

## The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How  
Christ  
restored  
the gospel  
to his  
church



### The Death of Calvin...

May 27, 1564

John Calvin died on Saturday May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1564. He was 54 years old.

No one is quite sure of the exact cause of his death; I suspect it was probably congestive heart failure but he had so many things wrong with him that the exact cause of his death is impossible to determine. Still, it's not the cause of death but the fact of his death that matters and it does matter. His death was very important...very important both to the history of the church in Geneva and very important, I think, to the Protestant Reformation in general.

We'll talk more about his death in a moment.

Michael Servetus died on Friday October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1553. Now the cause of his death is clear and is much simpler to explain. Servetus died in Geneva as a result of being burned alive at the stake. His death is very important too. But the truth of the matter is that had he died in any other manner than the one he did, I probably wouldn't be talking about him right now and you probably wouldn't care one

way or the other. I am not saying that to sound callous or hardhearted. Really, I am saying it simply because it is true. Had he been hanged or beheaded as was the usual custom of the day you would very likely have never even heard of him. As it is, you have probably have heard his name more than once and if you have, you have heard his name in close connection to that of Calvin. More than likely you have heard it mentioned in a context something like this:

In October 1553, John Calvin, the Ayatollah of Geneva, had Michael Servetus shamefully burned alive at the stake. The act constitutes one of the most reprehensible acts of Calvin's reprehensible career and has been noted as such by his friends and foes alike.

Now the interesting thing about the death of Calvin is that historically his own death has become the second most important death in his life. More is known, and written and said about the death of Servetus than that of Calvin himself.

In fact, Calvin is often singled out as the principal cause and architect of Servetus' death. And when that is done it is often done in a manner that more or less defies any sort of historical common sense. Calvin is often portrayed in the matter of Servetus's death as a ruthless prosecutor, incensed judge, and maniacal executioner who somehow lured him to Geneva and then had him arrested and murdered.

It doesn't help, of course, that Calvin wrote some of the things he did. For example, he wrote the following regarding Servetus in a letter to his friend William Farel.

Servetus lately wrote to me, and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies, with the Thrasonic boast, that I should see something astonishing and unheard of. He takes it upon him to come hither, if it be agreeable to me. But I am unwilling to pledge my word for his safety, for if he shall come, I shall never permit him to depart alive, provided my authority be of any avail.<sup>1</sup>

Did you get that, "Servetus recently wrote me with a bunch of multiplied craziness and is even asking if he can come here. But I won't give him a safe conduct and if does come he won't leave alive if I have anything to do with it."

Still, to be historically accurate I have to add that that letter was written seven years before Servetus made the mistake of traveling to Geneva. And because it was and it is important to try to get at the facts as they were and then to try to understand them in the context of the time in which they occurred. That is, we ought to try to understand what happened with Servetus in its original historical context.

William Wileman writes this in an article on Calvin and Sevetus in a recent Banner of Truth magazine article.

The duty of the historian is not to plead, but to narrate facts. I shall do this as impartially as possible. One writer need not be imitated (W. H. Drummond, D.D.), who is not ashamed to disfigure his title-page: "Life of Michael Servetus, who was entrapped, imprisoned, and burned by John Calvin." Less scurrilous, but equally prejudiced, is Dr. R. Willis. It is a weak case that needs the aid of ink mixed with abusive gall.<sup>2</sup>

Even the webpage of the Servetus International Society has this:

In judging this whole affair one must take care not to be unjust toward Calvin, by being as narrow and unsympathetic toward him as he was toward Servetus. For he deserves to be judged by the standards of his own age rather than of ours, even though we condemn those in comparison with our own. Besides being a man of extraordinary ability, he had many of the finest traits of personal character. He has been called the father of popular education and the inventor of free schools.

Protestantism owes him more than any other man after Luther, and for more than three centuries he remained the leader of its thought outside the Lutheran churches. But he took his office very seriously, and so wholly identified himself with his cause that he took attacks upon himself as equivalent to attacks upon the Christian religion; and when one had seemed to him to commit an offense against the honor of God, or to endanger the salvation of immortal souls, he would never forgive nor make allowances, but would pursue his opponent vindictively, relentlessly, and without pity. This should help us to explain, if not to excuse, his attitude toward Servetus, and even his willingness so treacherously to betray him to authorities.

