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SERVETUS' EDUCATION AND PUBLICATIONS

Early Life

There is little information about the early life of Michael Servetus. This is unfortunate because it would be helpful to have a window into the development of his character and doctrine. What is known is that he was a native of the Spanish region of Aragon and was raised under the tutelage of Dominican friars.¹ By 1526 he was studying law in Toulouse, and through 1530–1531 he began to travel Europe. Notably, when he was around twenty years of age, he visited significant figures of the

1. Servetus' birthplace and birthdate are debated because of conflicting testimony by Servetus during his trials at Vienne and Geneva. For a helpful chronology of Servetus' life, see Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511-1553* (Providence, RI: Blackstone Editions, 2005), 168–70.

Reformation: Johannes Œcolampadius (1482–1531) of Basel (even living with the reformer) and Martin Bucer of Strasbourg.²

Early on, Œcolampadius wrote to Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75), Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), and Wolfgang Capito (1478–41) to warn them of Servetus' doctrine and belligerent attitude.³ Even at this early stage in 1530, Zwingli admonished Œcolampadius: 'This is intolerable in the church of God; therefore strive in whatever way you can, not to allow his horrible blasphemies to spread abroad to the detriment of Christianity.'⁴

Following Œcolampadius' letter to Servetus which stated that his doctrine was of 'the highest blasphemy,' Servetus left Basel after ten months of being unable to convince Œcolampadius of his peculiar Christological views.⁵

Taking leave of Basel, Servetus then turned to Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, but was quickly asked to leave.⁶ Servetus then brazenly returned to Basel, but the magistrates arrested him and ordered him to recant of his heresy.⁷

Servetus' distaste for the doctrine of the Trinity grew, and in 1531 he published *On the Errors of the Trinity* (*De Trinitatis*

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2. Jeff Fisher, 'Housing a Heretic: Johannes Œcolampadius (1482–1531) and the "Pre-History" of the Servetus Affair,' *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 20:1 (2018), 35–50. See Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* [= CO], 59 volumes, edited by Guilielmus Baum, August Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Bad Feilnbach: Schmidt Periodicals, 1990), 8:767.
 3. CO, 8:744; cf. 8:866–68.
 4. Quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 8:715.
 5. Ibid., 8:857. Œcolampadius evidences his understanding of Servetus' Christological views in his letter, 'To Servetus the Spaniard who denies that Christ is the consubstantial Son of God from Johannes Œcolampadius' (Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 33).
 6. In a letter from 30 December 1531, Bucer assured Servetus that he would be safe in Strasbourg as long as he did not disturb or seduce anyone (CO, 8:868).
 7. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 219.

Erroribus, 1531) where he propounded views similar to the ancient heresy of Sabellianism (Modalism).⁸ Denial of the Trinity would not be Servetus' only heresy: he also held to baptismal regeneration, rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone,⁹ believed that mortal sin was not applicable until the age of 20,¹⁰ and rejected infant baptism (also condemned as heresy at the time).

The next year he wrote *Two Books of Dialogues on the Trinity* (*Dialogorum Duo*, 1532) where he retracted his theology, not on the basis of them being wrong, but because they were an immature representation of the truth.¹¹ Uncharacteristic of one who is now heralded as a model of tolerance, Servetus concluded his work by praying that God would 'destroy all tyrants of the Church.'¹²

Despite anti-Trinitarianism and Anabaptism being punishable by death according to the Imperial law of the Holy Roman Empire at that time, and the fact that heretics were executed in Basel and Strasbourg, it is important to note that Servetus was

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8. Ibid. Sabellianism is the belief that there is one person in one God who manifests Himself in different ways. With this interpretation, Jesus is the Father. Contemporary proponents of this are 'Jesus Only' denominations such as Oneness Pentecostals. A notable figure in this movement is T.D. Jakes.
 9. Schaff, 8:749.
 10. See Michael Servetus, *Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio*. Translated by Christopher Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007). At his trial, Servetus asserted that all sins prior to the age of 20 are not considered by God to be mortal (*CO*, 8:740.30–32).
 11. In Michael Serveto, *The Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity* (trans. Earl Wilbur; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 188.
 12. 'On the Righteousness of Christ's Kingdom,' *The Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity*, 264. As an example of this mischaracterization, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone write that Servetus' 'crime was publishing a book that redefined Christianity in a more tolerant and inclusive way' (*Out of the Flames* [New York: Broadway Books, 2002], 1).

