Calvin and Servetus

“On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was burnt after being condemned by the Council of Geneva. The smoke from this fire has never ceased to blacken the memory of Calvin from that day to this.” (Jean Cadier) For this act, Calvin’s name is reviled by his enemies and all who believe only what they have been told about him. Let us remind ourselves of the facts of the case, and try to reach some conclusions.

Michael Servetus was viewed throughout Europe as the arch-heretic of his day. To begin with, he believed “that he was one with the ‘Michael’ in the Book of Revelation fighting against both the dragon of Rome and the ‘Simon Magus’ or ‘Magician’ of Geneva and thus destined to ‘reform’ both the papacy and the Reformation.” (Robert L. Reymond) Moreover, not for twelve centuries had anyone within the Visible Church dared to deny publicly the doctrine of the Trinity, as he had done in his little treatise De Erroribus Trinitatis (On the Errors of the Trinity). In his Christianismi Restitutio (The Restitution of Christianity) he implicitly denied the eternal deity of Christ and asserted Pantheism, saying: “all things are a part and portion of God, and all nature is His substantial spirit.” For his Trinitarian heresy, following a denunciation of him by Guillaume de Trie, a French refugee in Geneva who was devoted to Calvin, Rome condemned him to death by fire.

It should not be forgotten too that his title Restitutio was a deliberate rejection of Calvin’s Institutio: after the institution, the restitution. Appended to the main body of the book are thirty-two letters addressed to Calvin seeking to refute the doctrines of the Institutes. These are of crucial importance in the whole business. In one of them Servetus said that he was willing to travel to Geneva to complete the task of convincing Calvin. The Reformer’s remark to Farel on this point rings like a terrible premature death toll: “I will not pledge my word to him [i.e. for his coming to
Geneva] for if he came I would not, wielding what little influence I have, allow him to depart alive.” Clearly, along with many of his contemporaries, Calvin deemed the denial of the Trinity as much a capital crime as murder. For his part, Servetus had no illusions about the outcome: “I know without a doubt that I shall have to die for this cause, but for all that I do not lose courage, so that I may become a disciple like my Master.”

The way in which the heretic was brought to trial in Geneva is most instructive: de Trie’s cousin, Antoine Arnay, pestered Calvin to hand over Servetus’ letters to him, so that he could give the Papal Inquisitors evidence on which they could take punitive action. When Calvin refused to hand over the letters, Arnay noted that the Reformer felt it “his own duty, having no sword of justice, to convince heretics by teaching.” Nevertheless, Calvin eventually succumbed to Arnay’s request, and the Inquisition condemned Servetus *in absentia*. [It is worth noting that as early as 1534 Calvin had tried to meet Servetus in Paris, “risking his own life,” as he said, “to win him for the Lord.” But Servetus failed to keep the appointment. By the time of Servetus’ arrival in Geneva, all correspondence between the two had been broken off. How mysterious is God’s counsel!]

After the Inquisition’s condemnation became widely known, Calvin wrote: “The rumour is flying around that I engineered the taking of Servetus in a popish land, that is, at Vienne. Whereupon several people say that I did not behave honestly by exposing him to the mortal enemies of the faith.” Calvin denied the charge: “How could I have suddenly become on such familiar terms with the satellites of the pope?” His intention was not to provide the Inquisition with weapons, but to protect Arnay from being punished for accusing Servetus without evidence, according to the law of retribution known as *lex talionis*. Arnay must have handed over the letters out of fear for his life.
Once armed with the letters, the Inquisitor Ory had Servetus arrested (5 April 1553). But soon afterwards he escaped from prison, whereupon he was condemned and burnt in effigy.

Servetus next wandered through various territories for four months. Then, he decided to go to Geneva. Wolfgang Musculus, a Reformed pastor originally from Lorraine, explained to Heinrich Bullinger: “Servetus recently came to Geneva to take advantage of the rancour felt towards Calvin by the government.” Calvin’s following was indeed waning, as he received only a narrow majority of support in the city councils. Evidently “Servetus wished to defy him even in his own city.” (Cadier)

On the Lord’s Day, 13th August, he attended the Church of the Madeleine to hear Calvin preach. He was recognized by some in the congregation, denounced to the criminal lieutenant and arrested. An official complaint was lodged against him by Calvin’s secretary, Nicolas de la Fontaine, who, in accordance with Genevan law, was imprisoned at the same time as the man he had accused.

The trial was a painful and tragic affair. Before civil magistrates, Calvin and Servetus discussed the authority of Scripture, and Servetus’ anti-Trinitarian and Pantheistic teachings. The opinion of other Swiss Reformed cities was sought. On 22 September, Servetus demanded that Calvin “be punished with the punishment of the lex talionis and be detained prisoner as I am myself until the case be finished by the death of one or other of us, or some other punishment . . . I am content to die if he is not convicted.”

On 18th October the reply from the other Swiss churches arrived. They all decided that Servetus was guilty of heresy, but that it was the duty of the Genevan magistrates, not theirs, to decide his punishment. By 26th October, the wavering Genevan authorities finally decided that the heretic should be taken to the hill Champel near the city’s south gate and burnt at the stake. Immediately the Council’s sentence was known, Calvin wrote to his fellow
Reformer Guillaume Farel: “Tomorrow Servetus will be taken to his punishment. We have done everything we can to change the type of death, but in vain.” Jean Rilliet comments: “legal custom . . won the day over Calvin’s request. Yet he is the one who is always held responsible for the burning which he desired should never take place.”

Shortly before his dreadful ordeal, Servetus asked Calvin to forgive him. The Reformer replied: “I profess that I never held any personal grievance against you.” Reminding the doomed man of his former attempts to win him “for our Lord,” Calvin asked him to “think of beseeching God for His forgiveness, the God whom you have blasphemed by wishing to efface the three Persons who are in His essence. Rather ask the Son of God for His pardon, the one whom you have disfigured and virtually denied as Saviour.”

Theodore Beza, Calvin’s colleague in Geneva, observed that in his dying prayer Servetus cried: “O Jesus, son of eternal God, have pity on me.” What a world of difference there is between this and: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Thou eternal Son of God, have mercy on me.”

The burning of Servetus is indefensible. As Sebastian Castellio, a young lecturer banned from Geneva for denying the canonicity of the Song of Songs, said: “To kill a man is not to protect a doctrine; it is to kill a man.” Even the erroneously named granite ‘expiatory monument’ erected in 1903 on the spot where Servetus died does not exonerate the Genevan City Council. Yet Calvin is not to be blamed for his burning. He was a theologian, not an executioner. His principal desire was to see Servetus brought back to the truth. But the whole system — by which the church would condemn a man for heresy, then hand him over to the state for punishment — was (and still is in some places) a Satanic travesty of the spiritual discipline which Christ bequeathed to His church. O may we be kept from ever condoning or participating in it!