Servetus, on the other hand, was in controversy self-conceited, obstinate, fanatical, insulting, and exasperating to the last degree, and by his own manner brought upon himself no small part of what he suffered.<sup>3</sup>

So what did happen in the Servetus affair? Who was Servetus really? How was Calvin involved in his death? Did Servetus do something worthy of the death according to the standards of the time in which he lived and should Calvin be considered responsible for his death of Servetus by the standards of his time or of ours? They are all important questions and they're important regardless of where the answers go. Still, I to tell you that most people already have their minds made up before they really look at the facts. I think it ought to be admitted that one of the reasons that Calvin is singled out in a way that is really quite different compared to other historical figures of his time is that many writers despise his theology. That is, they despise Calvinism. The logic or argument goes something like this I think, "If we can disparage Calvin's life then we can at the

same time disparage Calvin's doctrine." And there may be some truth to that assertion. Still, it's not appropriate, I think, to judge such matters by the moral standards of our own time.

That having been said, let me talk for a moment about who Servetus was and what it was about him that made not just Calvin but a whole host of other people so angry.

G. Coleman Luck writing in a 1947 journal article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* writes this:

Servetus was undoubtedly a man of considerable ability. He was apparently born in Villaneuva in the old Spanish kingdom of Aragon, about 1510. He was therefore approximately of the same age as Calvin. His early life is something uncertain. In 1531 he published at Hagenau a radical work, *De Trinitatis erroribus*, which was repugnant to Romanists and Protestants alike. Concealing his identity under the pseudonym of Villeneuve, he resorted to Paris where he studied medicine and natural sciences. There he met Calvin who greatly disapproved of his views. Servetus refused an offer of Calvin to debate their respective positions before friends. Later he appeared at Lyons where he worked for a publishing house, and brought out an edition of Ptolemy's *Geography*. However he soon returned to Paris where he became engaged in medical controversies, thereby gaining many enemies. He discovered, almost a century before William Harvey, the pulmonary circulation of the blood. In 1540 he settled as a physician in Vienne, France, still under the pseudonym, and there established a large medical practice and won many friends. Privately he began writing another theological work, *Restitution of Christianity*, (note the similarity of the title to Calvin's *Institutes*) completed about 1546 and published in 1553. In this work Servetus denied the pre-existence of Christ and called the doctrine of the trinity "a sort of three-headed Cerberus."

While working on this book he entered into a correspondence with Calvin in 1545, which, begun with arrogance on his part, soon degenerated into an exasperating controversy.

Calvin sent him a copy of the *Institutes* which he returned filled with critical and contemptuous annotations. In one letter to Calvin he said: "False are all the invisible Gods of the Trinitarians, as false as the gods of the Babylonians." Calvin finally quit the correspondence, as he came to consider Servetus a hopeless case. In 1553 a copy of Servetus' volume, secretly printed, reached Calvin in Geneva. This he showed to a friend, Guillaume Trie, a former merchant of Lyons, but then a fugitive because of his faith. Trie was in correspondence with a cousin, Antoine Arneys of Lyons, who was still an ardent Romanist. In one letter Trie incidentally mentioned Servetus; by showing that though the Roman Church was so strong against the true Protestants, yet at the same time it tolerated such abominable error as that of Servetus. He enclosed as evidence a part of the book, *Restitution*. Arneys placed this private letter in the hands of the Roman Catholic authorities, who at once instituted process against Servetus. However he denied any connection with the work, and insisted that he was simply the physician Villeneuve. Arneys then wrote again to his cousin Trie, and at his request, Trie secured from Calvin the annotated copy of the *Institutes*, and a number of the letters Servetus had written. Trie himself stated that he obtained these from Calvin with great difficulty, and that he finally yielded them only on the plea that it was to vindicate Trie's own honor. Servetus was tried in March, 1553, at Vienne and on June 17th was condemned by the Roman Catholic authorities to death by slow fire. However during the trial he escaped (April 7th) and was therefore burned in effigy.<sup>4</sup>

