

Michael Servetus – a victim of orthodoxy

Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. (John 6:47-48 NIV)

Who has eternal life? According to Jesus Christ, it is simply the person who believes. What is simple, religion has often rendered complex. What is life-giving, religion has at times made deadly. Jesus invites us to believe, but the religious may want to argue about the truly acceptable orthodoxy.

Michael Servetus is an example of a believer who was harmed by the unforgiving gears of religious orthodoxy. His story should remind us to guard ourselves against the “leaven of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:6) and to instead serve the “bread of life” to all who hunger.

On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was executed by being burned alive by his fellow Christians. (Christianity Today) Michael and his executioners all believed in Jesus Christ as the son of God, but they understood the sonship in different ways. Michael Servetus had a belief in Christ worth dying for, while his executioners had a belief in Christ that was worth killing over.

The Spaniard, Michael Servetus, was born in 1509 (or possibly 1511) and went by many names. In Spain, he was called Miguel Serveto. In France, he was Michel Servet. He was also known by the pseudonym Miguel de Villanueva. Known as a theologian, physician, cartographer, and Renaissance humanist, he was a polymath whose knowledge spanned a substantial number of subjects. This man with many names could rightly be called mathematician, astronomer, meteorologist, geographer, an expert of human anatomy, medicine, and pharmacology, as well as jurisprudence, translator, poet, and a scholar of the Bible in its original languages. (Popular Science, Britannica “Michael Servetus”)

Born in the middle of the Renaissance, Servetus was a great thinker, author, and scientist. Born only a few years before the reformation day of October 31, 1517, he was living in a period of great upheaval and change among Christians. Michael Servetus would leave behind his mark upon the Renaissance and the Reformation.

At a time when people practiced “bloodletting” as a medical treatment, Servetus’ questioning curiosity brought him to the conclusion that the Bible was correct to say, “the life of the flesh is in the blood.” (Leviticus 17:11) In the 1500s Michael Servetus became "the first who proclaimed the true way in which the blood from the right (*chamber*) reaches the left chambers of the heart by passing through the lungs, and even hinted at its further course by the arteries to the body at large." (Popular Science p109) He wrote down his pulmonary circulation discovery in the very book that would later get him executed, the **Christianismi Restitutio** (The Restoration of Christianity).

How could an exceptional man meet such a cruel and painful end at the hands of religious ministers?

Servetus leaves Spain as a teenager to study law at the University of Toulouse in France. Little is known about the young man until he ends up in Basel, Switzerland. It is unknown what made him travel to Basel, although some historians feel “Servetus was probably looking for a suitable environment to continue his mission of reformation and expected to find **Erasmus (1466-1536)** and engage him in discussions.” (Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant p36)

Erasmus had written the following words in the edition of church Father, Hilary of Poitiers (315-367) published in 1523:

“We define so many things which may be left in ignorance or in doubt without loss of salvation. Is it not possible to have fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without being

able to explain philosophically the distinction between them and between the nativity of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit? If I believe the tradition that there are three of one nature, what is the use of labored disputation? If I do not believe, I shall not be persuaded by any human reasons You will not be damned if you do not know whether the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son has one or two beginnings, but you will not escape damnation, if you do not cultivate the fruits of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering, mercy, faith, modesty, continence, and chastity ... The sum of our religion is peace and unanimity, but these can scarcely stand unless we define as little as possible, and in many things leave each one free to follow his own judgment because there is great obscurity in many matters... When faith is in the mouth rather than in the heart, when the solid knowledge of Sacred Scripture fails us, nevertheless by terrorization we drive men to believe what they do not believe, to love what they do not love, to know what they do not know. That which is forced cannot be sincere, and that which is not voluntary cannot please Christ.” (Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant p36-37)

These sayings of the Dutch reformer and Catholic theologian, Erasmus, would have great appeal to a Michael Servetus who had already begun to wrestle with his sincere faith. Unfortunately for Servetus, when he arrived in Basel, he discovered that Erasmus had already departed. One wonders how the story might be different had Servetus connected with Erasmus at this time in Basel, Switzerland. Instead of connecting with an ally, Michael Servetus connected with the very person who would testify against him.

