



Housing a Heretic: Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531) and the ‘Pre-History’ of the Servetus Affair

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ABSTRACT

Although many scholars have written about Calvin’s treatment of Michael Servetus, very few have explored Servetus’s earliest encounters with other Protestant Reformers. By utilizing letters, prefaces and other writings in the sixteenth century, this study aims to develop a portrait of the multiple ways in which the Basel Reformer, Johannes Oecolampadius, influenced Servetus and ultimately, the outcome of his trial. Perhaps most notably in the background of the Servetus affair, Oecolampadius allowed Servetus to live in his house for 10 months prior to the publication of his first antitrinitarian book. The correspondence between the two of them, and the correspondence between Oecolampadius and other Reformers in 1530–1531, enables us to fill out the picture of Servetus’s early ideas and reactions to them. The descriptions of events more than 20 years later in Geneva likewise aid our understanding of Servetus’s trial and the ways Oecolampadius’s legacy and reputation affected it.

KEYWORDS

Servetus; Oecolampadius; heresy; tolerance; conscience; antitrinitarianism

Introduction

The execution of Michael Servetus (1509/1511–1553) on 27 October 1553 undoubtedly evokes one of the most notorious cases of heresy in the sixteenth century. His death in Geneva raised questions of religious tolerance and liberty ‘in an unprecedented manner.’¹ Some current scholars have charged John Calvin (1509–1564) with ‘murder’; some have called the whole process ‘Calvin’s biggest mistake’; and others have argued that it was an unfortunate but understandable event, given its social and historical context.² Much has been written regarding the political, judicial, and ecclesiastical situation in Geneva at the time of the Servetus affair. While John Calvin’s role in the Servetus affair has been well documented and frequently debated, other Reformers have received far less attention.³ Calvin was not the only Reformer (and certainly not the first) to

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¹ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 214. Marian Hillar advocates the view that Servetus was the first Christian thinker in modern times who clearly proclaimed that every individual should have the right not to be persecuted and liquidated for following his own conscience. See Hillar, *The Case*; and Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*.

² See, for example, George, “Calvin’s Biggest Mistake,” 32; Kingdon, “Social Control,” 521–32; and Pettegree, “Limits of Tolerance,” 40.

³ The most recent scholarly treatment of Calvin’s role in the Servetus affair is Van Stam, *The Servetus Case*. Other previous examples of interpretations include Fulton, *Humanist and Martyr*; Friedman, *Case Study*; Naya and Hillar, *Michael Servetus, Heartfelt*; and Cameron, “Scottish Calvinism,” 113–28.

encounter Servetus and his anti-Trinitarian teachings. Some biographies of Calvin include a passing mention that Servetus had discussions with the Basel Reformer, Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531,) long before he encountered Calvin.⁴ Yet the interaction between Servetus and Oecolampadius has received very little attention, despite the fact that it set in motion the decisive outcome of Servetus’s trial.

Oecolampadius, of course, was not the only or even primary person to influence the events surrounding Servetus, but he was one of the earliest. By housing Servetus for several months, Oecolampadius was also the most directly involved with the younger Servetus. This study aims to portray the role that Oecolampadius had in the life and death of Servetus as the ‘pre-history’ to the infamous Servetus affair in 1553. Although dead by the time of the Spaniard’s arrest, trial, and execution of, Oecolampadius had profound indirect influence on the subsequent course of events. This derived from his encounters with Servetus more than 20 years before he came to Geneva and contended with Calvin. The study displays multiple occasions when Oecolampadius had a unique voice in the conviction of Servetus.

The first conversations between Oecolampadius and Servetus

Very little is known about Servetus’s life before he arrived in Basel. He was most likely born in 1511 (or 1509) in Villanova in the Spanish province of Aragon.⁵ Servetus left Spain as a teenager to begin studying law at the University of Toulouse.⁶ Even as a youth, it is evident that Servetus had been influenced by the Renaissance and attained significant knowledge of the Bible, Hebrew, Greek, and the Church Fathers.⁷ It is not entirely apparent what led him to Basel, but it is likely that he had hoped to find Erasmus there.⁸ When he discovered that Erasmus had already moved away from Basel, he sought out Johannes Oecolampadius.

