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CALVIN AND SERVETUS A CASE OF VIOLENCE AND CALVIN'S INVOLVEMENT ¹

Agustinus M. L. Batlajery²

ABSTRACT: The murder of Michael Servetus by burning him alive has put a negative mark in the history of Christianity, and even has given Calvin a bad name as a church reformer. Calvin was considered as a kind of ruthless dictator for committing such an act. This view has influenced how people looked at him. However, is that really so? This paper will prove that the accusation towards Calvin is not fully true. Calvin has tried everything that he could to save Servetus from the death sentence, but he did not succeed. Calvin agreed that Servetus must be punished according to the then law against blasphemers. Nevertheless he did not agree with such punishment.

ABSTRAK: Peristiwa pembunuhan Michael Servetus dengan cara membakarnya hidup-hidup telah menodai sejarah kekristenan bahkan mencitraburukkan Calvin sebagai seorang reformator

¹ Tulisan ini disampaikan pada The Fifth International Conference dari The International Reformed Theological Institut (IRTI) Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

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gereja. Calvin dinilai sangat diktator dan tidak berperikemanusiaan karena telah melakukan tindak kekerasan semacam itu. Pandangan ini telah memengaruhi penilaian orang terhadap sang reformator. Akan tetapi, benarkah demikian? Tulisan ini hendak membuktikan bahwa apa yang disangkakan orang terhadap Calvin tidak sepenuhnya benar. Ternyata Calvin telah berusaha sekuat tenaga, dengan berbagai cara, untuk menyelamatkan Servetus dari ancaman penghukuman, namun tidak berhasil. Calvin setuju bahwa Servetus harus dihukum menurut pola pemberian hukuman yang lazim waktu itu kepada para pelanggar atau penghujat agama. Namun ia tidak setuju dengan cara dan bentuk penghukuman seperti itu.

KEYWORDS: Calvin, Michael Servetus, Trinity, execution, inquisition, cruelly burning, punishment.

KATA-KATA KUNCI: Calvin, Michael Servetus, Trinitas, eksekusi, inkuisisi, pembakaran, hukuman.

Introduction

The History of Reformation is marred by a terrible trauma involving what the Reformation church did to one of its members, Michael Servetus. He was executed by being burned at the stake on October 27, 1553 as the result of his teaching on the Trinity. His controversy with Calvin brought him to his death.

Concerning this execution, there are varied comments. Jean Cadier wrote, "Indeed, it was a terrible drama, that one of the execution of Servetus" (Cadier 1959, 162), even though he then puts this event in a more positive light. Stefan Zweig stated that "Calvin was a dictator in matters of morals, tastes, habits, thoughts, politics, and all of life. He was absolute arbiter in Geneva, and ruled with iron fist" (Zweig 1951). These two scholars attacked Calvin in line with their negative view.

However, there are others who are less hostile to Calvin. These scholars defend Calvin by thoroughly studying the steps taken by Calvin in dealing with the execution. They are Paul F. Geisendorf, the author of a widely acclaimed biography of Calvin's associate Theodore

Beza, and Henri Delarue who wrote the book *Calvin, Stefan Zweig et M. Jean Schorer* together with Geisendorf. They are a Vigorous in the defense as Zweig was in his attack. They show that far from ruling with an iron hand, Calvin had in fact preached a farewell sermon at Saint Pierre on September 3, 1553, the autumn in which Servetus died, because he expected his second expulsion from Geneva at any moment. These things, the authors went on, had already been argued by Doumergue, who gave most of the sixth volume of his biography of Calvin to the Servetus case, and therefore, should not have been a secret to Schorer and Zweig (de Koster 1964, 518; see Bainton 1932, 80-81).

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the whole long process of this case in order to see how deep Calvin's involvement was in the decision taken by magisterium of the city of Geneva. It means that we must put this case back into its historical context to get an objective, balanced and fair view. It is my view that we cannot blame Calvin as easily as some scholars mentioned above. Burning was a way the church used to punish those who attacked the church's doctrines and showed heretical.