Upon discovering that Erasmus had left Basel, Servetus sought out a first-generation reformer named **Johannes Oecolampadius(1492-1531)**. He was an ordained priest and reformed pastor who assisted Erasmus on the “first edition of the Greek New Testament, and earned a doctorate of divinity from the University of Basel.” (Housing a Heretic p36) When Servetus arrived in Basel in July 1530, he stayed for 10 months and lived in Oecolampadius’s

house. Servetus was around 20 years old and Oecolampadius was 48 years old at the time and did not know that he was housing a future heretic.

While historians describe the early interactions between the roommates as friendly and patient, within a few months Oecolampadius was becoming agitated and displeased over the anti-trinitarian views of Servetus. Oecolampadius said during this time in a letter to Servetus...

“For as if I am idle, you drive me on about whatever the Sorbonne trifles about the Trinity. Meanwhile, when I do not carry myself with the highest patience – while grieving that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is dishonored in such a way – I am seen by you to act less Christian...” - Johannes Oecolampadius around 1530 CE (Housing a Heretic p36)

In this letter the reformer called Servetus’ views “the highest blasphemy” and “diabolical cunning.” Oecolampadius disagrees with the “contentions that the traditional view of Trinity used merely human terms not found in the Bible, that the Word and the Son were distinct persons; and that the prophetic scriptures only spoke about Christ the man as a future Son of God.” (Housing a Heretic p38)

Near the end of the letter Oecolampadius focuses his attention on a confession of faith written by Servetus that sounded mostly orthodox. Oecolampadius wrote, “A simple person perhaps might approve of your confession and suspect nothing. However, because you declared your mind, I loathe it as false.” It shows that while they should be able to agree on the confession of faith, Oecolampadius has already found him guilty of independent thought and boldness to declare one’s mind.

The closing of the letter are these words. “I do not write that with hot anger, but I desire to guard the faith in my God, who I pray may illuminate you so that you will actually believe and confess that Christ is the Son of God. Amen.” Servetus did believe and confess that Christ is the

Son of God, in fact, his dying words confess this Truth, but Oecampadius rejected the faith of Servetus because of his disagreements over the Trinity doctrine.

In his next letter Oecolampadius better describes what he means by believing in the Son of God. “I urge you to confess that the Son of God is consubstantial and coeternal on account of the union with the Word so that we can consider you a Christian. Farewell.” During this time of reformation, it became clear that it was not enough to confess Jesus as the Son of God but to confess Him in Trinitarian terms as a consubstantial and coeternal second person.

One is reminded here how Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16 NIV) Jesus declared this confession to be blessed and a revelation from the Father in heaven (Matthew 16:17), but the reformers believed it was worthy of execution to confess as the apostle Peter had.

Oecolampadius began to urge other reformers to reject Servetus. Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) reported that such warnings went to himself, “Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), and Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541), that Servetus was expressing views similar to Arianism [a denial in the deity of Jesus Christ].

So what exactly did Servetus believe about the Godhead? Oecolampadius was incorrect as Servetus was not an Arian. And while he is a hero among Unitarians/Arians, it is for his anti-trinitarian views and his conviction to die for his beliefs that he is held in their high regard. “Scholars from all perspectives have noted the difficulty of labeling or categorizing Servetus’s views on the Trinity. Marian Hillar perhaps labels it most accurately when he states that Servetus’s view can best be described as ‘historical modalism.’” (Michael Servetus Intellectual Giant p40-41) [Modalism – Father, Son, Holy Ghost are 3 manifestations of the one God]

In *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, written in 1531, Servetus affirms the deity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost – something an Arian would never do. In it he describes Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

as “three wonderful dispositions of GOD, in each of which DIVINITY shines forth.” (De Trinitatis p29) Servetus contended that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity had developed from Greek philosophy rather than scripture, and his definition of the Godhead refused terms like “Persons” but instead used words like manifestation or disposition which are more in line with Modalistic Monarchianism. (Michael Servetus Intellectual Giant p41)

There is still today much false information spread about Servetus as an Arian who denied the deity of Christ. Proof that religion not only physically assassinated Servetus, but continues to assassinate his character. The truth is that Servetus affirmed Jesus as the son of God, and as God in flesh, but did deny Jesus as the “eternal son of God” or “God the son”, both of which he would point out are unscriptural terms.

