

The Burning of Michael Servetus (1511-1553)

Servetus used to bring discredit to the Reformation

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There has been a good deal of controversy over the burning of Servetus in the Christian press recently and it appears that those Christians who would value laws against blasphemy are becoming a declining percentage of the Christian public. Indeed, we are living in times where in formerly Christian Europe one can misuse God's Name in films, television, radio, newspapers and private speech but woe betide the person who is heard to mock and misuse the name of Mohamed! Scripture teaches that laws cannot fit a Christian out for his citizenship in Heaven, but the Scriptures also teach that laws are nevertheless the basic mechanism ruling secular conduct and civilised life. The office of a lawmaker is a God-appointed office (Rom. 13) for the organisation and administration of God's creatures. The brutal execution of the Anti-Trinitarian and Anabaptist Michael Servetus for blasphemy has been traditional used by Rome and a number of anti-Reformed churches, to denigrate the entire Reformation movement. In particular, Calvin has been universally branded as the inquisitorial tyrant of tyrants who paved the way for a dubious Reformation in deeds and doctrines by burning Servetus to death. This is odd criticism coming from the papists as they had condemned Servetus to death themselves before Geneva but Servetus escaped from their hands. When such criticism comes from Arminian churches, it merely displays a lack of knowledge concerning the secular laws of the 16th century and the events leading to Servetus' execution. As Heinrich Bullinger, Calvin's close friend and mentor, took a much stronger line against Servetus than Calvin and was in a more authoritative position to send Servetus to the scaffold, it is necessary to look more carefully into this matter, allowing history to speak for itself.

BACKGROUND TO THE SERVETUS AFFAIR

Servetus had fled from his home country Spain as a young man to avoid persecution. He had hoped to settle down in Basle where he published his Arian work *The Error of the Trinity* in 1531, arguing that the doctrine was un-Biblical and a dangerous error, never taught by the Apostles and the Church Fathers. Oecolampadius, the Superintendent of the Basle Church, immediately accused Servetus of heresy, calling his book, 'blasphemous and impious' and had him banned from the city. Shortly afterwards, Servetus began to correspond with the young Calvin, a fact that was later

used as evidence against Calvin when accused of Arianism by Bern and Basle. When Calvin refused to accept the Athanasian Creed as binding on the Church, this suspicion grew. Pierre Caroli and Myconius remained adamant in claiming that Calvin was an Arian. Bern, who had driven out the Roman Catholic bishop-lords and Savoyan troops from Geneva, now controlled the city and resisted Calvin's work there for theological and political reasons until the later 1550s.

Servetus now moved from country to country, greatly restricted in his movements by his Roman Catholic and Reformed enemies. As he was a qualified doctor, he practiced medicine under the pseudonym of Villanovanus or de Villaneuve and became famous as a scientist of note. It was Servetus who first discovered the reasons for the circulation of blood. Whilst in Vienna, Servetus was betrayed to the papist authorities, imprisoned and sentenced to death by burning. According to Johannes Friedrich Franz, it was John Calvin who disclosed Servetus' whereabouts to the Roman Catholics.¹ This would be one factor explaining Servetus' extreme hatred of Calvin; a hatred which was reciprocated. Another was that Servetus had striven to discredit Calvin in particular and Christianity in general in his *De Christianismi Restitutio* (Christianity Reconstructed). In this work, Servetus replaced traditional Christianity by a Neo-Platonist form of pantheism, doing away with the Biblical doctrine of sin and basing his ethics on pre-Christian paganism. This work finally caused the papists to condemn Servetus to be burnt. Even in the papist prison in Vienna, however, Servetus denounced Calvin in the strongest terms, calling him a dealer in magic and a sycophant. He even demanded that the Genevan Senate should put Calvin to death. Servetus managed to escape from prison and was invited to Geneva by very influential citizens such as the Perrins and Bertheliers who were former supporters of Calvin during his supposed Arian period but had now transferred their allegiance to Servetus whom they wished to set him up in Geneva in Calvin's stead.

