

Wanted for Murder: John Calvin (3)

by Kenneth Westby

In previous installments we presented the uncontested historical evidence that John Calvin had Michael Servetus burned at the stake. The charge against him, unproved, was heresy. What was Servetus' heresy?

The Spanish theologian and physician taught against infant baptism and the doctrine of the Trinity. He engaged Calvin in spirited scholarly discussion by letter for over a decade. Servetus maintained that neither doctrine was rooted in Scripture; in fact, he provided detailed evidence that both doctrines were contrary to the scriptures and to biblical principles.

His scholarly book, *Errors of the Trinity*, was a frontal attack against the Catholic and Protestant doctrine of the nature of God and his Son. He said they “contrive three Gods or one threefold one,” a concept foreign to Scripture. Speaking of the Trinity doctrine, established in the fourth century, he said, “this plague of philosophy was brought upon us by the Greeks...they never understood the passages of the Scriptures which they adduced with regard to this matter.”

He also observed that, “The Jews also shrink from giving adherence to this [“Christian”] fancy of ours, and laugh at our foolishness about the Trinity, and on account of its blasphemies, they do not believe that this is the Messiah promised in their Law.” Servetus was quite familiar with Jewish thought as his native Spain was heavily influenced by centuries of Jewish culture. Servetus found Jews who would secretly tutor him in biblical Hebrew, its teaching having been forbidden by the Catholic Church.

Finally Caught

Through a strange twist of fate Servetus finally came face to face with John Calvin, the great reformer, theologian, and founder of what would become the Presbyterian Church. Servetus had escaped from prison and was fleeing the long arm of the French Inquisition when he stopped in Geneva on his way to safe sanctuary in northern Italy.

It should be noted that it was Calvin who alerted the French Inquisition to Servetus' whereabouts and true name (he was using an alias in France as he had a death sentence upon him from the Catholic Spanish Inquisition) which resulted in his imprisonment. Catholics had also labeled him a heretic for his anti-Trinity, anti-infant baptism beliefs.

Geneva was Calvin's base and he ruled it with a rod of iron. All citizens were required to attend church. The fleeing Servetus, not wanting to be conspicuous, went to a church in Geneva. The preacher that Sunday was none other than The Reformer. Servetus was recognized by one of Calvin's men, and when told his protagonist was in attendance, Calvin ordered him arrested on that Sunday, August 13, 1553, and tossed in prison.

Previous installments described Calvin's prosecution and Servetus' defense before a stacked court acting without legal jurisdiction (Servetus was not a citizen of Geneva, had committed no crime, and was just passing through town). The outcome was determined before any arguments

were heard. During the entire proceedings, which lasted months, Servetus was kept in a filthy vermin filled cell and not allowed a change of clothes.

At one point in the trial the debate moved from the Trinity to other issues. Servetus went on the attack against Calvin's doctrine of predestination which was the center of Calvin's theology. He imputed to Calvin that he followed Simon Magus whom Servetus believed to be the father of that hateful doctrine.

Further, he said Calvin's doctrine of original sin, total depravity and determinism, reduced man to a "log" and a "stone." He would not yield to Calvin's insistence that he confess to the eternal existence of the Son, maintaining that Jesus Christ was the Son of God but didn't become so until he was begotten on earth as documented in the Gospel accounts.

Burned Without Mercy

When Servetus knew Calvin was going to have him killed regardless of the merits of his arguments (all of which Calvin could not refute), he asked for mercy. He pleaded with Calvin to just quickly cut off his head by sword rather than burning him at the stake, fearing he might not remain faithful under the anticipated pain.

Ignoring pleas for mercy, Calvin ordered Servetus to be burned with green wood so the suffering would be prolonged. He ordered sulfur be placed atop his head so when the flames finally reached high enough to ignite the sulfur an even more intense heat would burn his head.

Throughout the ordeal Michael Servetus did not recant his deeply held beliefs or his innocence. On October 26 the official Council of Two Hundred ordered Servetus "to be led to Champel and burned there alive on the next day together with his books." Only two charges were mentioned in his sentencing – anti-trinitarianism and anti-pedobaptism.