Servetus, being the Renaissance man who relished challenging error, published *De Trinitatis Erroribus* near the end of July 1531. Servetus was aware that Oecolampadius was urging other reformers to reject him, and knew he would press the prohibition of his freshly printed book. He wrote Oecolampadius, saying, “I beg you, by God, to spare my name and fame. Do not provoke an uproar among others who are not involved with the present complaint.” (Housing a Heretic p42)

More than pleading for the freedom of his book publication, Servetus appears to beg for his own life in this letter. “Even if you find me erring on one point, you should not on that account condemn me in all, for according to this, there is no mortal who would not be **burned** a thousand times ... The greatest of the apostles were sometimes in error, [and] you do not condemn Luther on other matters even though you see well that he errs... it seems to me to be a serious matter to **kill men** because they are in error on some question of scriptural understanding, when we know that even the elect may be led into error.” (Housing a Heretic p43)

The reality of the danger of an original thinker during the reformation was no doubt influenced by the execution of Konrad der Gassen in August 1530 for questioning Chalcedonian Christology. Konrad's beheading and burning occurs only 1 month after Servetus arrived in Basel. The year before his Basel arrival, the Reformation ordinances instituted severe regulations against Anabaptists and those who denied the divinity of Christ. While Servetus was allowed to stay in Basel without persecution, it must have been evident what would likely happen if you did not line up with Reformation dogma. (Housing a Heretic p44)

Oecolampadius died in November 1531, before the publication of Servetus' second book, *Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity* in 1532. Although Oecampadius had died, his words against Servetus lived on and would be used in his trials and execution.

Following the publication of 'Two Treaties', Servetus fled into anonymity for nearly two decades under the name **Michael de Villeneuve**, only to emerge again in 1553 at the publishing of his third theological writing, *Christianismi Restitutio* [The Restoration of Christianity].

In 1532 Michael Servetus, now known as Michael de Villeneuve, was back in France, attending the university of Paris at the same time another theologian was attending, **John Calvin** (1509-1564). There is no proof that the two ever met during this time, but there is proof Villeneuve served at the university as a mathematician and also studied medicine in 1534. Also in 1534 there was to be a debate held between Calvin and Villanueva over theology but Villanueva did not appear for unknown reasons.

In 1546 Michael Servetus, again using his real name, started a correspondence with John Calvin (pseudonym Charles D'Esperville) and sent him an early manuscript of '*Christianismi Restitutio*.' This correspondence spanned from Servetus in Vienne, France to John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. The first three questions submitted by Servetus to Calvin were:

1. "Is the man Jesus, the crucified, the Son of God, and if so, how did this come to be?";

2. "Does the kingdom of Jesus Christ exist among men; and if so, at what moment does one enter it and how is one regenerated?";
3. "Should the baptism of Christ be a requirement of faith, as is the Lord's Supper, and to what purpose were these instituted under the New Testament? (Michael Servetus Intellectual Giant p85)

Calvin politely excuses himself from a full answer, claiming to be busy. He instead refers Servetus to his *Institutio* (His seminal work published 1536) which he sent with his letter. Servetus annotated the book and sent it back to Calvin. Calvin did not enjoy this challenge to his work and on February 13, 1546 wrote to fellow reformer **Guillaume Farel** these words that reveal a murderous motive. "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." Calvin this same year is said to have sent a letter to a Catholic Cardinal de Tournon alerting him to the heretic in nearby Vienne. "The Cardinal supposedly found it amusing that a heretic (Calvin) would be accusing another heretic(Servetus)." (Michael Servetus Intellectual Giant p86)(The veracity of this account is called into question by some due to Catholic vs Protestant bias)

It is important to point out that everyone was considered a heretic during this time. The Reformed Protestants thought the Catholics were heretics, and vice versa. The fight for orthodoxy was much more complex than a fight for right and wrong. Yet, we see Calvin, a heretic, reaching out to the heretic Catholics to apprehend a modalist heretic named Servetus. Servetus was viewed as a true enemy for Calvin.

