

## Calvin vs. Servetus

### [A Partial Account of Calvin as a Theologian and Controversialist]

***In the last part of 1534 [Calvin] was again in Paris, where he met Michael Servetus, whom he encountered in later years with disaster to his own good name...***

Michael Servetus was born either at Villanueva, a city of Aragon, in Spain, in 1509, the year of the birth of Calvin, or at Tudela, in Spanish Navarre, in 1511, both towns being named by him at different times as his birthplace.

In his twenty-second year (1531) he published his work *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (*On the Errors of the Trinity*). In this he avows Sabellianism. His theory is that the divine essence is incommunicable, and that therefore “the modifications in God can only be variations of form, and not persons...”

Zwingli was alarmed. He bade Œcolampadius to take heed lest the false and evil doctrine of the rash Spaniard should ruin the Protestant religion. He added, “This must not be endured in the Church of God; therefore do what you can to prevent the blasphemy from getting abroad.” Bucer's indignation went beyond all bounds; he declared from the pulpit, “Servetus deserves to have his entrails torn from his body.”

Servetus travelled much and talked much with the leading reformers. Catholics and Protestants were alike inflamed against him, and it became necessary for him to escape detection by changing his name as he passed from place to place.

His occupations were various; at Lyons he was a corrector of the press; at Paris a lecturer on astronomy and mathematics; at Vienne, in Dauphiny, whither he removed about 1541, he was a physician. In this latter city he spent twelve quiet years.

In 1546 he completed his work entitled *Christianismi Restitutio* (*The Restoration of Christianity*), and sent a manuscript copy to Calvin for his criticism. The manuscript was the occasion of long correspondence between Calvin and Servetus; evidently the latter wished to convert the Genevan reformer to his opinions, for he found him to be the chief obstacle to the second reformation of the Church.

Among the topics discussed in their letters was infant baptism, the validity of which Servetus denied. This denial created for him the odium of being an Anabaptist, and Anabaptists were regarded then as the revolutionary socialists are regarded by us to-day.

[In] February 13, 1546, Calvin wrote thus to his friend Farel: "Servetus wrote to me a short time ago, and sent a huge volume of his dreamings and pompous triflings with his letter. I was to find among them wonderful things, and such as I had never seen before, and if I wished he would himself come. But I am by no means inclined to be responsible for him; and if he come I will never allow him, supposing my influence worth anything, to depart alive."! Calvin's mind was already made up; it cannot be said that in compassing the death of Servetus he was hurried away by sudden passion.

The *Restitutio* was published in Vienne, January, 1553; as the license of the Catholic clergy could not be obtained the printing was done secretly. Copies were sent to Lyons, Frankfort, and Geneva. One of them reached Calvin; having had the manuscript in his possession he knew the author. A zealous Protestant in Geneva, named William Trie, wrote to a Catholic relation in Vienne, named Arneys, disclosing the fact of the publication of the *Restitutio*. But how prove it to be the work of Servetus? Neither printer nor author was named on the title-page.

Trie obtained from Calvin several autograph letters of Servetus, some pages of the *Institutes*, annotated by him, and further informed his cousin at Vienne that a manuscript of the *Restitutio* had been in the possession of Calvin, but was now loaned to a friend at Lausanne. Who does not wish that Calvin had refused to permit his knowledge of Servetus to be used in an inquisitorial prosecution? Calvin playing the part of an informer is not an edifying spectacle.

Trie professed that he had great trouble in obtaining the documents from Calvin; it should have been impossible. Servetus was arrested, tried by the magistrates at Vienne, and condemned. He pretended when on his trial that he was not the Servetus who wrote the *Restitutio*. Placed in easy confinement, for he had a friend in the archbishop, whose physician he had been, he had no difficulty in escaping from his prison. After his escape he was sentenced to be burned to death, and was burned in effigy by the Catholic authorities.

