

[Christianity](#) / [Church](#) / [Church History](#) / [Timeline](#) / **1501-1600**

6000-1 BC AD 1-300 301-600 601-900 901-1200 1201-1500 **1501-1600** 1601-1700 1701-1800 1801-1900 1901-2000



## Michael Servetus Burned for Heresy

MAY 03, 2010





The two men were the most exact opposites in spirit, doctrine, and aim. One was a reformer, a champion of orthodoxy, and one who sought to build up the church of Christ. The other was considered by Catholic and Protestant alike an archheretic who sought to destroy key doctrines on which the church took its stand. At twenty-seven the first had written one of the most influential systems of [theology](#) the Christian faith had ever seen. When he was barely twenty the other wrote a work to denounce a fundamental doctrine of Christianity. Both were brilliant and leaned men born in 1509. One was burned at the stake for heresy in the town where the other was pastor. The two men? John Calvin and Michael Servetus.

Michael Servetus was born in Spain in 1509. He had a brilliant mind, was trained by the Dominicans, and went to the University of Saragossa. There he began studying the Bible, whose authority he accepted; but his interpretations brought him into conflict with the orthodox church. In 1531 Servetus published a work called the *Errors of the Trinity*, in which he said those who believed in the Trinity were really Tritheists (believers in three gods) or atheists. He said the

gods of the Trinitarians were a 3-headed monster and a deception of the devil. Both Protestants and Catholics found the work blasphemous, and the emperor banned it.

Servetus proceeded to France where he took the name Michel de Villeneuve. He studied mathematics, geography, astrology, and medicine. Gaining fame as a physician, he came close to discovering the pulmonary circulation of the blood, and published a frequently studied book on the use of syrups in medicine. In spite of his success, Michael made enemies through his insolent and contentious tone. He who denied the [prophecies](#) of the Old Testament made prophecies based on astrology.

In 1540 Michael opened a correspondence with John Calvin of Geneva, asking the reformer what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God and how a man was to be born again. He criticized Calvin's replies and stated that those who believed in the Trinity believed in the spirit of the dragon, the priests and the false prophets who make war on the lamb. He implied that he was the Michael, referred to in Revelation 12:7 and Daniel 12:1, the one who was to fight the antichrist. Both John Calvin and the Pope were antichrists in Servetus' eyes. Calvin wrote to a friend that if Servetus ever fell into his hands, he would not allow him to get away alive.

In 1553 Michael anonymously published *The Restitution of Christianity* which he saw as an attempt to restore Christianity to its primitive purity. In that work he boldly--or rashly--continued to deny the Trinity despite the danger it

brought him. Denying the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ were still capital offenses as they had been throughout the middle ages. Michael said Jesus was the Son of the eternal God but not the eternal Son of God. Contrary to the reformers, he also taught that both faith and works were necessary for salvation. He sent Calvin a portion of the work.

Roman Catholic authorities in Vienne discovered the name of the *Restitution's* author because Calvin collaborated in denouncing him to the Inquisition, and they arrested Michael for heresy. He escaped, however, and fled toward Naples by way of Calvin's Geneva. Vienne's authorities burned him in effigy. He entered a church where Calvin was preaching, was recognized, and arrested on charges of blasphemy and heresy, although he was not a citizen and was just passing through town. Was it legal for them to arrest him?

Nonetheless, Michael was tried for heresy, this time by a Protestant city council. He continued in an attitude of superior knowledge and called John Calvin "Simon Magus" an "impostor," and more. Servetus shocked the Genevans with his pantheistic or gnostic claim that everything emanated from God, even the devil. Like the Anabaptists, he declared infant baptism a great error. Geneva unfairly refused him legal council although he was a stranger to its law system, saying he could lie well enough without a lawyer to assist him.

The Geneva Council voted to condemn Servetus for heresy and called for his execution. The Swiss churches of Berne, Zurich, Basle, and Schaffhausen encouraged this move. Although Calvin insisted with the rest that Servetus must die, he urged that in mercy Servetus be executed by the sword, not by burning, but the Council rejected the suggestion. It was quarreling with Calvin at that time over the city government. Calvin and reformer William Farel spent hours with Servetus trying to turn him back from his lapses from commonly accepted Christian doctrine, but Servetus stood fast to his principles.

