

THE 454TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BURNING OF MICHAEL SERVETUS

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On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus, after being tried by John Calvin, the top religious authority in Geneva, was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake.

Calvin and Servetus were two of the most brilliant leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Both were trained in the new humanistic methods of the European Renaissance, and both were committed to returning Christianity to a fully scriptural basis.

In addition to several European languages, Servetus was an expert in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic. The fact that he could read the Qu'ran in the original was later used against him. He was also one of the greatest doctors of his time, discovering pulmonary circulation long before William Harvey.

Servetus was the first scholar to point out that doctrine of the Virgin Birth was based on a mistranslation. The Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 says that a "young woman [not a virgin] shall conceive and bear a son. . . ." The context of the verse also indicates a birth in the near future, not 500 years later.

Even before Servetus, scholars had noticed that translations of 1 John 5:7 were heavily doctored to support the Trinity when in fact the original Greek reads "Spirit, water, and the blood." Unfortunately, the King James translation still has the Trinitarian phrasing and that is why newer translations are preferred.

Servetus and all religious liberals who follow him were the only Christians who actually embraced Luther's dictum that all believers should be their own priests. What this meant was that religion should be a strictly personal matter, one unencumbered by external authority. Sadly, Luther and Calvin very quickly broke this great promise of religious freedom and started asserting their own authority in ruthless and violent ways.

The same fate awaited the Unitarians, who confidently declared that the Trinity

was not biblical, especially now that 1 John 5:7 could not be used. But the response to Servetus' first book rejecting the Trinity was so vicious that he decided to live under an assumed name and pursue a very successful medical practice.

Calvin read Servetus' book and the two exchanged some acrimonious letters. Calvin joined Luther and Roman Catholics in condemning Servetus' rejection of infant baptism, and Calvin was particularly incensed that Servetus rejected his doctrine of predestination.

Calvin wrote to religious authorities in France reminding them that they had a duty to punish this great sinner. At first they ignored his entreaties, thinking that it was rather odd for one heretic to be turning in another.

Servetus was finally arrested, but he managed to escape from prison. He decided to join some Italian Unitarians in Naples, but instead of taking a much safer sea route, Servetus chose to travel through Switzerland instead.

Mysteriously drawn to his new adversary, he made the fatal error of overnighting in Geneva. Servetus was a Spaniard of Jewish descent that made him easily recognizable. He was arrested and thrown into a lice infested dungeon.

Defenders of Calvin claim that he gave Servetus due process and he did only what the Catholic authorities would have done in France. But Calvin did not allow Servetus legal counsel, and besides Calvin had no legal authority to try Servetus for heresy.

After finding him guilty on two counts—denying the Trinity and infant baptism—Calvin handed him over to civil leaders to be executed. Right at the last minute, Calvin proposed to have Servetus beheaded instead, but Geneva's civil authorities stood by the standard form of execution for heresy of this magnitude.

Hollywood dramatizes burning at the stake as a quick affair with dry wood piled high around the neck of the wretched heretic. Servetus begged for a quick death, but his executioners followed the tradition of their Catholic enemies: using the greenest

wood for the slowest fire. It took a full thirty minutes for Servetus to die, unrepentant, as a martyr for all those who support full religious freedom.

Religious wars and persecution went on for another 250 years before American religious liberals such as Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, and Paine, some rejecting the Trinity and the deity of Christ, made sure that freedom of conscience was written into the U.S. Constitution.

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