Geneva's attitude to heretics and blasphemers had always been severe before ever Calvin had any authority whatsoever in the city. Indeed, the party responsible for banishing Calvin from Geneva in 1538 did not hesitate to torture and behead those who left the paths of their church. According to the city records, however, there seems to have been no set punishments for particular 'crimes' as one blasphemer was only given a jail sentence on 4th June, 1539 and people caught dancing on the Sabbath were merely let off with a warning on 20 February, 1539.² Furthermore, there was not a country or state in Europe at the time in which the denial of the Trinity and blasphemy were not capital crimes. German Lutheran Melancthon, for instance, otherwise noted for his tolerance, urged the Swiss not to show any leniency whatsoever regarding Servetus who must be put to death. The English Reformers and martyrs condemned Servetus' errors, going into great detail in analysing and refuting them. Severe laws, it must be remembered, against blasphemy were enforced in the English-speaking world until modern times. However, the major blame given to Calvin as an individual for the burning of Servetus has no historical

backing whatsoever. The facts prove that Calvin had neither the power, nor the opportunity, nor the desire to burn Servetus. The Geneva magistrates had initially asked Calvin to give his opinion of Servetus because they were under great pressure from Bern and Basel to undertake action against the blasphemer. Calvin replied mildly that he had little hope of bringing Servetus to his senses and that he needed to learn humility. This was hardly a view which could force a court to condemn anyone to death.

CALVIN WAS IGNORED IN THE SERVETUS TRIAL

When one reads the eulogies concerning Calvin in standard Reformed works such as William Cunningham's *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* one gains the impression that Calvin's 'commanding influence' was so great that the Genevan church and secular authorities believed that he was the greatest Christian and the most influential hero since New Testament Times. Such works invariably give the impression that all were at Calvin's beck and call in Geneva, save for either ne'er-dowells or papists.³ It is thus commonly thought in certain 'Reformed' circles that Calvin had full control over the Geneva magistrates and could influence their legislation. This was by no means the case. Calvin was not even a citizen of Geneva at the time and was very far from being supported unanimously by either the Council or the Church. Indeed, he was constantly in danger of being re-expelled from Geneva for similar reasons to those leading to his expulsion in 1538. On several occasions between 1541 and 1553, he had thought of fleeing from the city because of his own lack of acceptance amongst his fellow ministers and the Genevan Council. Both the Senate and opposition wanted more state and less church but Calvin wanted more church and less state and campaigned for a church which would take over many responsibilities formerly held by the magistrates. During the period of Servetus' influence in Geneva, Calvin was again threatened with expulsion as we know from his correspondence with Bullinger who begged him to remain firm and keep up his witness in spite of the anti-Calvin riots in the city. Instead of protecting Calvin, the Senate forbade the pro-Calvin French to carry weapons. Such happenings caused August Lang to write in his *Zwingli und Calvin* "The years 1552 and 1553 were the most bitter and saddening in Calvin's turbulent life. He experienced disparagement and even contempt."⁴ On hearing of Servetus' criticisms of Calvin and the city authorities suspicion of him, Bullinger assured Calvin of his support, remarking that Servetus was no common heretic but a dangerous deceiver of men who was beyond correction and the Geneva magistrates ought to deal with him under the full power of their laws.

Bullinger also told Calvin that the Zürich Senate believed that Geneva should "put a stop to this pestilence", that is, put Servetus on trial and pronounce the death penalty.⁵ It is obvious from the context that Bullinger was in full agreement with his Senate which is not surprising as they had sought and followed his advice. When Calvin told Bullinger that he was seriously considering abandoning Geneva, whatever the magistrates decided, Bullinger quoted Acts 18:9-10 to him "Be not afraid, but speak,

and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee: for I have much people in the city." Bullinger then begged Calvin not to give up the good work he had begun at Geneva. It is, however, at this moment of weakness on Calvin's part, and at a time when he was in as much danger as Servetus of reaping the anger of the magistrates, that many would have us believe that Calvin ruled Geneva!

After fleeing from Vienna and spending some time in Italy, Servetus, thinking that he would be safe in Geneva because of the anti-Calvin situation, sought asylum there. On 13 August, 1553, Servetus was recognised in Geneva by several citizens who applied for his arrest. Actually, thinking himself secure, Servetus had sat in the congregation of Magdalena Church where Calvin was scheduled to preach! He was quickly brought before the court but the magistrates became nervous because of the strong pro-Servetus lobby. Furthermore, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Rigot was a member of the opposition party and an avowed opponent of Calvin. Calvin's opinions were of no interest to the court but the majority also refused to be put under pressure by the influential minority who supported Servetus. Not daring to judge Servetus alone, the Genevan magistrates gave up their responsibility as an independent court and told Servetus that they would hand him over to the Roman Catholic authorities who had already condemned him to death by burning. Servetus begged in tears to remain in Geneva. Then the Geneva Senate suggested appealing to their German-Swiss neighbours and protectors, promising they would abide by their decision. Servetus and his defenders agreed at once. Calvin protested against this move but the Senate ignored him completely. He thus wrote to Bullinger on September 7, 1553:

