

# The One-God Controversy

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

## Burn the Heretic!

**T**he cry “Burn the heretic!” hasn’t been heard in Christianity for a few centuries, thankfully. Such modern moderation would have been welcomed by a 16th-century scholar who attacked the Trinity and pedobaptism (infant baptism) as unbiblical doctrines and called for their abandonment. He successfully fled from the Spanish and French Inquisitions but made the fatal mistake of attending services at the Geneva church of John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer.

### Part One

John Calvin lied about, betrayed, hounded and finally murdered Michael Servetus, a fellow Christian. Calvin, the Frenchman, born Jean Chauvin, found a man he couldn’t bully and whose arguments he could not refute. The man he murdered was one of the greatest minds of the 16th century and a match for an equally brilliant John Calvin. The reformer Calvin would not be satisfied with a simple execution; he demanded torture and slow burning with green wood, with sulfur piled upon the “heretic’s” head to ensure that his adversary would suffer great anguish.

This is the remarkable story of a fearless scholar, a fatal heresy and one of the rarest books in the world.

Before Michael Servetus (1511–1553) met his fate at the hands of John Calvin, he had accomplished truly amazing things. He lived at an axial time in history when Johann Gutenberg’s invention of movable type met the Catholic Inquisition and the Protestant Reformation. Servetus used the expanding power of the printing press to publish his worthy research, thus incurring the wrath of both the Spanish and French Inquisitions and, fatally, the ire of reformer John Calvin.

Born of middle-class parents in Spain, Servetus excelled in learning. Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone in their new work *Out of the Flames* (Broadway Books, 2002) tell us that, “by the time he was thirteen, in addition to his native language, he could read French, Greek, Latin, and most significantly, Hebrew. In most of the Christian world Hebrew was a forbidden language. It was considered dangerous, mystical, and subversive. The Church was adamantly against it: knowledge of Hebrew meant that the Old Testament could be read in its original form . . . Hebrew, when it was taught at all, was almost always taught in secret and by a Jew.”

The scholarly Servetus studied the Bible, an activity the Church regarded

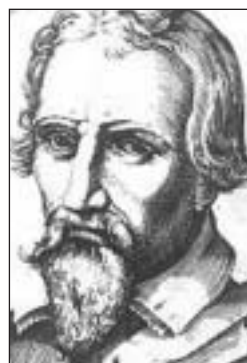
as subversive. Reading it could lead to imprisonment or death—one of the many ways the Church for over a thousand years maintained its control. Servetus’ scholarship took him another step forward as he added Arabic to his repertoire so he could also read the Koran.

He was still only 17 years old. He attended and earned degrees at the best universities in France and Germany. His love was theology, and he became very good at it.

Disgusted with what he called Roman corruption, Servetus wanted to see the Church returned to its original purity. He felt reformers like Luther had not gone nearly far enough. The Goldstones note: “Without a willingness to attack the fundamental precepts of Catholic dogma, Servetus thundered, no meaningful reform was imaginable—there could be no possible restoration of the simpler, more generous Christianity propounded by Jesus himself. Servetus came up with his own battle plan for purging Christianity of Roman corruption. Everything, he insisted, came back to the Trinity.”<sup>1</sup>



John Calvin



Michael Servetus

and Christianity could never be purified until it was stripped away.”<sup>3</sup>

Servetus realized that people form their religion and worship according to their concept of God. A corrupt concept will produce corrupt religion. He found a printer, and his first book, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (*On the Errors of the Trinity*), hit the world. It was a direct slap at the Church and its hero Saint

Augustine. It was a rigorous work citing more than 30 sources in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic. He naively expected honest scholars to entertain his challenge to the holiest concept in Roman Christianity. It caused a

offering a page-by-page critique of Calvin’s huge work *Christianae Religiosae Institutio* (*The Institutes of Christianity*). Servetus attacked Calvinism on many fronts including the Trinity and Calvin’s once-saved-always-saved doctrine that became a distinctive for the founder of Presbyterianism. The two scholars carried on a heated debate via letters for several years.