Oecolampadius was a first-generation reformer, who had been ordained as a priest, assisted Erasmus on the first edition of the Greek New Testament, and earned a doctorate of divinity from the University of Basel.⁹ He was advocating Reformation teachings by at least May 1519. Near the end of 1522, he returned to Basel, where he was appointed pastor and a theology professor at the university. For the next several years, he was instrumental in changes that eventually resulted in the Basel council officially embracing the Reformation in April 1529.

When Servetus arrived in Basel in July 1530, he stayed for 10 months and lived in Oecolampadius’s house.¹⁰ Servetus was around 20 years old when he was welcomed by

⁴ See, for example, Parker, *John Calvin*, 146; Gordon, *Calvin*, 221–3; and Cottret, *Calvin*, 214–15.

⁵ In 1548 in Vienne, Servetus said he was born in Tudela in southern Navarre. In Geneva, he said he was from Villanueva. He also made inconsistent statements about his age in the 1553 trials at Vienne (42) and Geneva (44). See Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 2.

⁶ Depending on the date of his birth and the date he began his studies, Servetus was somewhere between the age of 14 and 17. Hillar and Allen identify him as 16, *Michael Servetus*, 10.

⁷ Hillar and Allen state that Servetus’s father was a notary and perhaps was his educational mentor, *ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ For biographical information on Oecolampadius, see Fisher, *Christoscopic Reading*, 14–26; Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*; and Rupp, *Patterns*, 3–46.

¹⁰ See Hillar, *The Case*, 195; Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 217; and Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 536. Primary source documentation of Servetus’s stay with Oecolampadius is in Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads [= BuA]* 2, 765, 1010, and Calvin, *Calvini opera omnia [= CO]* 8, 767.

the 48-year-old pastor and teacher. Bainton notes that this kind of situation was not that unusual, since Oecolampadius likely recognized hospitality as part of his ministerial role.¹¹ Oecolampadius was unaware that he was housing a future heretic. The conversations between these two over this time period are the earliest indications we have of the theological development in Servetus's thought.

Many historians describe the initial relationship between Oecolampadius and Servetus as friendly.¹² Even though Oecolampadius was busy with the events of the Reformation and his own personal life (having recently been married) he initially received Servetus and his peculiar ideas with patience.¹³ Oecolampadius may have even allowed Servetus to continue living in his home, because he hoped to convince him of his errors.¹⁴ **Within a few months, however, Oecolampadius was becoming displeased with Servetus and his views on the Trinity.** The most detailed reaction to Servetus's teaching comes from two letters Oecolampadius wrote to Servetus, while he was living with Oecolampadius. Though we cannot know for sure the exact circumstances of these letters, it seems that Oecolampadius wrote the first before the publication of Servetus's book in July 1531.¹⁵ The format of Oecolampadius, repeatedly writing, 'You say ...,' followed by a specific statement, indicates that he was likely responding to a written document of some kind – perhaps an early draft of Servetus's book.¹⁶

The first letter from Oecolampadius to Servetus

One gets a sense of Oecolampadius's exasperation with Servetus and an indication that this was not the first time they had these discussions at the beginning of the letter:

You complain to me that I am troublesome and harsh; but I have more reason to complain. 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 ... But I will again address a few [matters] and render the reasoning of faith – not to satisfy your curiosity and contentiousness, but so that you do not perpetually boast in vain.¹⁷

Some current writers interpret this opening as Oecolampadius's refusal to listen to a younger thinker or let go of his newly established power in Basel.¹⁸ The content of

¹¹ Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 41. Bainton states, 'Oecolampadius, himself, some five or six years before, had been addicted to entertaining the dubious, but in the meantime he had grown more chary of subversive strangers.'

¹² See Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 16; Hillar, *The Case*, 197–8; and Northway, "The Reception," 265–6.

¹³ Velazquez observed: 'It is difficult to find such shepherds filled with compromises and so well-disposed, who would listen to a young man of nineteen years who, besides not being easy to be taught, is aggressive and self-confident in his views and attitude.' In Naya and Hillar, *Michael Servetus, Heartfelt*, 26–8.