On this day, October 27, 1553, Geneva burned Michael Servetus at the stake for blasphemy and heresy. In the flames, Michael called repeatedly on Jesus, the Son of God for mercy.

Geneva's action led to an immediate controversy among reformers whether it is right for a reformation church to execute heretics. Most said it was not. Calvin took a lot of heat for his role in the denunciation, trial and execution of Servetus and was not always honest in his account of what had happened.

#### Bibliography:

1. Adapted from an earlier Christian History Institute story by Diana Severance, Ph.D.
2. Bainton, Roland. *Hunted Heretic; the life and death of Michael Servetus*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1953.
3. Fulton, John F. *Michael Servetus, Humanist and Martyr*. New York: Herbert Reichner, 1953.
4. Hunt, Dave. *What Love Is This? : Calvinism's misrepresentation of God*. Bend, Oregon: Berean Call, c2004.
5. "Servetus, Michael." *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone. Oxford, 1997.
6. "Servetus, Michael." *Encyclopedia Americana*. Chicago: American Corp., 1956.
7. Various internet articles.

Last updated July, 2007

SHARE



**Editor's Note:** Experience life-changing spiritual growth with exclusive in-depth studies and prayer guides. <[Join Christianity.com PLUS](#) for even more faith inspiration. Cancel anytime.

---

[Christianity](#) / [Church](#) / [Church History](#) / [Timeline](#) / [1501-1600](#) / **Michael Servetus Burned for Heresy**

---

*Today on Christianity.com*



## Why Should Christians Celebrate Juneteenth?

---



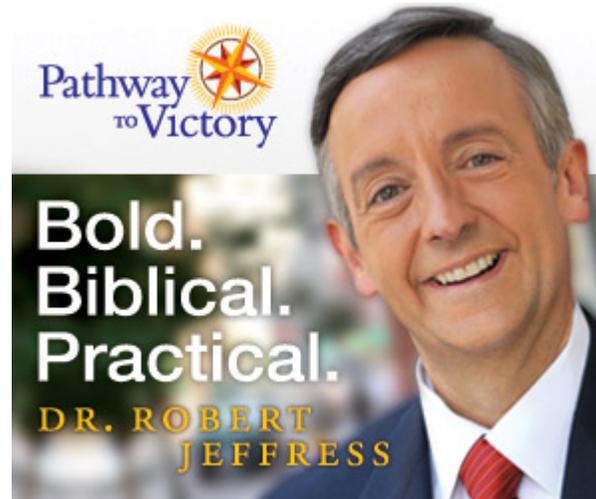
## What Is the Significance of Fatherhood in the Bible?

---



## 5 Actions to Take When You're Facing a Spiritual Attack

---



*Most Popular*

**1. What Is Baptism? Its Meaning and Importance in Christianity**

DR. RAY PRITCHARD

---

**2. How to Move from Being a Hearer to a Doer of the Word**

KEREN KANYAGO

---

**3. When Is it Okay for Christians to Consider Divorce?**

VIVIAN BRICKER

---

**4. How Is the Term 'Cultural Marxism' Used Today?**

MIKE LEAKE

---

## 5. What Does 'God Is Love' Look Like Today?

CANDICE LUCEY

---

### *Today's Devotional*

#### **He Lives in You (Galatians 4:6) - Your Daily Bible Verse - June 19**

*I've learned a great truth, and that is that Jesus is in the Bible, and Jesus is in history, and Jesus is in heaven, but—here's the great truth—Christ lives in me.*

[Continue reading...](#)

### *Free Bible Trivia Games*

#### **Bible Baseball**

[Play now...](#)



#### **Saintly Millionaire**

[Play now...](#)



#### **Bible Jeopardy**

[Play now...](#)



## Bible Trivia By Category

[Play now...](#)



## Bible Trivia Challenge

[Play now...](#)



## About 1501-1600

Read {2} by {3} and more articles about {1} and {0} on Christianity.com

---

### About Christianity.com

[About Us](#) [Advertise with Us](#) [Feedback](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Site Map](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Link to Us](#) [RSS](#)  
[California - CCPA Notice](#) [California - Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

Copyright © 2023, Christianity.com. All rights reserved.