not executed in either city, but expelled.¹³ Despite Œcolampadius' and Bucer's recognition of Servetus' heresies, the reason why Servetus was not arrested in these cities is likely due to the fact that he was a young man in his early twenties. Given that there is precedent for expulsion instead of execution, a valid question should be raised as to why Servetus was not expelled from Geneva. This will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Medical Training

As a result of the spread of Servetus' heretical writings, he changed his name to Miguel de Villeneuve and lived for twenty years (1532–1553) hiding his true identity.¹⁴ Servetus moved to France in 1534 and was active in Orléans, Avignon, and Lyons. In his travels he studied medicine at Paris and later at Montpellier. He wrote on controversial themes such as *Apology for Astrology* (1536), medical themes such as *The Universal Use of Syrups* (1537), and he edited Ptolemy's *Geography* in Latin.¹⁵

It is in Paris that we see early signs of Servetus' character that would be a significant factor in his Genevan trial. Namely, Servetus exhibited prideful behavior when the faculty of Paris censured him. Dean Thagault (Dean of the Medical Faculty)

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13. On 11 August 1530, a month following the arrival of Servetus in Basel, Konrad in der Gassen was executed (beheaded and burned) for rejecting the New Testament, the power of prayer, the virgin birth, and Chalcedonian Christology. See S. Zijlstra, *Om de ware gemeente en de oude gronden: Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden 1531–1675* (Hilversum, Netherlands: Verloren, 2000), 75. See also Jeff Fisher, 'Housing a Heretic.'
 14. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 269. Changing one's name for publication was not uncommon, and was even practiced by Calvin himself, who wrote under the pseudonym, 'Charles d'Espeville.'
 15. Servetus refers to himself as a Doctor of Medicine from the University of Paris, but his graduation is debatable because of the faculty's disapproval of his views on astrology.

tried to persuade Servetus not to publish his controversial views on astrology, and recorded Servetus' response to this admonishment: 'He was abusive in the presence of several scholars and two or three doctors.'¹⁶

When Servetus persisted and published his *Apology for Astrology*, he was brought before a university council that was chaired by the president of the University of Paris, Pierre Lizet. When charges were brought against Servetus on 18 March 1538, the minutes record his response:

The representative of the Faculty of Medicine complained that when the doctors remonstrated graciously Villeneuve had replied insolently. He had published not so much an apology as an invective against those who candidly admonished him. He, a student, accuses his teachers of imperiousness. He owes them respect as masters and instead he calls them monsters.¹⁷

Despite his negative disposition, Servetus is credited with the discovery of the lesser pulmonary circulation of the blood from the heart to the lungs.

Following his medical training, Servetus left Paris and practiced medicine in Lyon, Avignon, and Charlieu, France.¹⁸ Significantly, from 1540–1553 he became the personal physician of his former Parisian classmate, Pierre Palmier (d. 1554), the Archbishop of Vienne, France.

16. Quoted in Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 75.

17. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

18. Citing Bolsec, Schaff notes that Servetus' 'arrogance made him so unpopular that he had to leave Charlieu' (*History of the Christian Church*, 8:725).

Relationship to Calvin

Concerning Servetus' relationship with Calvin, they were both students at the University of Paris in the early 1530s, but there is no evidence to suggest that the two became acquainted. Although Calvin was forced to flee Paris in October 1534 (following the Placard Affair), Servetus initiated a correspondence with Calvin on doctrine.