¹⁴ See below for the comments by Oecolampadius to other leaders in the Swiss churches about his efforts to convert Servetus.

¹⁵ See note 2 in *BuA* 2, 475 [No. 765]. Staehelin provides a range for the date of both letters between summer 1530 and May 1531. Based on the specific wording cited in the first letter, it is evident that the content was not exactly what Servetus published in *De Trinitatis erroribus*.

¹⁶ Northway surmises that Oecolampadius may have read *De Trinitatis erroribus* prior to the second letter, because Oecolampadius has rather detailed comments on the use of Irenaeus; see Northway, "The Reception," 265–6. He refers to the similarity of statements in *BuA* 2, 475–6 [No. 766] and Servetus, *The Two Treatises*, 75–9. Northway also notes the possibility that Oecolampadius was responding to a draft of the writing.

¹⁷ *BuA* 2, 472–3 [No. 765]; and *CO* 8, 857–8. Slightly different English translation excerpts of this letter are found in Hillar, *The Case*, 197; Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 52; and Willis, *Servetus and Calvin*, 34–6. The translations included here are my own.

¹⁸ See Goldstone and Goldstone, *Out of the Flames*, 63–70; Hillar, *The Case*, 197–8; and Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 16.

these letters, though, reveals that the 20-year-old Servetus had repeatedly rejected the traditional teachings regarding the Trinity and was chastising Oecolampadius for ceasing to listen to his ideas.

In this first extant letter, Oecolampadius called Servetus's views 'the highest blasphemy' and 'diabolical cunning'.¹⁹ He wrote, 'I will be mild in other manners, but not in blasphemies against Christ.'²⁰ Oecolampadius refuted Servetus's contentions that the traditional view of the 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.²¹ He particularly rejected Servetus's views that Christ did not have two natures in one person and that the Son is only 'co-eternal' in the same sense that the world is 'eternal'.²² At the end of the letter, Oecolampadius identified slight but significant variations in a confession of faith written by Servetus that sounded mostly orthodox.²³ He wrote, 'A simple person perhaps might approve your confession and suspect nothing. However, because you declared your mind, I loathe it as false.'²⁴ Oecolampadius identified where they were in agreement, but emphasized the significant differences that 'we recognize three *hypostases* [persons],' and 'we acknowledge that the Word and the Spirit are co-eternal with the Father,' and 'we confess ... that *before* his conception, he was the Son of God.'²⁵ Oecolampadius concluded the first letter:

So I see enough how much you move away from us and how much more you Judaize than preach the glory of Christ. 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.²⁶

Before the publication of his work, Oecolampadius sought to correct Servetus's theology because he found it unorthodox and blasphemous.

The second letter from Oecolampadius to Servetus

The opening of the second letter further reveals Oecolampadius's stance. He addressed it to 'Servetus, the Spaniard who denies that Christ is the consubstantial Son of God.'²⁷ This letter reflects some of the same concerns found in the first letter, but deals with three specific issues: Servetus's use of the term sacrament to refer to the incarnation, his

¹⁹ BuA 2, 472 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 857.

²⁰ BuA 2, 472–3 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 858.

²¹ BuA 2, 472 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 857. Oecolampadius quoted and explained Scripture verses, challenged the reasoning behind Servetus's conclusions, and affirmed that contrary to what Servetus claimed, the Church Fathers had taught that the Son was consubstantial with the Father.

²² BuA 2, 473 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 858–9. In *De Trinitatis erroribus*, Servetus affirmed that Christ had two natures and was fully God and human, but specified that the divine nature of Christ was not eternal from the beginning. Oecolampadius appears to be interacting with a different issue in this letter that perhaps was later modified by Servetus before his book was published.

²³ This 'confession of faith' is not in *De Trinitatis erroribus*, which indicates that Oecolampadius is responding to a written document different from the book.

²⁴ BuA 2, 473–4 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 859. For example, Servetus confesses that Jesus was 'begotten by the eternal Word of the Father' and that baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to the glory 'of the indescribable *dispositions* of God.'

²⁵ BuA 2, 474 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 859. Oecolampadius affirmed agreement with Servetus on the simplicity of God, the creation of all things by word and spirit, the conception of Christ by the Holy Spirit, and the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ BuA 2, 474 [No. 765]; and CO 8, 860.

