

Wanted for Murder: John Calvin (1)

by Kenneth Westby

He lied about, betrayed, hounded and finally murdered a fellow Christian. John Calvin, the Frenchman, born Jean Chauvin, found a man he couldn't bully and whose arguments he couldn't refute. The man he murdered was one of the greatest minds of the sixteenth century and a match for the equally brilliant John Calvin. The great reformer would not be satisfied with a simple execution, he demanded torture and slow burning with green wood to insure that his adversary suffer greatly.

It's 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, this rarest of men had accomplished truly amazing things. His life met at the junction of Johann Gutenberg's invention moveable type, the Catholic Inquisition, and the Protestant Reformation. He 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 wrath of reformer John Calvin.

Born of middle class parents in Spain, he 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, caught reading it could lead to imprisonment or death – one of the many ways the Church for over a thousand years had maintained its control. Servetus' scholarship took him another step forward as he added Arabic to his repertoire so he could read the Koran. He was still only seventeen 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."

The Church's greatest debate was decided in 325, when at Nicaea, Emperor Constantine gave approval to a new understanding of the persons of God and Jesus, and added a third person, the Holy spirit into a 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, nor about its Persons, nor about Essence, nor about a unity of Substance.’ The Trinity was a contrivance – sheer mysticism – and Christianity could never be purified until it was stripped.”

Servetus realized that people follow 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 over thirty 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 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 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, offering a page by page critique of Calvin’s huge work, *Christianae Religiois Institutio (The Institutes of Christianity)*. Servetus attacked Calvinism on many fronts including the Trinity and his 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)* and it was a slap in the face to Calvin’s Institutes. He sent his 800-page book to Calvin asking response to its evidence. Calvin had clearly met his match and was incensed by the challenge to his authority (Calvin had people flogged for failing to address him as “Master”). Calvin found out 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 labeled them Satan’s servants).

Servetus escaped prison, but couldn’t escape the agents of John Calvin.