet attempting to woo Geneva back to Rome. Calvin's reply was such a persuasive apology for Reformed Christianity that the Cardinal withdrew without a word. Luther said of Calvin's letter, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men."

Geneva wanted Calvin back. "Rather would I submit to death," he wrote, "a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over." Again urged by Farel, Calvin dutifully returned to Geneva, climbing his pulpit and recommencing his exposition at precisely the text he had left off three years before. In the next twenty-three years under Calvin's ministry people hungry for the freedom of the gospel flocked to the city. Known throughout Europe as a haven for women and the family, Geneva's population doubled.

After spending an hour at the Reformation Wall, built into the old wall of the city on Calvin's 400th birthday, visit the International Museum of the Reformation. The old museum occupied a musty back room half given to memorabilia of Calvin and half, absurdly, to Jean Jacques Rousseau. Arguably, that has changed. Connected by a subterranean passageway to the archaeological digs under Saint-Pierre, the award-winning museum appears to be an elaborate commemoration of Calvin. Discover first-edition books, manuscripts, and artifacts arranged to trace the history of the Reformation. Alongside Calvin's chair and other personal effects, you will experience interactive exhibits like the one on the Geneva Psalter, 1551.

When you're scratching your head at the syncretistic spin of the museum, as if the sum of Calvin's teaching was theological tolerance, remember that the building you are in sits directly on the site where the city Council of Geneva, in 1536, voted to embrace the monergistic truth of *Sola Scriptura*. It will reassure you.

Pause at Champel Hill, near the county hospital, at the expiatory monument erected on the 350th anniversary of the burning of Michael Servetus. Though anti-Trinitarian Servetus was already sought by Rome for heresy, and though Calvin pled before City Council for a lesser sentence, and though universities and monarchs all over Europe burned thousands of Protestants; nevertheless, critics are quick to vilify Calvin for the single burning of pantheist-leaning Servetus.

Only a short walk from Saint-Pierre is Calvin's home where he died, May 27, 1564. Near death, he dictated these words, "I confess to live and die in this faith which God has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than his predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded."

Salvation is a gift, Calvin taught, that comes entirely by grace alone, so there is no grace to be gained by the "fictitious worship of dead men's bones." Thanks to Calvin's humility and foresight, where his bones lay remains a mystery, making them rather difficult to worship. Theodore Beza was right about Calvin: in him "all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character." But, alas, most have found it easier to slander him than to imitate him.

"How comes it," Calvin wrote in his *Commentary on Colossians*, "that we are 'carried about with so many strange doctrines'?" A theologically shifty age must heed his answer: "Because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us."

No one has ever gained an ounce of grace on a pilgrimage venerating dead men's bones. But all who want to grow in grace and perceive "the excellence of Christ" would do well to imitate Calvin's zeal for the glory of God. Christians who do will find "stronger hope and sure" and with sturdier faith will "boldly conquer and endure."