

Calvin and Servetus - The Facts

In recent years I have seen a renewed attack on the Reformer, Calvin. It is said that he burned alive a man called Servetus. Some authors emotionally used this to attack what they understand to be the evils of 'Calvinism'. Even a glance at the writings of Servetus himself will put the story into its proper perspective. But sadly there is a growing number of Christians ill informed on this history and too willing to be emotive rather than scholarly.

Michael Servetus was born at Villanueva, in 1509. After a liberal education, he studied medicine. In 1530 he published a book *'On the Errors of the Trinity'*. He said the doctrine of the Trinity was *'a three-headed Cerberus, a dream of Augustine, and an invention of the devil'*. He denied the equality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with the father and thus taught 'Arianism'. (1) His trial as a 'heretic' was eventually based on his book *'Restitutio Christianismi'*. Servetus sent the draft manuscript to Calvin for his comments and correspondence occurred between the two men between 1546 to 1548. Calvin stated: *'When he was at Lyons he sent me three questions to answer. He thought to entrap me. That my answer did not satisfy him I am not surprised'*. Calvin wrote to Servetus: *'I neither hate you nor despise you; nor do I wish to persecute you; but I would be as hard as iron when I behold you insulting sound doctrine with so great audacity'*.

A Frenchman at Lyons named William Trie had a Roman Catholic relative named Arneys. After the publication of the above book by Servetus, Trie wrote to his friend Arneys a letter stating it was hypocrisy for Protestants who believed in Christ to be burned by Roman Catholics, yet Servetus be permitted to live to publish his heresy. Arneys then placed this letter before the Roman Catholic Inquisition at Lyons. Immediately, Roman Catholic Cardinal Tournon arrested and imprisoned Servetus, who was living under an assumed name. But soon after, Servetus escaped. A 'trial' of Servetus was then conducted in his absence. On June 17th, 1552, he was sentenced by the Roman Catholic Inquisition *'to be burned alive, at a slow fire, till his body be reduced to a cinder'*. An effigy of him was burned with five bales of his books.

In July, Servetus suddenly showed himself in Geneva, attending services in Calvin's church. He was arrested, not by Calvin's church, but *by the Council of Geneva*. This Council was at this time *opposed to Calvin*. Calvin did not hold any official power outside the Church during this time in Geneva. The government of the church in Geneva was Presbyterian with a pastor and a board of elders. But the government of the church was not the government of the city, which was called 'the Council'. The harshest penalty the church could impose was excommunication and that not without the prior approval of the Council. It was only the Council who could impose the maximum death sentence. Even that decision could be appealed by another Council called 'The Council of Two Hundred', consisting of two hundred citizens of Geneva. Calvin himself was not a citizen of Geneva until late in his life and thus was disqualified from voting, holding public office, or even serving on the Councils.

The trial was lengthy, exhaustive and in harmony with the requirements of law in that era. Calvin was called as a witness and drew up thirty eight points of error. During the trial, Servetus hurled insults at Calvin. Two further examinations took place. Calvin, although determined to prove Servetus a 'heretic', most of all desired a retraction. After further examinations, the articles with the replies of Servetus attached, were sent to the churches of Zurich, Berne, Basle, and Schaffhausen, asking for their comments.

The Roman Catholics at Lyons requested extradition, but Servetus pleaded to stay in Geneva and protested that he would accept the judgment of the Geneva Council. He was aware the Council was intensely opposed to Calvin and as well he hoped for favour with the liberals in the Council.

The 'Lesser Council' were unanimously in favour of the death penalty as was the majority of the 'Great Council'. All the Reformers who were consulted agreed with the sentence pronounced. The sentence of death by fire was given on October 26th. Calvin did not vote on this council; he disagreed with the sentence; and he pleaded for a more lenient one. He interceded strongly with the judges, but in vain. Both Calvin and his friend, Farel, sat and prayed with and expressed sympathy to Servetus. Both men pleaded with the Council for a different mode of death, but still to no avail.

Servetus was burned on October 27, 1553. Besides the facts that show Calvin was not responsible for the death of Servetus, there are other factors that must be taken into account. For many years Calvin had strived to bring the church back to the Bible and thus had fought false teaching and Roman Catholic errors. Heresy was serious business in those days and was the same as what today we see as serious crime. This sad history of Servetus must be judged according to its laws at that time, whether we agree with them or not, (I do not agree with killing heretics, nor with everything Calvin wrote). Servetus was guilty of blasphemy which, unlike our day, in that era was punished by death.

Some writers also blame Calvin for other deaths. The numbers (up to 40) are sometimes greatly exaggerated. Calvin himself wrote of 23 executions. (2) Some writers claim these were killed for witchcraft, but what is often not stated is what Calvin himself wrote about these - that in addition to their witchcraft, they spread the plague. In a letter to Myconius of Basel (March 27, 1545), Calvin described such malicious acts: '*A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered, who, for the space of three years, had spread the plague through the city by what mischievous device I know not. After fifteen women have been burnt, some men have even been punished more severely, some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners - the conspirators do not cease, notwithstanding, to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment...*' Other executions mentioned are for various crimes such as sedition, murder and adultery. It is of interest to remember that such death executions are seen in the Old Testament as just and commanded by God. It is true that Calvin believed it was right for dangerous heretics to be put to death. But Servetus also believed this! While today we may differ with both of them, it must be kept in context that the era and the laws of that day were accepting that heresy was indeed a very serious crime.

The facts of history show clearly that Calvin played no official part in the execution of Servetus and indeed was opposed to the burning. May the record be set straight.

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(1) For a sampling of Servetus's actual views, see Lewis W. Spitz, ed. '*The Protestant Reformation: Major Documents*' (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), P.102-5. Correspondence relative to his trial is reproduced in Clyde Manschreck, ed., '*A History of Christianity*' (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), P.96-99.

(2) A Biography, by Bernard Cottret.

Sources that look at both sides of this issue: Peace and Truth, 2003:3 www.sgu.org.uk; http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/8_ch13.htm; http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/8_ch16.htm;