After wandering for three months some infatuation took him to Geneva. Here he rested quietly for several weeks, but just as he was about to depart for Zurich he was recognized and seized by order of the council. Calvin had no hesitation in saying that Servetus had been arrested through information given to the magistrates by himself. He was anxious that the Spaniard should recant but in failure of recantation insisted on his punishment.

Formal charges against Servetus were made by Nicholas de la Fontaine, Calvin's secretary, but before long Calvin himself became the prosecutor. The examination ranged over all the mysteries of theology. As to the relation of God to the creation, Servetus showed himself to be pantheistic, and in this was inconsistent with himself. When questioned on the Trinity he resolutely asserted Sabellianism.

Infant baptism he declared to be an invention of the devil. He avowed his belief that some of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament have a twofold reference, the first to some other person than the Messiah. This reasonable opinion was condemned as a terrible heresy. The consistory tried in vain to induce him to recant his errors.

Servetus may have hoped for aid from the Libertines. The papers in the case, with a copy of the *Restitutio*, were now sent to the churches of Zurich, Berne, Basle, and Schaffhausen, with a request for their judgment. Zurich advised Geneva to exercise severity. Schaffhausen expressed confidence that the Genevans would frustrate the wicked designs of Servetus with something stronger than argument; Basle replied that if he did not recant he must be chastised according to the power given to Geneva by the Lord.

The Bernese advised carefulness, but prayed that this pest might be driven from the Church. Whether these letters meant death is an open question, but they certainly pointed that way. Calvin thus interpreted them: "All with one mouth declared that Servetus has renewed those impious errors by which Satan in early times disturbed the Church, and that he is a monster not to be endured."

Death could be inflicted only by the Council of Sixty; after three days' debate this body declared for death by fire. Calvin did his best to obtain a change of the mode of execution, but his efforts were of no avail. Farel was the companion of the last hours of Servetus; and it speaks well for the latter that he received without objection the visits of this intimate friend of Calvin.

He sent for Calvin and asked forgiveness for the harsh language he had used in their many debates with each other. To every effort made in these last days to convert him to the Trinitarian faith he opposed the resistance of firm conviction. On the 27th of October, 1553, he was burned outside the city. His printed book and the fatal manuscript sent to Calvin were tied to his body and burned with him.

The execution of Servetus was a shock to the Christian world. The enemies of Calvin quickly made use of it in their attacks upon him, and many of his friends were averse to the severity of the sentence, but his course, at the time, was supported by some of the leading Protestant theologians. The condemnation of Servetus was a denial of the fundamental principle of the Reformation, the right of every man to judge for himself of the contents and meaning of the Holy Scriptures. Calvin's excess of zeal for what he believed to be the honor of God hurried him into the commission of a crime which has left an ineffaceable stain upon his memory.

Eleven years after the burning of Servetus Calvin died a most peaceful death. The iron will which had subjugated the wills of other men was in his last days as remorseless in its triumph over his own bodily infirmities. During his last ten years he scarcely ate enough food to sustain life; still, though strength was failing, he worked on at the same tremendous pace. When he could no longer walk to church he was carried thither in a chair, and from his chair preached to the people. His commentary on John was finished while on his deathbed. When too feeble to preach he would still be carried to church and speak a few words.

No remonstrances of friends could induce him to suspend his labors. "What!" said he to Beza, "would you have the Lord find me idle?" The city council sent him money wherewith to meet his increasing expenses. He declined, saying "that he was not now in a condition to perform his duties, and could not in conscience receive wages." At his request the counsellors and the ministers visited him; and to each body he addressed his last charge, asking their pardon for all the faults of his administration. On May 27, 1564, he quietly fell asleep.

(The Story of the Christian Church by George R. Crooks, New York: Eaton & Mains, 1897, 509, 528-532, Text and paragraph structure modified; Excerpt is primarily from the chapter entitled, Calvin as a Theologian and Controversialist)