For this purpose, first we must describe what the real doctrinal problem was which caused tension between Servetus and Calvin. Then we will go further into the judicial decision-making process and observe examine it step by step. Here we will see how far Calvin was involved in it. We should also be aware of the fact that Calvin had worked long for the redemption of Servetus. After that we will come to our conclusion as to whether Calvin did violence in the execution of Servetus.

The Doctrinal Problem between Servetus and Calvin

The doctrinal problem of Servetus and Calvin is about the doctrine of Trinity. The tension between the two began when Servetus published his book on the Trinity, entitled *The Trinitatis Erroribus Libri Septem*, in July 1531.³ In order to understand Servetus's thought as expressed in this book and other works, we had better go

³ Later he wrote *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri duo* and combined all his works and letters in a book under the title *Christianismi Restitutio*.

back a little bit and examine the background of his life and education.

Michael Servetus was born in 1511, in a Spanish town named Villanueva. From this town he later borrowed a pseudonym, Villancuvanus or, in French, de Villeneuve, when in flight from the Inquisition some twenty years later. He was attached as a youth to the service of the Spanish prelate, Juan the Quintana, Vicar to Charles the Fifth. Quintana supervised the studies of this precocious lad, and permitted him to study law for two years at the University of Toulouse before taking him to Rome for the coronation of Charles the Fifth by Pope Clement VII in 1529. Servetus was not favorably impressed by the pomp and circumstance he witnessed at Rome. He slipped away from Rome, leaving Quintana's service, and about a year and half later he had become author of the publication mentioned above in which he called the doctrine of Trinity a sophistry not to be found in the Bible (de Koster 1964, 520). Some years later he appeared in Basel. There he met Johannes Oecolampadius, the reformer there. He was well received there by Oecolampadius, who was willing to open a theological discussion with him. But because of his doctrine of God is obviously called into question the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine was taken seriously by the church in Basel, Oecolampadius advised him not to consider permanent residence there. While in Basel he published his second attack on the Trinity under the title *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri duo*. From Basel he moved to Strasbourg where Bucer was the reformer. But in Strasbourg he was no more welcome than in Basel (de Koster 1964, 520).

In 1532, Quintana obtained a copy of Servetus' book. After reading it he ordered that all copies of the book should be searched out and burned. He also asked for the Spanish Inquisition to set in motion various devices designed to tempt Servetus back to his homeland to stand trial. But Servetus refused the bait. Therefore, on June 17, 1532, at Toulouse, Michael Servetus was formally declared suspect of heresy and orders for his apprehension were issued (de Koster 1964, 521).

With this declaration, Servetus went into hiding under the pseudonym Michael de Villeneuve. He escaped to Lyon and worked there as editor and proof-reader at the printing house of Trechsel. From Lyon he moved to Paris to study medicine. After completing

his study successfully, he moved to Vienna as medical doctor in 1540. There he was intimate with the Roman Catholic bishop of the place, for he became doctor to the prelate. In Vienna he had opportunity to publish his book on the theory of blood circulation between the heart and lungs, which was landmark discovery (de Koster 1964, 521). From this place, he also opened his correspondence with Calvin (Emerton 1909, 152).

What really was his teaching? Regarding this subject, I do not plan to describe Servetus' view completely because time and space are limited to us. I just want to explore his teaching briefly by referring to some scholar's observations and in this way come to the real and main issue.

As we have seen the doctrinal tension between Calvin and Servetus lies in their different views about the Christian doctrine of the trinity. As quoted by De Koster, Doumergue summarizes the content of Servetus' view based on his correspondence as follows:

Those who believe in the Trinity accept a "hellhound with three heads." God is all and all is God, "wood in wood and stone in stone." In the interrogation which preceded his judgment and Geneva, Servetus was asked by Calvin, "By your reasoning, then, is not the devil God?" And Servetus replied, "I believe this to be and absolute truth." Christ cannot be truly God, but only god-like. God was in him only in the same sense that he is in all things, wood and stones a like. Only as logos, the voice of reason, might Christ be called the 'idea' of God. True righteousness resides only in works, never in faith alone. Infants should not be baptized because no man can sin before he reaches the ages of discretion, about twenty years of age, only then need he accept baptism (de Koster 1964, 524).