When Calvin's letter to Cardinal de Tournon failed to move the Catholics against Servetus, he turned to a friend named **Guillaume de Trie**, a merchant in Geneva and former sheriff of Lyon. On February 26, 1553 de Trie composed a letter to his devout Catholic cousin, **Antoine Arneys**, along with the first 8 eight pages of Servetus' anti-trinitarian book,

Christianismi Restitutio. De Trie's complaints of heresy were really a letter dictated by Calvin's murderous motive. De Trie was not versed in theological matters and could not have a copy of Christianismi Restitutio because it was not available in Geneva. It is highly likely that Calvin's copy of the book, words, and will, were in this letter. (Michael Servetus Intellectual Giant p118)

April 4, 1553 Servetus was imprisoned in Vienne, and escaped prison on April 7. The Catholic inquisition condemned him in absentia and burned him and any of his writings in effigy. Servetus was running for his life and for some reason ended up in Geneva. Some think that he was just passing through, and some consider that he wanted to face Calvin in person. On August 13, 1553 Servetus attended a Church service in Geneva, was recognized, and imprisoned.

Calvin, who had written these words in a letter to Farel, "I shall never permit him to depart alive, provided my authority be of any avail," and now Calvin did use his authority and actively presented the 39 allegations of heresy and led the prosecution of the trial. He provided every letter and the copies of books Servetus had sent him in correspondence. He also provided testimony from the letters of Oecolampadius, who condemned Servetus, his roommate, from beyond the grave. Only Servetus testified in his own defense. All Protestants in Geneva and Catholics in Vienna were against Servetus for the crime of faith and speaking his mind.

The martyrdom of Michael Servetus became complete on October 27, 1553, when he was burnt alive at the stake. Calvin is said to have "spent the hour on his knees" praying for his soul at the time of his painful death. (Michael Servetus Saint) Trying to either chide him or to convert the guilty heretic was Farel, who was the first to hear of Calvin's plan to "never permit him to depart alive."

The Christians of Geneva put half-green wood around the feet of Michael Servetus and a crown like wreath strewn with sulfur on his head. It took over thirty minutes to render him

lifeless in such a fire, while the people of Geneva stood around to watch Michael Servetus suffer and slowly die.

“When the executioner began his work, Servetus whispered with a trembling voice: 'Oh God, Oh God!' The thwarted Farel snapped at him: 'Have you nothing else to say?' This time Servetus replied to him: 'What else might I do, but speak of God!' Thereupon he was lifted onto the pyre and chained to the stake. A wreath strewn with sulfur was placed on his head. When the faggots were ignited, a piercing cry of horror broke from him. 'Mercy, mercy!' he cried. For more than half an hour the horrible agony continued, for the pyre had been made of half-green wood, which burned slowly. 'Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have mercy on me,' the tormented man cried from the midst of the flames.” (The Heretics p327)

"Farel noted that Servetus might have been saved by shifting the position of the adjective and confessing Christ as the Eternal Son rather than as the Son of the Eternal God." (Hunted Heretic p214)

Servetus in death gave the same confession of the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:16 – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This confession was blessed according to Jesus, yet worthy of a most brutal and painful death according to self-proclaimed orthodox religion.

While many reformers believed that Servetus’ cry was heretical, many still to this day remember his cry as a great example of conviction in the face of religious persecution.

What is one to do with this story? Is it not enough to declare Jesus, the Christ and Son of the Eternal God? Is it orthodox to persecute and murder those who define the “mystery of Godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16) in slightly different terms? Let us pray that we [Protestant, Catholic, and outsider] “all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13 NIV)

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