

The One-God Controversy

A Series of Essays Investigating the Scriptural Understanding of the First Commandment

Burn the Heretic (Part 2)

Michael Servetus was on the run, wanted by the Spanish Inquisition for heresy and, more recently, by John Calvin for the same charge. The brilliant theologian and medical doctor had written books calling for the Catholic Church and the new Protestant movement to return to the scriptural beliefs and practices of the primitive church. He contended that, since the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), the church had fallen into paganism with such unscriptural doctrines as the Trinity and infant baptism.

Chased by the Spanish Inquisition, he fled from his native Spain to France, where he acquired an alias, went to university and established a new profession as a medical doctor.

His abiding love, however, remained the Scriptures. He used his alias in initiating a spirited correspondence with the great reformer John Calvin, a Frenchman who had fled the Catholic French Inquisition and taken up residence in Geneva. Their back-and-forth dialogue by mail continued for many years.

Calvin, like Luther, is one of the Protestant Reformation's larger-than-life heroes. His modern legacy includes the Presbyterian Church. He was an intellectual giant, akin to his Catholic counterpart, Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. Ironically, in their younger days, Servetus, Calvin and Loyola attended the University of Paris at exactly the same time, although they traveled in far different circles, and Servetus did not use his real name.

At one point Servetus sent Calvin a detailed critique of *The Institutes of Christianity*, Calvin's magisterial theological work. Clearly, Calvin had met his intellectual match and chafed over the challenge to his doctrine. Calvin did not brook criticism patiently. Servetus had also sent him his own work, the 800-page *The Restoration of Christianity*, inviting Calvin to refute it.

Later, Calvin was informed that his critical correspondent was none other than the great scholar and theologian—and heretic—Michael Servetus. He quickly notified the French Inquisition (which he had previously labeled instruments of Satan and before which he had fled to Geneva), who arrested and imprisoned Servetus. But Servetus escaped again and now headed to the Kingdom of Naples, where he learned he might find

protection and continue his writing.

But Servetus made the big mistake of traveling through Geneva on his way to Naples. Geneva was John Calvin's city. His foes called him the Protestant Pope, for he ruled with an iron hand. As chance would have it, he arrived on the eve of the "Sabbath" (Sunday), when there would be no boats crossing the lake to Zurich. Desiring to be inconspicuous, and since church attendance was mandatory, on the 13th of August in 1553 he attended the Magdeleine church.

Of all the churches in Geneva he chanced to pick the one where Calvin was preaching. Was it accidental or was it on purpose? Did he want to actually see in person the man he had so actively debated in letters? Perhaps he believed he might even be welcomed by his protagonist.

He wasn't. Calvin had him arrested and thrown in prison. The arrest, of course, was illegal, since Servetus was neither a citizen of Geneva, nor had he committed any crime there. But Calvin was calling the shots.

Local law required a formal charge to be presented within twenty-four hours of arrest. In order to meet the deadline, Calvin worked through the night drawing up a list of thirty-nine charges. The list ranged from accusations of publishing heretical literature attacking the Trinity, infant baptism, predesti-

count of the Servetus case, Marian Hillar recounts some facts about Calvin ("The Case of Michael Servetus: The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience," *Texts and Studies in Religion*, Vol. 74, Edwin Mellen Press, 1997, p. 288):

One burgher smiled while attending a baptism: three days' imprisonment. Another tired out on a hot summer day, went to sleep during the sermon: prison. Two boatman had a brawl, in which no one was hurt: exe-

They fired charges and questions at Servetus to shake the foundations of his positions. Servetus was more than equal to any of the lines of questioning, and in time the prosecutors became frustrated.

Calvin then stood up and took over the questioning from his subordinates. As Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone write in their book *Out of the Flames*,

The exchanges were sharp, fast, and erudite. There was perhaps no other person in Europe who could have matched up to either of them . . . At every turn, Calvin attacked and Servetus countered.