R.H. Bainton stressed that Servetus's teaching must be understood in connection with the doctrines taught by theologian of the Middle Ages such as Peter Lombard, Richard of St. Victor, Hendri de Gand, William Occam, Robert Holcot, Gregory of Rimini, Pierre D'Ailly and John Major. Servetus was acquainted with this whole line of authors, and he was in the position to subject them all to the touchstone of Biblical authority in the original tongues, Hebrew and Greek (Bainton 1953, 22-31). By contrasting the late scholastic theories with the earliest Biblical formulations, he attacked the course of Trinitarian speculation. He came to conclusion that the doctrine of Trinity is riddled with fallacies. That is why for him the doctrine

of Trinity could be defended only by sheer sophistry (Bainton 1953, 32). Servetus went on to speak about Jesus as follows,

The one thing was perfectly plain: Jesus was a man. The Scriptures over and over again refer to him as a man. He is also called the Son of God and even God. But if he were God, he could be God only in a sense in which man is capable of being God. We must bear in mind, said Servetus, that there are different ways of being God; here he availed himself of the several names for deity in Hebrew which to him connoted varying degrees of divinity. The term Jehovah, he said, is applied to God as the Creator of the Heaven and Earth. This term is never applied to angels or to men. But the term Elohim, indicating a lesser grade, is employed with reference to mortals. This actually invalid distinction in the Hebrew words was designed to conserve at once the unity of God and the humanity of Christ, and likewise to recognize in a meaningful sense the divinity of Christ (Bainton 1953, 40).

Apparently, Servetus's view of Christ is influenced by Pantheism, especially in its concept of God. Through his research into the deep teaching of Servetus, Samuel Macauley Jackson came to the following conclusion,

On the basis of essentially pantheistic view of God, he taught that Christ was truly the Son of God, all the Godhead was corporally manifested in Him, but that His personality was not pre-existent, save in the mind of God and really began with His earthly conception and birth. To Servetus's thinking, the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, - "a sort of three headed Cerberus" - the Calcedonian Christology, and infant baptism were the three chief sources of churchly corruption. He recognized, far more than his opponents, a progress in revelation from the Old Testament to the New; he rejected predestination and attached merit to good works; and believed the end of the present age with the millennial reign of Christ to be just at hand. For the reign his *Res-titution* was to be a preparation (Jackson 1967, 328).

For Servetus, the terms "person" and "Trinity" are not biblical term. Therefore these term must be rejected as unbiblical. And for him the idea of three divine persons is an idea of three gods. The quotation below describes his thought,

Those who maintain that there are three substantial persons or hypostases in God, equal by nature. For them purpose to us three distinct and different substantial things, and they insist that each one of these things (or hypostases as they call it), is distinct God. For when these persons or hypostases, different as to thing and number, are one by one predicated of God, it necessarily follows that there are as many subjects as there are predicates, and that according to the number of the persons, so also the number of the gods are multiplied. And though in words they predicate one such God to us, yet in

effect and fact they represent to us the three Gods in the understanding. For every acute and sincere intellect must see and there are three things proposed for the worship. But how this three, of whom each one is God, make one God in number, no one has ever been able to say or to teach. It is therefore left in the spirit and in the understanding an insoluble perplexity and inexplicable confusion, that there are one, and in the one is three ... But to step up three Gods equal by nature, this is the highest blasphemy an impiety (Odhner 1910, 68).

It is clear that Servetus's concept of the Trinity and Christ is radically different from Calvin's in the *Institutes*, and from the Catholics. To the Protestants and Catholics alike, in that day, he seemed to be an extreme heretic, and he was, indeed, a radical of radicals. Therefore, after learning of Servetus's works Calvin sent to him a copy of his *Institutes* as the first step of his reaction. Then the correspondence between the two was begun.