The law under which Servetus was condemned was the Codex of Justinian that prescribed the death penalty for the denial of the Trinity. This law was instituted by the totalitarian ecclesiastical state, whose morality was defined by the interests of the ecclesiastical state.

The lengthy text of charges were formally read in his presence. The principle charge read: "Who [Servetus] is first accused to have printed about 23 to 24 years ago a book in Hagenau in Germany against the Holy and indivisible Trinity, containing several and great blasphemies against it in the churches of Germany."

Two hours before his execution he requested an audience with Calvin who agreed and came with two of his lieutenants. We have only Calvin's account of the meeting. He wrote of Servetus, "I reminded him gently that for more than 16 years I did not spare anything in order to gain him for our Lord." Calvin's self-righteous justifications were shameless. He acknowledged that Servetus became "irritated against my good and saintly admonishings.... Seeing that I do not accomplish anything by exhortations, I did not want to be wiser than my Master would permit me. Therefore following the rule of Saint Paul I separated myself from the heretic."

Servetus was led to his place of martyrdom by a cortege of archers upon horses. People lined the way, some of whom taunted him to recant. Two witnesses wrote that Servetus responded that he was being unjustly killed and he would pray for his accusers. One notable accuser was the theologian Farel who traveled to Geneva from Neuchatel. Walking along he urged Servetus to the last moment to acknowledge errors and confess. Servetus answered him by asking for a single biblical passage showing the eternal sonship of Christ. For Farel and Calvin, Servetus was not a martyr for truth as were those Protestants burned by French Catholics, he was a martyr for error.

Calvin's burning of "heretics" was moral; Catholic's burning of Protestant "heretics" was immoral. Such was the religious wisdom and morality of sixteenth century Christianity.

Marian Hillar in his book on Servetus describes the martyrdom. "No cruelty was spared on Servetus as his state was made of bundles of the fresh wood of live oak still green, mixed with the branches still bearing leaves. On his head a straw crown was placed sprayed with sulfur. He was seated on a log with his body chained to a post with an iron chain, his neck was bound with four or five turns of a thick rope. This way Servetus was being fried at a slow fire for about half an hour before he died. At his side were attached copies of his book which he sent 'confidentially' to Calvin for 'his fraternal opinion.'"

His last words were, "O God, save my soul; O Jesus of the eternal God, have mercy on me."

A Counter-revolution Begun

Calvin succeeded in burning to death his innocent challenger, but in doing so ignited a greater fire of protest against both his doctrine and his intolerance of a free religious conscience.

Word of Servetus' martyrdom spread and Calvin came under attack from several worthies who chastened him for so ruthless an act.

Servetus' martyrdom became the spark and impetus for men to begin to cry out for the right to have freedom of conscience. What we now take for granted, a free religious conscience to openly believe what we choose, was a foreign concept to the religious world of Popes and Protestants.

The spark became a flame as the notion of religious freedom, often allied with antitrinitarianism, began to spread. It flamed brightest in Poland where a Catholic Polish King, Sigismund II, allowed Lutherans and Calvinists to live and pray unmolested, noting that he "wished to be king of both sheep and goats." Even Jews were allowed to live and worship openly in Poland.

Italian reformers, Bernardino Ochino, Georgio Blandrata, and Laelius and Faustus Socinus fled persecution in Italy for the safer climes of Poland. They had embraced both the antitrinitarian doctrine of Servetus and his call for a new humanism that allowed freedom of religion. Under the leadership of Faustus Socinus the movement thrived in Poland and became known as Socinianism. The Unitarian movement would evolve from it.

King John II of Transylvania, a bright young monarch who spoke eight languages and read widely, met one of the Italian reformers and converted, becoming history's first and only

Unitarian king. In 1558 the king issued the Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience. In their history of Servetus, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone comment that the king's Act, "in light of what was going on everywhere else in the world (and has in large part gone on since), was astonishing for its perspicacity, intelligence, and sophistication." It reads:

In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the precious statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.

