

John Calvin



*An Admonition showing,
the Advantages which
Christendom might derive
from an Inventory of Relics*

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An Inventory of Relics by John Calvin

ADMONITION,

IN WHICH IT IS SHOWN HOW ADVANTAGEOUS IT WOULD BE FOR CHRISTENDOM THAT THE BODIES AND RELICS OF SAINTS WERE REDUCED TO A KIND OF INVENTORY, INCLUDING THOSE WHICH ARE SAID TO EXIST, AS WELL IN ITALY AS IN FRANCE, GERMANY, SPAIN, AND OTHER COUNTRIES.

AUGUSTINE, in his work, entitled, *On the Labor of Monks*, complaining of certain itinerant impostors, who, as early as his day, plied a vile and sordid traffic, by carrying the relics of martyrs about from place to place, adds, "If; indeed, they are relics of martyrs." By this expression, he intimates the prevalence, even in his day, of abuses and impostures, by which the ignorant populace were cheated into the belief, that bones gathered here and there were those of saints. While the origin of the imposture is thus ancient, there cannot be a doubt that in the long period which has since elapsed, it has exceedingly increased, considering, especially, that the world has since been strangely corrupted, and has never ceased to become worse, till it has reached the extreme wherein we now behold it. But the first abuse, and, as it were, beginning of the evil, was, that when Christ ought to have been sought in his Word, sacraments, and spiritual influences, the world, after its wont, clung to his garments, vests, and swaddling-clothes; and thus overlooking the principal matter, followed only its accessory. The same course was pursued in regard to apostles, martyrs, and other saints. For when the duty was to

meditate diligently on their lives, and engage in imitating them, men made it their whole study to contemplate and lay up, as it were in a treasury, their bones, shirts, girdles, caps, and similar trifles.

I am not unaware that in this there is a semblance of pious zeal, the allegation being, that the relics of Christ are kept on account of the reverence which is felt for himself, and in order that the remembrance of him may take a firmer hold of the mind. And the same thing is alleged with regard to the saints. But attention should be paid to what Paul says, viz., that all divine worship of man's devising, having no better and surer foundation than his own opinion, be its semblance of wisdom what it may, is mere vanity and folly. Besides, any advantage, supposed to be derived from it, ought to be contrasted with the danger. In this way it would be discovered, that the possession of such relics was of little use, or was altogether superfluous and frivolous, whereas, on the other hand, it was most difficult, or rather impossible, that men should not thereby degenerate into idolatry. For they cannot look upon them, or handle them, without veneration; and there being no limit to this, the honour due to Christ is forthwith paid to them. In short, a longing for relics is never free from superstition, nay, what is worse, it is the parent of idolatry, with which it is very generally conjoined.

All admit, without dispute, that God carried away the body of Moses from human sight, lest the Jewish nation should fall into the abuse of worshipping it. What was done in the case of one ought to be extended to all, since the reason equally applies. But not to speak of saints, let us see

what Paul says of Christ himself. He declares, that after the resurrection of Christ he knew him no more after the flesh, intimating by these words, that every thing carnal which belonged to Christ should be consigned to oblivion and discarded, in order that we may make it our whole study and endeavor to seek and possess him in spirit. Now, therefore, when men talk of it as a grand thing to possess some memorial of Christ and his saints, what else is it than to seek an empty cloak with which to hide some foolish desire that has no foundation in reason? But even should there seem to be a sufficient reason for it, yet, seeing it is so clearly repugnant to the mind of the Holy Spirit, as declared by the mouth of Paul, what more do we require?

But it is not at all necessary to enter into a long discussion of the point, whether or not it is a good thing to have relics merely for preservation, and not for worship for, as we have said, experience teaches that the one is never separated from the other. Ambrose, indeed, speaking of Helena, (the mother of Constantine,) who had at great labor and expense procured the cross of our Lord, says, that she did not adore the wood, but only the Lord, who had hung upon it. But it is most rare for persons to be at all devoted to relics, without being also polluted by some degree of superstition. I admit that they do not, at the very outset, break out into open idolatry, but that gradually, from one fallacy to another, they move along their downward path, until they at last rush headlong. Indeed, people, calling themselves Christian, have gone to such lengths as to exhibit the madness of idolatry in a degree equal to that of the heathen of old. For they have prostrated themselves,