A significant event occurred during this time of persecution when, upon Servetus' request, Calvin agreed to meet for a theological discussion in Paris. The seriousness of this cannot be overstated—Protestants were being burned alive, which was the impetus for Calvin to write his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. At the risk of his own life, Calvin exposed himself to meet Servetus at Rue St. Antoine, but Servetus did not keep the appointment.¹⁹

Although Servetus offended Calvin by not meeting him in Paris, Calvin agreed to correspond with him from 1546–1548.²⁰ In letters that contained the early manuscripts of Servetus' final work, *The Restoration of Christianity* (1553),²¹ which would prove to be primary evidence in the future trial of Servetus, he wrote to Calvin on the nature of Christ, the presence of the kingdom, and baptism.

Exhibiting behavior similar to that which he showed in Paris towards his professors, Servetus' letters contained vitriol

19. *CO*, 8:826. Calvin was open to dialogue with men struggling with such theological issues. One may see the same congenial spirit in Calvin's correspondences with Lelio Socin ('CCLXXXIX—To Lelio Socin,' 1551, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1–7, edited by Jules Bonnet and translated by David Constable (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 5:330–31.

20. Calvin describes his efforts with Servetus in his 'Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal', in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, edited and translated by Henry Beveridge, 2:358.

21. These letters may be found in *CO*, 8:645–714.

and condescension towards Calvin. Servetus wrote things such as: 'Very horribly you do tear God apart, blot out the true son, and fashion new gods';²² 'the invisible gods of the Trinitarians are false, as false as the gods of the Babylonians';²³ 'I have often warned you not to admit the existence of the great and quite impossible monstrosity of the three entities in God which has no proof in any scripture properly understood [your] arguments are too weak for positing such a great monstrosity in God';²⁴ 'focus your mind briefly and I shall lead you by the hand';²⁵ 'wherefrom do you have dreams about so great a barbarity of a separate son in the divine generative act?';²⁶ 'I am plainly amazed that a man with a well-ordered mind, as you claim to be, you are cast into so deep a sea by so tiny a gust and that you would insist on clinging to so many crags and beasts';²⁷ 'Your illusion under the Antichrist's reign is indebted to the mesmerized Sophists who are inexperienced in the sacred tongue';²⁸ 'what demon has taught you ...?';²⁹ 'you have wholly deluded yourself';³⁰ 'you have not yet been born from heaven you ... are shameless and blasphemous';³¹ 'your sort of

22. Michael Servetus, *Thirty Letters to Calvin, Preacher to the Genevans & Sixty Signs of the Kingdom of the Antichrist and His Revelation Which Is Now at Hand*, translated by Christopher Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 1–2.

23. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

24. *Ibid.*, 9.

25. *Ibid.*, 16.

26. *Ibid.*, 27.

27. *Ibid.*, 32.

28. *Ibid.*, 43.

29. *Ibid.*, 46.

30. *Ibid.*, 49.

31. *Ibid.*, 55.

justification is satanic';³² 'abandon your magical delusions';³³ 'your understanding is shown to be ridiculous, nay, a magical delusion';³⁴ 'you are a thief and a brigand';³⁵ 'you wickedly confuse the times of the law and the gospel';³⁶ 'your ignorance is great, such that you cannot understand';³⁷ 'You are the most wretched of all mortals, if this demon [belief] always disturbs your own mind';³⁸ and 'you subvert everything and confuse heaven and earth.'³⁹

Eventually, not wishing to spend time on that for which he had already written, Calvin simply sent his *Institutes* to Servetus.⁴⁰ *Quid pro quo*, Servetus returned Calvin's *Institutes* with his personal criticisms noted in the margins, along with a biting letter.⁴¹ Characteristic of his abusive language that affected his medical career in Paris, Servetus wrote to Calvin, 'I have often told you that triad of impossible monstrosities that you admit in God is not proved by any Scriptures properly understood.'⁴² He continued: 'This shows that your knowledge is ridiculous, nay, a magical enchantment and a lying justification.'⁴³

Calvin was so incensed at Servetus that he wrote to William Farel (1489–1565), 'Servetus lately wrote to me, and coupled with his letter a long volume of his delirious fancies, with

32. *Ibid.*, 59.

33. *Ibid.*, 60.

34. *Ibid.*, 62.

35. *Ibid.*, 69.