²⁷ BuA 2, 475 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 860.

distinction between the Word and the Son of God, and his use of Irenaeus to support his views.²⁸ Oecolampadius included six quotations from Irenaeus to show that ‘everywhere he [Irenaeus] most clearly asserts that the Word of God is himself the Son of the Father, and not only the representation of a future son.’²⁹ Oecolampadius emphasized again that ‘the Word is coeternal with God the Father,’ and ‘is rightly called the Son of God the Father.’³⁰ He concluded the second letter:

Finally, as far as you promise that you are going to persist in this confession that Jesus is 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.³¹

These letters establish that Oecolampadius particularly considered Servetus’s denial that the Son was coeternal and consubstantial with the Father as heterodox and requiring serious attention.

Oecolampadius asks other Reformers to reject Servetus

As a result of his concerns, Oecolampadius began to urge other Reformers to reject Servetus’s teaching and eventually to reject him. According to a report from Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) decades after the fact, already in September 1530 (less than 3 months after Servetus’s arrival in Basel) Oecolampadius warned Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), Martin Bucer (1491–1551), Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541), and Bullinger that Servetus was expressing views similar to Arianism, and that he was belligerent, addicted to controversy, and refused to be persuaded.³² Zwingli advised Oecolampadius to try to convert Servetus, and Oecolampadius responded that he had tried everything, but since Servetus was ‘so proud, presumptuous and quarrelsome’ nothing worked.³³ Zwingli then counseled that any means possible be used to prevent these horrible blasphemies from breaking out and damaging the whole Christian religion.³⁴ A month later, Bucer traveled to Basel and apparently met Servetus. It seems that he did not initially react as negatively toward Servetus as Oecolampadius had. In a letter to Bucer on 25 October 1530, Oecolampadius defended his position and explicitly asked, ‘Why would I listen to anyone who denies that the Son is coeternal or consubstantial with the Father, and rejects us as blasphemers?’³⁵

²⁸ BuA 2, 475–6 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 860–1.

²⁹ BuA 2, 475–6 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 860. Oecolampadius cites Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, book 4, chaps 17, 20 [7 in modern edns] and book 3, chaps 20, 21 [18 and 19 in modern edns]. See *Patrologiae* 7, 932, 939, 941, 992, 1032, 1033.

³⁰ BuA 2, 475 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 860. Oecolampadius called it ‘frivolous’ that Servetus tried to ‘argue from the order’ that when Jesus ‘was anointed he began to be the Son of God,’ since John 20:31 refers to Jesus as the Christ and then the Son of God. Oecolampadius appealed to John 1:1 and 1:14 to argue that John plainly taught otherwise; see BuA 2, 476 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 860–1.

³¹ BuA 2, 476 [No. 766]; and CO 8, 861.

³² BuA 2, 861–2 [No. 1024]; and CO 8, 744. Staehelin dates the entry as 1575 recounting the conversation from 2 to 6 September 1530.

³³ BuA 2, 862 [No. 1024]. See Hillar’s interpretation of these events in *The Case*, 198, and in *Michael Servetus*, 16.

³⁴ BuA 2, 862 [No. 1024]. Although Bullinger concluded his report by noting: ‘Not long after Servetus, or rather Perdetus, left Basel,’ Servetus actually continued to reside in Basel for several more months before leaving.

³⁵ BuA 2, 520–2 [No. 793]; CO 8, 866–8; and *Martin Bucer Briefwechsel/Correspondance* [= BCOR], v. 5, 77–9 [No. 353]. Based on how Oecolampadius addressed Servetus in his second letter (BuA 2, 475 [No. 766]), he clearly refers here to Servetus. Evidently Bucer had criticized Oecolampadius for being too harsh. Staehelin notes that Oecolampadius was probably responding to questions that Bucer had raised when he visited (*ibid.*, notes 5 and 6). See also BCOR 5, 79 n. 10.