The Process of Making Decision

If we examine the chronology of Servetus (Bainton 1953, 217-219), it would become clear that in May, 1531, he persuaded Setzer to publish *De Trinitatis Erroribus*. A year later on May 24, 1532 after hearing Alexander's report on *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, Inquisition at Saragosa took place. And on June 17, 1532 Quintana issued a decree for the apprehension of Servetus by correspondence started in 1546. It means that 14 years later after his first publication, Calvin began dealing seriously with the problem. We can imagine that Servetus's thought has been influencing the reformation church, for the topic had become a matter of intensive discourse, even among the Roman Catholics.

After sending the *Institutes* to Servetus and receiving some thirty epistolary discourses from him, Calvin wrote a letter to his colleague Farel expressing that he was very disappointed and concerned about the situation,

Servetus lately wrote to me, and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious, with the Transonic 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

(Bonnet (ed.) 1972, 33; see Bainton 1953, 144-145; Dankbaar 1967, 99).

For Calvin, Servetus cannot be allowed to get out alive. He must be killed as usual for his teaching that had to be a heresy. The same expression cannot be found also in a letter by the Protestants of Geneva to the Catholics of Lyons,

What a shame it is to put to death those who say that we should invoke but one God in the name of Jesus Christ, that there is no other satisfaction than that which is made in the passion ... Yes, and one is not content simply to put these men to death, but they must be most cruelly burned ... (Bainton 1953, 152).

Here we see that for the Protestants of Geneva, Servetus must not only be killed but has to be "cruelly burned." Burning was what the Church usually did to those who insulted church doctrine, especially in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, persecution for heresy had become a part of the thinking of Christendom at the time.

In order to see how deep Calvin's involvement in the Servetus' case was, let us observe the inquisition process and note several facts that should be considered. As we have seen, the Catholic Inquisition in Spain had decided and ordered an arrest to Servetus in June, 1532. In that decision, the death sentence for Servetus had been established.

In the mid of 1530s Calvin arranged to meet him in Paris, at risk of his own life, that he might gain him for the Lord. But Servetus failed to keep the appointment (Parker 1975, 117). So Calvin had a good will that he wanted to work for Servetus's redemption.

It has to be recognized that Guillaume de Trie, a French refugee at Geneva and a personal friend of Calvin, reported to the authorities in Vienne the existence of Servetus through a letter to his cousin living in Vienne. In that letter he said that the city there is living an archheretic, and not merely living, but actually in the employ of the Archbishop himself.

The interrogation by a commission headed by Matthieu Ory, Inquisitor General in Vienna, started in prison on March 15, 1553. This was the first interrogation. The second interrogation was made the day after. In that interrogation he neglect to identify himself as Servetus (Parker 1975, 120f). After the interrogation he tried to escape from the prison early in the morning by climbing the wall, and he succeeded. Based on these facts, the tribunal sentenced him at

their meeting on June 17, 1533, and declared that “he is to be burned alive in a slow fire until his body is to be carried out in effigy and his books are to be burnt” (Parker 1975, 121).

After his escape, Servetus came to Geneva and his case was taken over by magistrate of the city. At the time Calvin’s position in Geneva was at its lowest, for he expected his second expulsion from Geneva would take place in the near future (Parker 1975, 117).⁴

Calvin composed a list of accusations on theological points which Nicolas de la Fontaine, his secretary, submitted to the court which was conducted by Pierre Tissot as prosecutor. The result of the court was that were several points that had to be proved, as follows: (1) That the writings in question were heretical; that is that they were contrary to the Scripture as understood by Catholic fathers and councils, and heretical, moreover, on principal heads of the faith. Thus much time was spent on early Church Christology. (2) That Servetus was the author of the writings in question. (3) That he had written them intending that they should be sold and that therefore the views expressed in them should be communicated to others. (4) That he had verbally or in writing communicated this heretical opinions to other persons, among them M. Calvin, M. Viret and M. Poupin.

It has also to be established from Roman Law that heresy was a criminal offence in the empire. There was therefore much discussion of the Codex of Justinian and of examples or supposed examples of the punishment of heretics by the civil power (Parker 1975, 121f).