In the next century oppression returned and Unitarians in Poland and Transylvania were officially suppressed. Most were forced to flee to Western Europe, England, and to America. They brought with them both their Unitarian beliefs and their burning quest for religious freedom. Some of the great thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries embraced Servetus' plea for freedom of conscience, even if all did not embrace his doctrine. Some, like John Milton, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, John Locke, and Montesquieu embraced both.

The great Voltaire (born Francois-Marie Arouet) made Servetus one of his favorite subjects and devoted an entire chapter in one of his books to him calling him "a very learned doctor" and rightly crediting him with the discovery of the circulation of blood and its function. He became the conscience of Europe and forced the entire Christian world to examine the foundations of its faith. He brought on the period called Enlightenment – for better or worse. His better acts were those where he threw himself into the defense of people under religious persecution.

His most famous case, the Calas affair, involved a hapless Huguenot who didn't flee France, was falsely accused of crimes he didn't commit. The innocent Jean Calas was strangled to death by Catholic authorities, tied to a stake and burned. His two daughters were forced into a convent. A son escaped and came to Voltaire for help. Voltaire began a defense fund among whose contributors were Catherine the Great of Russia, Caroline, wife of King George II of England, and Augustus III, king of Poland. Voltaire won the case resulting in Calas exoneration, the release of his daughters from the nunnery, and a large compensation for the Calas family.

The antitrinitarian movement that grew from the martyrdom of Servetus had spread to England where they were accepted by called "dissenters." They began their own schools which encouraged free inquiry in religion, science, history, politics, and other academic disciplines. "The result." Writes the Goldstones, "was a disproportionate number of Dissenters who became leading scientific minds of the time. One man in particular embodied this quest to reconcile science and the spirit: the great English chemist Joseph Priestly. Born in 1733 and by the time he was sixteen had mastered Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in addition to French, Italian, and Dutch. Priestley followed Servetus' path of tracing the roots of the Trinity to the Council of Nicea, rejecting the corrupt traditions outside Scripture, and believing in Christ as a man who was made divine by the One God.

While he is remembered for his brilliant scientific discoveries (he once met Benjamin Franklin in London in 1766 who encouraged him to write a history of electricity), he considered himself a theologian first. He opposed the lucrative slave trade and was an outspoken supporter of the American Revolution. Because he was the most famous Dissenter in England, an angry mob one night burned down his house including his extensive library and notebooks of all his unpublished scientific research. Chased by mobs, he and his family fled the area and later crossed the Atlantic to America.

Priestly founded a Unitarian Society in Philadelphia and was offered a professorship of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania and the presidency of the American Philosophical society.

Priestly and Thomas Jefferson met in 1797 and Jefferson became something of a mentor to him. They shared keen scientific interests and Priestley's religious views also affected Jefferson's own. Jefferson had always been antitrinitarian and had read of Servetus' martyrdom, all of Voltaire's works, and shared Priestley's views on religious freedom.

Jefferson viewed John Calvin as one of history's worst offenders, a tyrant who bred other tyrants in his name. The event that exposed Calvin for what he was, that most epitomized his hypocrisy, was the trial and execution of Michael Servetus.

One of the three things Jefferson wanted on his tombstone's epitaph what he wanted to be remembered for was as "Author of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom." The other two were "Author of the Declaration of American Independence" and the "Father of the University of Virginia." He didn't include his presidency or his role in drafting the Bill of Rights to the Constitution.

Jefferson once wrote, "I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States." By 1822, all but one of Boston's churches were Unitarian and the movement was growing. Many famous Americans like Samuel F.B Morse, inventor of the telegraph, and poet and orator Ralph Waldo Emerson were Unitarians. But it peaked in the 1840s and '50s, but the spirit of inclusion and free inquiry lives on, thanks in part to Michael Servetus. No thanks to John Calvin.