Initial reactions to the publication of *De Trinitatis erroribus*

Seven months after that, when Servetus left Basel in May 1531, he went to Strasbourg to seek out Bucer and Capito.³⁶ Though Capito may have been impressed initially, Servetus was not successful in convincing them of his views. Despite their negative reactions, in July 1531, Servetus published his first book on errors about the Trinity in the same year.³⁷ His name appeared as the author, but the printer, Johann Setzer, did not publish the location of Hagenau or his own name on the book.³⁸ Almost immediately after its publication, *De Trinitatis erroribus* was opposed by both Protestants and Catholics. Despite Servetus's attempts in the book to disassociate himself with previous heretics, his views could only be heard as heretical.³⁹

Oecolampadius expressed the particular concern of the Swiss churches that they would be 'detested as if we are the authors of such blasphemies.'⁴⁰ He urged Bucer to 'read the book and write your thoughts to me,' and to write a refutation.⁴¹ Oecolampadius likewise wrote to Zwingli out of concern that there were some in Strasbourg praising the book, despite his instance that it was 'blasphemous and impious according to me, indeed, according to the view of the Church.'⁴² When the civic Senate of Basel asked Oecolampadius about Servetus's book, he stated that the work should be either completely suppressed or read only by those who would not abuse it, because it was very unclear and dangerous.⁴³ He summarized this report to the Senate in a letter to Bucer, 'Since the Spaniard does not acknowledge that the Son is co-eternal with the Father, I can by no means approve [the book], even if he wrote many other good things.'⁴⁴

Summary of *De Trinitatis erroribus*

Several of the main themes present in the correspondence with Oecolampadius appear in *De Trinitatis erroribus*.⁴⁵ Scholars from all perspectives have noted the difficulty of labeling or categorizing Servetus's views on the Trinity. Hillar perhaps labels it most accurately

³⁶ BuA 2, 838–9 [No. 1010]. See also Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 537; Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 19; and Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom*, 134. Staehelin notes that the statements by Servetus at the Geneva trial essentially coincide with the facts that can be determined, BuA 2, 841 fn. 6 [No. 1011].

³⁷ Servetus, *De Trinitatis erroribus* [= *De Trinit.*].

³⁸ See BuA 2, 839 [No. 1010]; Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 19; and Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 62–3. Perhaps in his youthful naïveté, Servetus did not realize the gravity of what he was putting into print.

³⁹ Servetus identified that the primary reason why previous heretics had fallen into error was because of unnecessary speculations. Servetus specifically noted how his views differed from the heresies of Adoptionists, Sabellians, Arians, Valentinians, Nestorians, Euthychians, Monarchians, and Ebionites. See, for example, *De Trinit.*, 13a–b, 38a–b, 49b–50a; and *Two Treatises*, 22, 59–61, 79. The Reformers especially noted similarities to the heterodoxy of Paul of Samosata, Marcellus, and Photius.

⁴⁰ Oecolampadius to Bucer, 18 July 1531 in Basel in CO 8, 866; BuA 2, 628 [No. 893]; and BCorr 6, 33–5 [No. 437]. Oecolampadius remarked there that the book 'pleased those who abhor our church in a remarkable way.'

⁴¹ CO 8, 866, BuA 2, 628 [No. 893]. Oecolampadius lamented the fact that there were so many weak and fickle minds that this 'madness' would find support. Bucer promised a refutation when he was free from his other responsibilities, later in the spring, CO 8, 868.

⁴² Oecolampadius to Zwingli 20 July 1531 in BuA 2, 629 [No. 894]; CR 98, 539 [No. 1248]. Staehelin notes that it is questionable whether Oecolampadius had obtained a copy of the book yet when this letter was written.

⁴³ CO 8, 865; and BuA, 631–4 [No. 896]. Staehelin dates this report between 20 and 25 July 1531.

⁴⁴ Oecolampadius to Bucer, [20–25] July 1531, CO 8, 866; and BuA 2, 635 [No. 897]. Oecolampadius wrote that the Senate of Basel had 'prohibited the book of the Spaniard, *De Trinitatis erroribus*, to be sold here,' but he stated that he did not know what instigated the ban.