Now what is strange is that a few months later Servetus suddenly showed up in Geneva on a Sunday morning and he just happened to show up at Calvin's church, St. Pierre. Historians differ in their arguments as to what his purpose may have been. Some argue that he was simply on his way somewhere else. Some argue that he simply wanted to hear Calvin preach. Some even argue that he was in league with some of Calvin's enemies and had come there to make one last heroic push to cast Calvin from Geneva and take over his station and place in the church. He wore a long beard by which I think he hoped to disguise himself but it didn't work. He was recognized immediately sitting there in the pew at St, Pierre's and arrested immediately and hauled off to prison.

Now what is even stranger about the Servetus affair is that after his arrest he was quite open in Geneva about who he was and about his opposition to Calvin. Equally strange is the fact that Calvin's opponents in Geneva supported him in claims and even helped defend and represent him. That made attempt after attempt to try to get Servetus freed and at one point in the trial Servetus even suggested that he be allowed to take Calvin's place in Geneva.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Calvin's opponents ask the Council to send letters to the other Reformation cities in Switzerland and Germany asking for their opinions about what Geneva should do with Servetus. That was a bad idea. When the replies came back, city after city replied the same way, "Kill him."

Calvin's opponents gave up and switched their tactics. They decided not only to abandon Servetus but to demand the ultimate penalty...being burned at the stake. Emanuel Stickelberger argues in little book on the life of Calvin that they did so simply to embarrass Calvin. I think, and I am not one typically given to conspiracy theories, that he is probably right.

You see in the midst of Servetus' arrival at Geneva, Calvin had been in a life and death with a group of men known as the Libertines...that was Calvin's name for them. They were prominent men in the community but lived scurrilous lives. Calvin had made up his mind that he was going to bar them from communion.

The City Council, however, forbade Calvin from doing so. In a Council meeting with Servetus actually present told Calvin he was not permitted to bar anyone...not even those who had chased him to his home the week before in a drunken rage. Calvin was dismissed from the meeting.

Emanuel Stickelberger writes this:

The next day—it was the day before the Lord's Supper--the Council gathered for a special meeting. In a deeply moving speech, with the whole power of his conviction, Calvin spoke for the reconsideration of the resolution passed the day before. He trembled in agitation as he said, "I swear rather to die than to have the Lord's Supper defiled...I would rather be dead a hundred times than to commit such terrible mockery to Christ."

Still, the majority of the Council decided to leave the resolution as it stood. Calvin was dismissed.

The cautious on the council...did not want a repetition of the events of 1538 with the ensuing confusion. The result of the meeting was that Berthelier was secretly ordered not to partake of the Lord's Supper.

Calvin knew nothing about it, when, overtired yet with rapid steps, he ascended the pulpit on Sunday morning. The news of the decision of the Council and the opposition of the Reformer had spread through the whole city like wildfire. The large sanctuary was filled to the last place. And in view of the rows of Councilmen whose faces stared at him malevolently out of the Gothic choir stalls, after a powerful sermon he began a very serious address: "I asked that God would give me firmness and my prayer was answered. Therefore know that whatever may occur, I shall act according to the clearly revealed command of my Master. Should there be anyone during the Lord's Supper which we are about to celebrate approaching the table of the Lord who has been denied this privilege by the Elders, I shall take the stand that is required of me. You may kill me, but you will not force this hand to administer the bread of God to an unworthy man."<sup>6</sup>

Robert Godfrey, President of Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California writes this in his small biography of Calvin.

In August 1553 an even more difficult time for Calvin began when Michael Servetus (1511-1553) arrived in Geneva. He was a Spanish physician who was an old theological enemy of Calvin, As early as the 1530s Servetus had written a book rejecting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He was part of a small movement in the sixteenth century that concluded that the Trinity was another false doctrine imposed on Christians by the Roman Church. Servetus argued that Jesus was not

divine and was not the eternal Son of God.