36. *Ibid.*, 125–26.

37. *Ibid.*, 127–28.

38. *Ibid.*, 135.

39. *Ibid.*, 158.

40. *CO*, 8:487–95.

41. *Ibid.*, 8:482–500 and 649–720.

42. *Ibid.*, 8:653.

43. *Ibid.*, 8:674.

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.⁴⁴

While critics of Calvin cite this letter as proof of Calvin's bloodlust for Servetus, it is helpful to consider the context of Calvin's limitations in Geneva. Yale historian Bruce Gordon responds to Calvin's statement on not allowing Servetus to leave Geneva alive: 'that remark needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. Calvin could be cruel to opponents, and he did not hesitate to persecute them, but there is nothing to suggest that he actively sought to kill them.'⁴⁵ In support of Gordon's claim, it should be noted that Calvin knew of Servetus' identity and could have reported him to the Catholic authorities, but refrained. Additionally, he could have promised Servetus safe conduct to Geneva in order to trap him, but did not.

It is also helpful to review a letter of Calvin about Servetus, which was written on the same day as his letter to Farel. In this letter, Calvin expresses hope of Servetus' repentance:

I am very ready to gratify your wishes, although I have little hope of availing anything with a man of such a disposition as he seems to possess; but yet I will try whether there is any means of bringing him to reason, which may be accomplished if God shall work an entire change in him. Since he wrote me in so haughty a tone I have wished to humble his pride, by speaking to him with a little more severity than is my custom; I could not do otherwise, for I assure you, that no lesson is

44. 'CLIV–To Farel,' 13 February 1546, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 5:33. For similar sentiments concerning an anonymous heretic, see Calvin's letter, 'CCXCII–To Madame de Cany,' January 1552, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 5:338–41.

45. Gordon, 217.

more necessary for him to learn than that of humility, which will come to him only through the influence of the Spirit of God. But still we must use our exertions for it. If God shall be so gracious to him and to us as to make this reply profitable to him, I shall have occasion for joy.⁴⁶

Consequently, it is likely that Calvin's comments to Farel were born in anger and, while not representing a pursuit to have Servetus executed, give insight into Calvin's future support of Servetus' execution. As will be shown below, the pastors of Geneva had no such power. This authority resided only with the secular state.

As a result of Servetus' persistent 'incurable obstinacy' towards orthodox doctrine, Calvin refused to continue writing in order to 'comply with what Paul mentions' (possibly a reference to Titus 3:10).⁴⁷ Servetus continued to write Calvin some thirty times, but with no reply.⁴⁸ Not satisfied with Calvin's silence, Servetus turned his wrath on Calvin's fellow minister in Geneva, Abel Poupin. In his characteristic style, Servetus wrote:

Your gospel is without God, without true faith, without good works. Instead of a God you have a three-headed Cerberus. For faith you have a deterministic dream, and good works you say

46. 'CLIII-To John Frellon,' 13 February 1546, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 5:30-31. In this letter, Calvin wrote under the pseudonym, 'Charles d'Esperville.' Calvin wrote of this hope: 'For God, whenever it pleases him, changes the worst men into the best, engrafts the alien, and adopts the stranger into the church' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960], 2:1237).

47. 'VI-To Viret,' 1 September 1548, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 7:409.

48. Servetus' continued correspondences may be found in *CO*, 8:645-714.

are inane pictures. With you the faith of Christ is mere deceit effecting nothing. Man is with you an inert trunk, and God is a chimera of the enslaved will You close the Kingdom of Heaven before men ... Woe! Woe! Woe! This is the third letter that I have written to warn you that you may know better. I will not warn you again. Perhaps it will offend you that I meddle in this fight of Michael [the Archangel against Satan] and wish to involve you. Study that passage carefully and you will see that they are men who will fight there, giving their souls to death in blood and for a testimony to Jesus Christ I know that I shall certainly die on this account, but I do not falter that I may be a disciple like the Master.⁴⁹

As a foreshadowing of things to come, Servetus would die for his doctrine.

49. CO, 8:750-1, quoted in Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 99.