⁴⁵ For a summary of the main points of the book, see Servetus, *Two Treatises*, 3–5, 70–1, 105–6, 131, 149, 159, 170. See also Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 75–6.

when he states that Servetus's view can best be described as 'historical modalism.'⁴⁶ Servetus affirmed that there are 'three wonderful *dispositions* of God, in each of which divinity shines forth.'⁴⁷ Rather than calling these distinct persons, Servetus insisted that they are 'manifold *aspects*,' or 'diverse *forms* and *kinds* of deity.'⁴⁸ He contended that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity was a formulation that had developed from Greek philosophy, magisterial metaphysics, and scholastic speculations, which could not be proven from Scripture or established by logic, but in fact was blasphemy.⁴⁹ Servetus further questioned why the doctrine of the Trinity should be considered a foundation of the faith

even though not one word is found in the whole Bible about the Trinity, nor about its Persons, nor about an Essence, nor about a unity of the Substance, nor about one Nature of the several beings, nor about their other babblings and disputes of words.⁵⁰

Servetus repeatedly insisted on using terms as found in Scripture and not from the distinctions made at Nicaea 325 and later.⁵¹ He argued that those who held the traditional view were 'Trinites,' because for there to be three persons, there must be three entities, and consequently three substances, which results in 'this blasphemous and philosophical distinction of three *beings* in one God.'⁵² He affirmed that Jesus is God only in the sense that he now shares God's full divinity, but not because he was God from eternity.⁵³ Servetus made the distinction that before the incarnation, the Word was God himself speaking, and only after the incarnation was the Word joined to the man Jesus Christ so that he

⁴⁶ Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 26, 41, 43. Hillar suggests that Servetus was neither a Trinitarian nor a Unitarian. He suggests classifying him in a separate category as 'Servetian' that 'can best be described as a progressive, historical, and modalistic revelationism.'

⁴⁷ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 29a; and *Two Treatises*, 45. Servetus maintained that the Father is the whole substance and the one God from who these 'degrees' and 'personations' proceed. He explained that 'the same divinity which is in the Father is communicated to the Son, Jesus Christ, and to our spirits, which are the temples of the living God.' Servetus claimed that the Apostles agreed with this view, *De Trinit.*, 36b, 48a–b; and *Two Treatises*, 57, 76–7.

⁴⁸ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 29a–b; and *Two Treatises*, 45. Emphases mine. On this issue, Servetus was affirming the teaching found in the early apocryphal writing, the *Clementine Recognitions*. For background on the *Recognitions*, see Jones, *Ancient Jewish Christian Source*.

⁴⁹ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 8b, 9a–b, 39b, 42a–43a, 57a–b, 92b. Servetus particularly rejected as incomprehensible that 'they devised the *communicatio idiomatum* [sharing of attributes], namely, that the human nature shares its properties with God. They invent some new application of the term, man, so that it may be equivalent to the phrase, bearing a human nature; and then by this, *communicatio idiomatum*, they admit that the man is God' (*ibid.*, 10b).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 32a; and *Two Treatises*, 50.

⁵¹ Servetus maintained that he had studied all the known sources and interpretations of the Trinity. He named and interacted with various patristic and scholastic theologians such as Theophylact, John Major, Augustine, Origen, Erasmus, Cyprian, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, Jerome, Richard of St Victor, Henry of Ghent, Robert Holkot, Pierre d'Ailly, Joachim of Fiore, John of Damascus, Duns Scotus, Occam, Gregory Nazianzus, Peter Lombard, and Hilary of Poitiers. He also engaged with the Quran, philosophers, and writings on law. Because of their chronological proximity to the New Testament era, Servetus preferred the writings of those in the Early Church, such as Ignatius, Basil of Caesarea, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and the *Clementine Recognitions*.

⁵² Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 36a, 64b; and *Two Treatises*, 56, 100. For example, Servetus wrote, 'since I am unwilling to misuse the word Persons, I shall call them the first being, the second being, the third being; for in the Scriptures I find no other name for them.' Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 21b, 64b; and *Two Treatises*, 34, 100. He argued that Person in Scripture referred to one's outward form and appearance and not metaphysical beings, so 'the three beings which they call Persons I find no mention, nor does Scripture speak of an Essence, nor of all their other doctrines, disputes of words, and profane babblings'; Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 36b–37a; and *Two Treatises*, 57. He also charged that 'in reality three beings, three Gods, or one threefold God, are foisted upon us under the pretense and with the names of a unity'; Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 21b–22a; and *Two Treatises*, 34–5. See also Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 19a–b, 20b–21a, 22a, 30a–b, 36b–37a, 45b–46a, 59b–66a; and *Two Treatises*, 31, 33–4, 73, 92–102.