Already in the 1530s Calvin tried to arrange a meeting with Servetus so he could win him from his heresy. Calvin went to the meeting that had been arranged, but Servetus did not show up. Still Servetus continued to write against the Trinity, which was a very dangerous thing to do. Almost anywhere in Europe if he had been denounced to the authorities, he would have been arrested and executed. But he wrote anonymously and often moved from place to place.

In the mid-1540s Calvin again corresponded with Servetus to try to persuade him of the error of his ways. When that effort failed, Calvin warned Servetus that the doctrine he was espousing was lethal to his own soul and dangerous to the Christian community and would lead to his execution if arrested.

Early in 1553 Servetus published yet another work attacking the Trinity entitled *Restitution of the Christian Religion*. The title was a clear and deliberate attack on Calvin and his Institutes. After this work appeared, Servetus was arrested by Roman Catholic authorities in southern France. He managed to escape but was condemned in absentia for his heresy and would have been executed had he been captured in France. As Servetus knew, for over a thousand years Christian governments had judged antitrinitarianism to be a capital offense.

Servetus arrived in Geneva in August 1553, probably intending to cause trouble for Calvin. He was recognized, denounced, and arrested as a notorious heretic. Calvin insisted that he be placed on trial for his heresy.

The city council saw the trial of Servetus as a possible opportunity to embarrass Calvin; yet they knew they could not side with Servetus. So they decided to drag out the trial as a way to harass Calvin. They delayed the trial by writing various governments in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe seeking advice on how Servetus should be treated. Almost all the letters that came back had the same advice: he must be condemned for his terrible heresy and executed.

In October the trial finally took place. Members of the city council served as judges, and Calvin functioned as the chief prosecutor. Servetus was condemned and ordered to be executed by burning at the stake, the traditional medieval punishment for heresy. Calvin and the other ministers pled that the punishment should be changed to beheading, a much quicker and less painful form of execution. The city council refused. Justice moved swiftly in those days: he was

tried on October 20, condemned on October 21, and executed on October 27.<sup>7</sup>

Now, it's a remarkable quirk of history that Calvin gets the blame for burning of Servetus. He hadn't sought Servetus out. He hadn't lured Servetus to Geneva. Servetus would have been burned in any town in other in which he had been caught. He had, in fact, already been burned *in absentia* in the one town where he had escaped after having been caught. Calvin had pled with the City Council to execute Servetus in a more human manner than was used. But he voted down just as he had been over weekly communion. Still Calvin gets the blame for Servetus' death. Even some of Calvin's most enthusiastic supporters condemn his actions.

Today in Geneva there is a monument of reconciliation placed there in 1903. Doumergue, the great Calvin biographer, wrote the inscription. This is what it says:

As reverent and grateful  
sons of Calvin  
our great Reformer,  
repudiating his mistake, which was the mistake  
of his age,  
and according to the true principles of the  
Reformation and the Gospel  
holding fast to the freedom of conscience,  
we erect  
this monument of Reconciliation  
On October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1903.<sup>8</sup>

Now I said earlier I would return to talk about Calvin's death. Let me do so now by reading from Godfrey's little book.

Late in his life, as his health deteriorated and his strength ebbed, his friends pled

with him to work less diligently, but he refused. By early 1563 he at times was unable to walk due to gout and arthritis. By early 1564 it was clear that his strength was failing seriously. In early February 1564 he gave his last lectures and sermons. Calvin prayed that his mind would remain clear to the end so that he could work. From his bed he continued to dictate letters and his final commentary, on the book of Joshua. His fellow ministers appealed to him to get more rest. He responded, "What! Would you have the Lord come and find me idle? He was determined to work to the end.

He said many goodbyes in the final weeks of his life. On April 27 the city council came to see him. On April 28 the ministers came to say good-bye. His words to them are somewhat rambling but show what was on his mind:

On May 2 Calvin, knowing that his death was near, wrote to his old friend William Farel. In fact, Farel, who had insisted that Calvin join him in the work of reforming the church in Geneva in 1538 and brought Calvin into the official ministry, received one of Calvin's last letters. Calvin wrote: "I draw my breath with difficulty, and every moment I am in expectation of breathing my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is to all his followers a gain in life and in death." Although Calvin urged Farel not to travel for a final visit, Farel, seventy-five and in weak health, made the journey for a personal good-bye.