For six years Servetus worked in secret to produce his most important work, *Christianismi Restitutio* (*The Restoration of Christianity*) a sharp challenge to Calvin’s *Institutes*. He sent his 800-page book to Calvin, asking a response to its evidence. Calvin had clearly met his match and was incensed by this challenge to his authority (Calvin had people flogged for failing to address him as “Master”). Calvin found out that the famous physician, his theological critic, was none other than the heretic Servetus. Calvin revealed this fact to the French Inquisitors, who arrested and imprisoned Servetus (Calvin himself had escaped them, and he had labeled them Satan’s servants).

Servetus escaped prison and set out to flee to northern Italy. His flight brought him through Geneva, Calvin’s territory. It was a weekend, and Servetus attended Calvin’s church, where he was spotted by the reformer’s agents, arrested and imprisoned.

The following months chronicled one the saddest, most embarrassing periods in the history of the Christian Church. The natures of God and Christ were debated in a court setting of Calvin’s design. During the proceedings Servetus was imprisoned in a cold and dirty cell, denied bathing and denied clean clothes and clean food and access to a defender. Resigned to death, Servetus asked Calvin to simply kill him with the sword. Calvin refused and, following his court’s decree, went forward with his vengeful and cruel burning of a humble and honest scholar.

He followed the burning by putting out an order to canvass Europe to find every last copy of Servetus’ book and burn them all. In so doing, Calvin set back medical science by one hundred years since included in Servetus’ book was his discovery and explanation of how the cardiopulmonary system worked, unknown at that time.

See Part 2 in the next issue for the continuing story of Servetus’ compelling arguments against the Trinity, his belief that Jesus was fully man and the exalted Son of God, and how his martyrdom became the turning point in the struggle for the freedom of conscience.<sup>4</sup>

—Ken Westby

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The Church’s greatest debate was decided in A.D. 325 when, at Nicea, Emperor Constantine<sup>2</sup> gave approval to a new understanding of the persons of God and Jesus and paved the way (at the Council of Constantinople, A.D. 381, and following councils) for a third person, the Holy Spirit, to be added into a new, unique Godhead. Gone was the pure monotheism of Moses, the Prophets, Jesus and the Primitive Church. The Church hierarchy had created a new three-God deity, united mystically into “one God.” Servetus set about to prove the entire doctrine unbiblical.

“Servetus, whose biblical scholarship even at nineteen was colossal, knew that nothing of the Nicene Creed was stated or even hinted at in the Scriptures, which he had read in the original Hebrew and Greek. He found ‘not one word about the Trinity, or about its Persons, or about Essence, or about a unity of Substance.’ The Trinity was a contrivance—sheer mys-

ticism—and Christianity could never be purified until it was stripped away.”<sup>3</sup>

great stir and led the Spanish Inquisition to issue an order for his arrest and execution.

The young scholar fled to France, changed his name, went back to university and became a medical physician. So good was he at his new profession that he became personal physician to French royalty, pioneered new procedures, taught medical students and wrote books on anatomy.

But theology remained his first love. Using his alias, he engaged John Calvin,

<sup>1</sup> Goldstones, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> In 312 Christianity was legalized as the state religion and governed by the emperor as its Pontifex Maximus, who called the Church synods and councils, nominated the Church officials, exercised the right to decide all disputed points of doctrine, discipline, elections, etc. On July 3, 321, Constantine established the Day of the Sun (Dies Solis, Sunday) as the festive day for Christian celebrations. On Nov. 29, 330, Constantine decreed punishment by burning for Jews who would try to prevent the conversion of other Jews to Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> Goldstones, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson cited the Servetus martyrdom, and the revulsion to it that began to emerge among European thinkers, as his inspiration for the freedom-of-religion declarations he formulated for the founding of America.

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