⁵³ Servetus argued that both the Scriptures and the early Fathers taught that Jesus was not a *hypostasis* or the Word of John 1:1, but a human being. who was miraculously born in the flesh; Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 6b–7a, 59b. He began the book by stating that 'one ought to start from the man,' and concluded the first section with a summary that 'all the Scriptures from first to last speak of the man Christ himself.' *Ibid.*, 2b, 11b–12a, 21a–b; and *Two Treatises*, 6, 19–20, 33.

became the Son of God.⁵⁴ Likewise, Servetus taught that the Holy Spirit was not a separate metaphysical being or person, but either referred to the holiness of spirit in humans or the messenger of God's *hypostasis* who came as a *disposition*.⁵⁵ He declared, 'The philosophers invented a third separate being, truly and really distinct from the other two, which is a third person, and so they have devised an imaginary Trinity, three beings in one nature.'⁵⁶ Servetus especially lamented that 'this tradition of the Trinity' was an 'occasion of derision for the Mohammedans' and that 'the Jews also shrink back from adhering to this imagination, and mock our stupidity about the Trinity.'⁵⁷

Though the argumentation of *De Trinitatis erroribus* is quite complex, the reasoning sometimes confusing, and the book poorly organized, the clearest emphases are the humanity of Jesus, the oneness of God, and the rejection of theological terminology developed over the centuries. These emphases substantiated Servetus's position that God progressively expressed himself throughout history in three modes and did not eternally exist as three distinct Persons in one being.⁵⁸

Correspondence after *De Trinitatis erroribus*

Soon after the book's publication, near the end of July 1531, Servetus returned to Basel and wrote to Oecolampadius again. It is evident that Servetus knew the sale of his book was prohibited, and he understood that Oecolampadius was particularly influential in urging other Reformers to reject him. He implored Oecolampadius to allow the copies he had with him to be sent to France.⁵⁹ He also pleaded, '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.'⁶⁰ Servetus stated, 'I was very much afraid to approach you, although I desired this in the highest, and I will visit, if only you will allow it.'⁶¹ He conceded that if Oecolampadius thought it best, he would not remain in Basel, but requested, 'do not think of me as a fugitive.'⁶² At the conclusion of the letter, Servetus complained that 'to you it is not a great vice that you understand the holy spirit as an angel, and yet for me it will be a great crime that I say a man is the Son of God.'⁶³ He further conveyed his concerns about the severity of the situation:

⁵⁴ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 47a–48b, 49b–50a, 9, 47a, 48a–b, 51b–52a, 110a–113a; and *Two Treatises*, 75–83, 171–5. Book III is primarily devoted to explain this distinction; *De Trinit.*, 68a–84b; and *Two Treatises*, 105–30. Servetus affirmed that the Word was eternal, but the Son was not; *De Trinit.*, 67b–68b, 113a–b; and *Two Treatises*, 106–7, 174–5.

⁵⁵ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 63b–64b, 67a; and *Two Treatises*, 98, 104. Servetus distinguished between the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of God, and connected the Holy Spirit with breath and wind, which comes from angels as much as God. He emphasized that 'every holiness of spirit is referred to man; and with the exception of the messenger who when he descends is called the Holy Spirit, I say that nothing else outside of man is called the Holy Spirit.' *De Trinit.*, 65b; and *Two Treatises*, 101. Hillar observes that Servetus may have been particularly interested in describing the spirit as breath and the pulmonary, physiological mechanism of breathing; see Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 25.

⁵⁶ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 21b–22a; and *Two Treatises*, 34–5.

⁵⁷ Servetus, *De Trinit.*, 43a; and *Two Treatises*, 66–7.

⁵⁸ Summary in Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 25: 'It is clear that Servetus treated the concept of the Trinity as the expression of God's three aspects, modes, manifestations, or functions progressively expressed in human history, but not as differentiated three separated persons, beings, or individuals in the divinity. Divinity is one, inseparable, but it may be expressed under three manifestations.'