"Our Council will, on an early day, send the opinions of Servetus to your city, to obtain your judgment regarding them. Indeed, they cause you this trouble, despite our remonstrances, but they have reached such a pitch of folly and madness, that they regard with suspicion whatever we say to them. So much so, that were I to allege that it is clear at mid-day, they would forthwith begin to doubt of it."

PROTESTANT SWITZERLAND UNANIMOUS IN DEMANDING THE DEATH PENALTY FOR SERVETUS

Basel told Geneva that if Servetus did not repent, they should use the powers that God has given them to rid the world of such a danger to the Church. Bern told Geneva to eradicate the plague which had settled down amongst them and burn Servetus at the stake. Bullinger's Zürich reply was, "No severity is too great to punish this outrage". The other cantons gave similar judgements. Bullinger wrote to Theodore Beza privately on 30 August, 1553 saying, "But what is your most honourable senate of Geneva going to do with that blasphemous wretch Servetus? If they are wise, and do their duty, they will put him to death, that all the world may perceive that Geneva desires the glory of Christ to be maintained inviolate."⁶ It must be noted here that Bullinger did not seek the death penalty for Servetus as a

heretic but as a blasphemer of God and one who wished to destroy the statehood and democracy that the Swiss people loved. He believed Servetus was not only a plague to the churches but his system aimed at the total overthrow of civilized society. On 26 October, 1553, the Geneva court sentenced Servetus to death by burning. Calvin pleaded that the sentence should be changed to death by beheading, which was thought more merciful. But nobody at this time in the Senate took any notice of Calvin. In order to hinder opposition from growing, the execution was fixed for the following day. William Farel led Servetus to the scaffold and the convicted man prayed for God's forgiveness for sins which he had committed in ignorance and for God's mercy on his enemies. One might well comment here that justice had been turned into injustice but we can scarcely censure our Reformers for being men of their day. Furthermore, had Servetus won his battle against Calvin, as he almost did, Calvin would have certainly taken Servetus place on the scaffold. We would then have not known the final, definitive version of the Institutes, nor would we have been able to read very many of his commentaries choice letters and we would have seen Calvin cut off before his days of eminence at Geneva had begun.

To return to Bullinger's views on Servetus. The Swiss superintendent, whose friendship with Calvin was unshakeable, could not help telling his Geneva friend that he had made a mess of things and had not spoken up against Servetus when he should have done. Smarting under criticism from all sides, Calvin wrote his very personal Defence against Servetus, after Servetus' execution, which was published in February 1554. This work angered those who knew Calvin had been forced to take a back seat during the trial. They felt that Calvin was using his book in order to preen his own feathers and rise in public opinion as if he were the real giant-slayer. It is this work which has persuaded many that Calvin was the key figure behind Servetus' burning. With hindsight, it would have been better for Calvin to have maintained a 'low profile' as it appeared to many that he was merely showing everybody that he could no longer be placed under suspicion concerning Servetus' anti-Trinitarian views. However, even the staunchest Calvinist today will readily confess that Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity is 'obscure and unilluminating' as a recent booklet from the pen of R. T. Beckwith entitled *The Calvinist Doctrine of the Trinity* points out. Dr Beckwith also shows that in striving to defend and explain Calvin's speculative Trinitarianism, Professor Paul Helm in his London Theological Seminary lecture of February 12, 2001 entitled *Cautious Trinitarianism* ran a great risk of falling into Sabellianism. Be that as it may, no sooner was Servetus turned into ashes than new accusations arose claiming that Calvin's view of God was sub-Christian. Not only Hieronymus Bolsec (died 1585) and Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563) campaigned strongly against Calvin's view of the Godhead but the Frenchman's closest friend Bullinger had to reprove him for neglecting the Person of Christ in his fatalistic formulations of God's sovereignty in election and predestination.