On August 21 of the same year, the Little Council asked certain Swiss Churches such as Zurich, Basel, Bern and Schaffhausen for their opinion. All this cities agreed to condemn Servetus’s opinion as heretical, blasphemous, a pestilence (Parker 1975, 122). And on October 26, the Little Council gave their decision, the same sentence as in Vienna. And they pronounced it to the public.

Before the execution Calvin and some ministers asked that Servetus should be spared burning and be beheaded instead. Calvin sought a milder form of death, his disinclination toward cruel executions having already been noted,⁵ but this was refused by the court.

⁴ Calvin’s position was lowest for the case of Berthelier.

⁵ As mentionend in his two letters to Farel before the execution. In his letter on August 20, 1553 he wrote, “I hope that sentence of death will at least be passed upon him; but I desire that the severity of the punishment may be mitigated.” In

So it is clear that there were efforts by Calvin to save Servetus. He had worked for the redemption of Servetus. Calvin's involvement in the process of the inquisition was only by providing a list of accusations on theological points of view. He was not involved in the process of making the decision, and his position in Geneva at the time was weak. On the contrary, when decision has been made for "cruelly burning" he tried to ask for commutation of the sentence as shown in a letter he wrote to Farel.

Conclusion

We would all agree that it should have been impossible in a truly Christian state for Servetus to have been burned alive for wrong belief. That the burning of Servetus was also terrible, is universally agreed. Wm. Childs Robinson stated that in Servetus's case we see Calvin's intolerance of the teachings of heresy but at the same time we also see Calvin's tolerance.⁶

John T. McNeill points out that Calvin's attitude and the treatment accorded by Geneva to the Italian skeptics and heretics was relatively tolerant for the time (McNeill 1954, 133). And of course, we also agree that this case is a case of violence. But we cannot say that the idea of cruelly burning was Calvin's idea. It is interesting to hear Georgia Harkness's opinion (Robinson 1959, 48), that Calvin was no naturally cruel since he never put a Roman Catholic to death for his position." The utmost penalty for the majority of those whose views differed was exile. Calvin did not favor burning for heresy, but he did favor capital punishment for blasphemy. The same opinion is found in Basil Hall. According to him,

Those who wish to focus denigration of Calvin and what he stood for, on his supposed cruelty and dictatorial powers, fail to come to grip with two major another letter he wrote a day before the execution that is on October 26, 1553 he said, "We endeavored to alter the mode of his death, but in vain." See J. Bonnet (ed.), *Letters of John Calvin, Vol. II*, 417, 436.

6 Wm. Child Robinson, "The Tolerance of Our Prophet or Calvin's Tolerance and Intolerance' in: J.T. Hoogstra (ed.), *John Calvin Contemporary Prophet*, Grand Rapids 1959, 46-48. He stated that indeed Calvin began his public life as an advocate of tolerance. His initial book was a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, and the first edition of the *Institutes* declares that it is criminal to put heretics to death. To make an end of them by fire and sword is opposed to every principle of humanity.

facts, First, if Calvin was a cruel man, how did he attract so many, so varied, and so warmly attached friends and associates who speak of sensitiveness, and the charm beneath his shy and withdrawn manner in public life? The evidence is plain for all to read in the course of his vast correspondence. Secondly, if Calvin had dictatorial control over Geneva affairs, how is it that the records of Geneva show him plainly to have been the servant of its Council which on many occasions rejected out of hand Calvin's wishes for the religious life of Geneva, and was always master in Genevan affairs? A reading of Calvin's farewell speech to ministers of Geneva made shortly before he died should resolve doubt upon this point. To call Calvin the 'dictator of theocracy' is in view of the evidence, mere phrase-making prejudice (Hall 1966, 10-11).

Finally, we should be aware that in this case Calvin cannot be blamed easily for his actions and power over the case were limited. He agreed with the execution but he rejected a "cruel burning". As John T. McNeill stated: "Calvin wanted Servetus killed, but by a more merciful death than the flames. ... he declared that in the cases of heresy the glory of God must be maintained regardless of all feelings of humanity" (McNeill 1954, 176).

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