The overall charge was heresy. Servetus taught that the Trinity was absent from Scripture and a gross error, and he taught that infant baptism is likewise nonbiblical. He also presented an impassioned plea for religious liberty, a revolutionary concept in those times.

On the last point he was criticized by the prosecutor that his notion of religious liberty and freedom of conscience was a political threat and subversion of justice. In their view Servetus' world would be a horrible world since heretics could no longer be burned, beheaded or tortured.

With his execution all but certain, Servetus begged Calvin to just behead him with a sword rather than death by burning, being worried that he might not remain faithful under the prolonged pain. Calvin would not honor his request, instead ordering green wood for the pyre for a slow burn, and sulfur upon Servetus' head so when the flames reached up it would ignite with intense burning and additional suffering.

Next time: (1) Calvin attempts to eradicate Servetus' book and in so doing holds back medical science for one hundred years, for buried in what became the rarest book in the world was Servetus' discovery of the purpose and function of the human pulmonary system. (2) The execution and Servetus' last words. (3) The aftermath. Servetus' anti-Trinitarian doctrine, belief in One God and call for religious freedom of conscience survived and grew into a movement. It inspired some of the greatest thinkers of the last millennium: Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, John Milton, Voltaire, Montesquieu, John Locke, Joseph Priestly, Samuel F.B. Morse, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Jefferson, who was so moved by the trial and execution of Michael Servetus that he was inspired to write his famous Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in 1779, later enshrined in the Constitution of the United States.



John Calvin



Michael Servetus

John Calvin had met his intellectual match and chafed over the challenge to his doctrine. He did not brook criticism patiently. Servetus begged Calvin for death by the sword rather than burning, but Calvin would not honor his request.

cuted. A man who publicly protested against the reformer's doctrine of predestination was mercilessly flogged and expelled from the city. A book printer who, when drunk, had railed at Calvin, was sentenced to have his tongue perforated with a red-hot iron before being expelled from the city.

nation and the preexistence of Christ, to believing blasphemous doctrine.

The stakes could not be higher for Servetus. He knew his life was on the line, and Calvin was already famous for his cruelty to any who opposed him or were charged with heresy.

Calvin's philosophy was that it was better to punish too harshly than too gently where "God honor" was concerned. In the most scholarly and exhaustive ac-

Jacques Gruet was racked and then executed for merely have called Calvin a hypocrite.

In this [Calvin's] New Jerusalem during the first five years of his dictatorship thirteen people were hanged, ten were decapitated, thirty-five were burned and seventy-six were expelled from the city.

Calvin sat on the prosecutors' bench with many of his ministers close at hand.

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6th Annual One God Seminar Albany Area / June 8-10

The ACD announces its annual **One God Seminar**. This year's meetings will be at Living Hope Community Church, 458 Old Niskayuna Rd., Lathan, N.Y. ¶ Featured will be **11 seminars** on topics relating to the **nature of God, biblical monotheism, preexistence**, etc. Key objections will be addressed as will the meanings of disputed biblical passages. ¶ **Questions** from the audience and **open discussion** will follow each session. Four new presenters are scheduled this year: **Victor Gluckin,**

Nathan Crowder, Noel Rude and **David Sielaff**. Returning speakers with new topics: **Gary Fakhoury, Sir Anthony Buzzard, F. Paul Haney** and **Ken Westby**. Others will be announced. ¶ Most sessions can be heard live over the ACD's Virtual Church Network by dialing in at **918-222-7158** from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. eastern time Friday and Saturday and 10:30 Sunday. ¶ **David Sielaff** of Portland, Oregon, director of Associates for Scriptural Knowledge, will give a **contra argument**. ¶ A \$15 dona-

tion is requested for refreshments, lunch and printed materials. ¶ **Interest in the seminar grows.** The Bible presents One God, the Creator, a distinct, knowable personality, not a mysterious Binity or Trinity of Gods. Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know **you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.** The seminar atmosphere is collegial, the setting informal, the experience of biblical research stimulating and fun. I hope you can join us in Albany.—Ken Westby