Calvin also annoyed Bullinger greatly by quoting a private letter from his Swiss friend in the book without seeking his permission first. Bullinger told

Calvin that he feared that his book would make little impact because of its brevity and obscurity and the weightiness of the subject. He also told Calvin that his style was too perplexing, and added, "I know that you will kindly take this freedom of mine; for I love you from my heart." Calvin replied to Bullinger in April, 1554 saying:

" In my little treatise, I have been under a constant apprehension lest my brevity should occasion some obscurity. This, however, I have not been able to guard against, nay with deliberate intention and induced by other reasons, I have not even sought to guard against it. For what I had not only principally but I may say singly proposed to myself, was to make manifest the detestable impiety of Servetus. But an eloquent treatise on the matters in question would have seemed a feat of cunning, and by the pomp of its style, not to refute tenets so impious. In my style, I do not perceive that stateliness which you speak of, on the contrary, I made it my endeavour, so far as it was possible, to give, even to the unlettered reader, a clear notion of the perplexing sophisms of Servetus, without any troublesome deduction or laboured explication. However, it does not escape me that though I am concise in all my writings, in this one I have been more than usually succinct. But let it only appear that with sincere faith and upright zeal, I have been the advocate of sound doctrine, and this single consideration will have more weight with me than that I should repent of the work I have undertaken. You yourself, from your affection towards me, and the natural candour and equity of your temper, judge with indulgence. Others animadvert on me with greater harshness, even a master of cruelty and atrocity - that I now mangle with my pen the dead man who perished by my hands. There are also some not malevolently disposed, who could wish that I had never touched on the question of the punishment of heretics. For they say that all the others, in order to avoid odium, have expressly held their tongues. But it is well that I have you for the partner of my fault, if fault indeed there is, since you were my prompter and exhorter. Look then that you get yourself ready for the contest."⁸

THE SWISS-GERMAN PROTESTANT CANTONS CARRY THE FINAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR SERVETUS' DEATH AT THE STAKE

It is thus obvious that the Swiss-German Protestant cantons, with Bullinger to the fore, were unanimous in condemning Servetus for his blasphemy and godless religion. On the other hand, Geneva showed the most uncertainty as how to proceed. This was because Calvin's position was not shared by any influential group in either the council or the Church. There was not that unity of mind in the Genevan Church and state that flourished in Bern, Basle and especially Zürich. Of the Reformers, Calvin was not the most vigorous in condemning Servetus, possibly because he was in no position to say much in the city about him at all. Indeed, Bullinger sat far more firmly in the Zürich saddle than ever Calvin sat on his Genevan counterpart. He was also most likely able to view the matter more objectively, not being directly and personally involved in the controversy as was Calvin. If any one man can be given the responsibility for Servetus

death, it must be Bullinger who strongly influenced the other cantons in reaching a decision. Thus, the idea that it was Calvin's iron rule of the Geneva Senate which forced them to burn Servetus, a myth both critics of the Reformation and some mis-informed Reformed men themselves love to affirm, is without any historical backing whatsoever. Old prejudices die hard and though, for instance, August Land says that Calvin's influence in Geneva at this time was the lowest that it had ever been, and it had had many ups and downs, he still gives Calvin full responsibility for Servetus' burning. He accuses Calvin of not being man enough to confess that he was behind Servetus' arrest and execution but he brings no evidence whatsoever to support his theory.⁹ One thing is, however, certain. After Servetus' execution, Calvin's star began once again to ascend in Geneva. Now most of the partisan Genevans who had opposed French influence had been driven from the city, being replaced by thousands of French Protestant refugees. Along with these outcasts, the city at last gave Calvin full citizenship and voting rights. Bern, however, waited until 1564, the year of Calvin's death before persuading the Savoy to allow Geneva and the Vaud to become part of the Swiss Confederacy or Eidgenossenschaft.

- i. Merkwürdige Züge aus dem Leben des Zürcherischen Antistes Heinrich Bullinger , pp. iii-iv.
- ii. See lists produced by William, G. Naphy in his Calvin's Letters: Reflections on their Usefulness in Studying Genevan History.
- iii. See especially his chapter 'John Calvin'.
- iv. Bielefeld und Leipzig, 1913, p. 127.
- v. Original Letters , Vol. II., p. 742.
- vi. Ibid, Vol. II, pp. 741-42.
- vii. Ibid, Vol. II, pp.743-47. See also Calvin's letter to Bullinger dated 30 th December, 1553 in which Calvin tells Bullinger of his anti-Servetus work.
- viii. Calvinism in Europe 1540-1610, p. 39.
- ix. Zwingli und Calvin , pp. 130-131.

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