Beza recorded of Calvin's last days:

The interval to his death he spent in almost constant prayer...In his sufferings he often groaned like David, "I was silent, O Lord, because thou didst it"...I have also heard him say, You, O Lord crush me; but it is abundantly sufficient for me to know that this is from your hand.

Calvin may also have remembered the words that he had written long ago in his Catechism:

For death for believers is now nothing but passage to a better life...Hence it follows that death is no longer to be dreaded. We are rather to follow Christ our leader with undaunted mind, who, as he did not perish in death, will not suffer us to perish.

Calvin died peacefully and quietly on Saturday, May 27 at 8 P.M. Beza wrote, "The night and the following day there was a general lamentation throughout the city...all lamenting the loss of one who was, under God, a common parent and comforter." The popular image of Calvin today does not think of him as a comforter, but Beza accurately saw that the message of comfort was central to all the pastoral work that Calvin did for the faithful.

He was buried on Sunday in an unmarked grave at a secret location somewhere in Geneva. In one of the last commentaries he wrote, he commented on the death and burial of Moses, "It is good that famous men should be buried in unmarked graves." This conviction guided his own burial. He rejected the superstitious veneration of the dead and wanted no pilgrimages to his grave. He had lived to make Christians, not Calvinists. He had perhaps written his own best epitaph in his *Institutes*: "we may patiently pass through this life in afflictions, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other disagreeable circumstances, contented with this single assurance, that our King will never desert us, but will give what we need, until having finished our warfare, we shall be called to the triumph."

Let's pray.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, "Letter #154 to William Farel...(February 13, 1546)" in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letter Vol. 5* edited by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 33.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?457](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?457)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.servetus.org/en/michael-servetus/biography/bio8.htm>

<sup>4</sup> G. Coleman Luck, "Calvin and Servetus" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 104 no 414 Ap-Je 1947, 238-9.

<sup>5</sup> Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life* translated by David George Gelzer (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1954), 124-125. "For the libertines the attacks upon the Church discipline constituted ways and means: Calvin had to be overthrown. The means seemed to fail. The ways, however, the acquittal of Servetus, was to humiliate the despised head of the Church and bring his downfall.

Clear-eyed, Calvin realized the danger threatening his work. The letters of his friends were full of sympathy and lovingly sought to console him in his distress. Theodore Beza, the young French scholar and poet who after Calvin's death became his successor, wrote during these difficult days to Bullinger, the prelate of Zurich, "His enemies are so many, they press upon him in such manifold ways, that I

can hardly understand his power of resistance...He suffers it all with an amazing constancy. Nevertheless, if the Lord does not intervene, then his labors and his sorrows will take him from us. What would become of us! He needs our prayers and our encouragement." The darker Calvin saw the situation, the more jubilant was Servetus. The certainty of the coming triumph gave him strength and new encouragement for ever new attacks. Despite the decree of the Council that he was not to have contact with the outside world, he must have been well informed about the desperate condition of his enemy. Not in vain was his prison warden a Libertine who transmitted information so well that he had to be replaced. The letters of the prisoner were written according to the mood and condition in which he found himself, sometimes haughty, challenging, the next time eliciting sympathy. The poor man suffered from cold and noxious insects. Now, however, he saw himself at the threshold of the fulfillment of his wishes. Soon he would stand in the place of the one whom he so bitterly despised. It was the twenty-second of September when the Council received Servetus' famous writing:

"Therefore, gentlemen, I demand that my false accuser be punished, poena talionis, and that he, like me, be imprisoned until the trial be decided either by his or my death or by some other punishment."

He demanded even more—that the property of the opponent be adjudged to him. At the reading the Councilmen lost their seriousness. The Reformer's poverty was known throughout the city. He kept nothing for himself, absolutely nothing!"

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009), 132-3.

<sup>8</sup> Stickelberger, 132.