

Wanted for Murder: John Calvin (2)

by Kenneth Westby

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 (325 AD) 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 Reformations larger-than-life heroes. His modern legacy is 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.

Loyola, in fact, was Calvin's mirror image. "Physically, they were both small, thin, frail, short-tempered, and constantly beset by illness. Spiritually, both were intense, committed, indomitable, and utterly convinced of their godliness" (Lawrence & Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, Broadway Books, New York, 202, p 204).

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 his doctrine being challenged. Calvin did not brook criticism patiently. Servetus has also sent him his own work, the 800-page *The Restoration of Christianity*, asking Calvin to refute it.

Betrayed by Calvin

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'd previously labeled instruments of Satan and before which he'd 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 and 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 Madeleine 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, he wanting to actually see in person the man he had so actively debated the letter? Perhaps he believed he might even be welcomed by his protagonist. He wasn't.

Arrested by Calvin

Calvin's agents spotted Servetus in church, notified Calvin who promptly ordered Servetus arrested, his money and belongings confiscated, and thrown in prison. Calvin had him placed in a lice-infested cell and ordered the windows shuttered closed. Within hours all Geneva know of his arrest. 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 charges of publishing heretical literature attacking the Trinity, infant baptism, predestination, and the preexistence of Christ, to believing blasphemous doctrine, to lack of respect for accepted church doctrine (Calvin's), to insulting disrespect for John Calvin personally. Perhaps the silliest of the charges was one that he had violated the law by escaping the Catholic Inquisition – a “crime” of which most citizens of Geneva were likewise guilty.

Accused by Calvin

The trial before the Council began quickly on August 14 with interrogations of Servetus and examinations of his writings. The trial would continue with frequent breaks until his death sentence was carried out on October 27th.

Servetus was denied council even though that was the standard practice in trials. He was also denied a change of clothing being required to live in a cell full of filth and vermin. In the October cold he appealed for a change of clothing and warmer clothing, but was denied again.

Despite his pitiful circumstances he welcomed the face to face debate with his intellectual opponent and the leader of Protestantism. This was the climax of an almost twenty year correspondence contending over doctrine and the scriptures.

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 those 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 account 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 boatmen had a brawl, in which no one was hurt: executed. 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. Jacques Gruet was racked and then executed for merely having 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.

Like Luther, Calvin often preached a theory of toleration and against vengeance, but in practice they turned out to be empty words. Luther once wrote at the beginning of his career, "The burning of heretics is contrary to the will of the Holy Spirit." Such sentiments evaporated.

Bloody Times

Of course, times were different in the sixteenth century, but the early reformers had apparently learned from the Catholic Inquisitors how to best deal with opposition.

Not only was there little doctrinal change among the reformers, the cruel practices against dissent continued. Catholics slaughtered Protestants sometimes by as many as thirty thousand at a crack. Wars erupted between small and large Protestant and Catholic kingdoms. From the Servetus trial forward the reign of terror accelerated.

Protestants and Catholics – Calvinists and Jesuits – dug ecclesiastic trenches, two great armies prepared to pound it out.

To know the history of Europe over the next hundred years is to marvel that the human race survived. From 1618-1648 [The Thirty Year's War], Catholic fought Calvinist, Calvinist fought Lutheran, Hapsburg fought Bourbon, nationalist fought imperialist. The wreckage was unthinkable.

Cities were revisited again and again by a succession of marauding armies that killed, burned, raped, stole every bit of food in sight, then ruined the fields so that nothing further could be grown. In the Netherlands they had eaten rats and leather to survive; in Germany they ate each other. No statistic is more chilling than this: there were 21 million people living in Germany in 1618, at the start of the war; by 1648, the war's end, only 13 million were left. The plague was not so efficient. (Goldstones, p. 210, 214)

Servetus had no illusions of mercy at the hands of Calvin and his court, but he hoped he could prevail on the issue of the illegality of the trial, or failing that, on the scriptural merit of his beliefs. Of course, he could recant his beliefs, demonstrate servility, and beg for Calvin's forgiveness in hopes to receive a less than lethal punishment, an option Calvin apparently never considered.

Calvin's court broke its own procedures by denying Servetus' request for a defense counsel. Servetus was forced to act as his own defense and prepare for the trial from a dark and filthy prison cell. It was to be Servetus alone against the minions of Calvinism.

Trial of the Century

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

It is quite manifest that Servetus is one of the most audacious, presumptuous, and pernicious heretics that had ever lived. Moreover, not being content with the evil he has wrought, he wants to subvert every order the justice and to deprive the magistrate of the right to punish by the sword, the right given to him by God. But one should not be mistaken for his conscience condemns him and argues for death. And in order to avoid this punishment he wanted to propound such a false doctrine that the criminals should be punished by death. (Hillar, p. 293)

The trial prosecutor characterized Servetus' doctrine of religious liberty as the spreading of criminal behavior, i.e., heresy. If the state were to concede that people could believe what they want, it would put out of business the magistrates' right to kill them – his "God-given right." In their view, Servetus' world would be a horrible world since heretics could no longer be burned, beheaded, or tortured.

The trial consisted of four phases with many sessions in each phase. In the last phase, Calvin was determined to make Servetus' condemnation more serious so his death would be assured. He invoked the statement of Bucer, an associate, who said Servetus "deserved to have his entrails torn out."

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.