⁵⁹ *BuA* 2, 630 [No. 895].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Servetus to Oecolampadius, [21] July 1531, *ibid.*, 629. An English translation of most of this letter is in Willis, *Servetus and Calvin*, 51–4. A summary of the letter is also in Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 538.

⁶² *BuA* 2, 629.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 630.

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 is the weakness of the human condition that, with the exception of our own, we condemn the spirits of others as imposters and impious; for no one understands his own errors You say that I want all to be robbers and that I will not suffer any to be punished or killed. I call God Almighty as witness that this is not my opinion; on the contrary, I detest it entirely, but if I ever said that, it is because 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.⁶⁴

Servetus may have had good reason to express apprehension about returning to Basel and meeting with Oecolampadius. Staehelin relates that ‘the Council actually took up the fight against heresy in the strongest terms,’ particularly in the case of Konrad in der Gassen, who was executed in August 1530 (a month after Servetus first came to Basel) because he could not agree that Jesus was both truly God and truly man.⁶⁵ The Reformation ordinances instituted in the spring of 1529 carried severe regulations against Anabaptists and those who denied the divinity of Jesus.⁶⁶ However, it appears that Servetus was allowed to stay in Basel again for a time without persecution.⁶⁷ We do not have any indication of what happened with the books Servetus had brought with him to Basel.

Despite this hint of toleration, Oecolampadius continued to urge other Reformers to shun Servetus. In August 1531, he wrote again to Bucer urging him to refute *De Trinitatis erroribus* so that a bad light would not fall on the churches, since Servetus ‘does not confess that the Son is coeternal and consubstantial with the Father.’⁶⁸ He also expressed his desire to inform Luther that the book had not been printed in Basel.⁶⁹ Two weeks later, Oecolampadius wrote to Bucer again because Servetus had apparently returned to Strasbourg. Oecolampadius warned him that it was dangerous to allow Servetus to remain in hiding there, because the church there was ‘eager for new things,’ and Servetus was not there to learn but to ‘spread his poison.’⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Ibid. Servetus expressed surprise that Oecolampadius was offended by his demeaning words about the Lutherans, because he had heard similar things from Oecolampadius’s own mouth when they lived together. Scholars who identify Servetus as the modern father of religious toleration often quote this part of the letter as one of the earliest pleas for freedom of conscience; see Hillar, *The Case*, 202–3.

⁶⁵ Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 534–5. Staehelin also recounts the case of John Herbster who revoked all his errors on 10 July 1530, and suggests that Oecolampadius was likely involved in both cases, ‘but we know nothing about it.’ Ibid., 535. The portrayals of the level of tolerance in Basel at this time vary greatly among historians. Hillar states that ‘Basel was the city that, until then, was known for its tolerance,’ but Oecolampadius ‘assumed a tough line in dealing with any heterodoxy’ and deplored freedom of religion; see Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 14–15; and Hillar, *The Case*, 195, 197. Bainton also depicts Oecolampadius as feeling that the Council was ‘too cool in repression,’ but describes Basel itself as much more hostile to those who differed in their views, *Hunted Heretic*, 40. In contrast, Poythress follows Rupp in highlighting that Oecolampadius ‘had to intercede for some thirty Anabaptists who faced execution in Basel [in December 1529] and counselled these prisoners and dramatically pleaded on his knees before the Council for their lives, with the result that apparently only one was executed.’ See Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*, 29; Rupp, *Patterns*, 40–1; and BuA 2, 404 [No. 713].

⁶⁶ Already the edict issued in 1526 that Anabaptists be exiled was escalated in 1527 to mandate that they (and anyone who sheltered them) be dunked in the Rhine River on the first offense and face the penalty of execution on a second offense. See Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 534; and Poythress, *Reformer of Basel*, 29.

⁶⁷ Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 539. Hillar states: ‘Oecolampadius recommended that the City Council ignore him if he recanted his views,’ *The Case*, 203.

⁶⁸ BuA 2, 639 [No. 904]; and BCorr 6, 41–4 [No. 442]. Bucer wrote a warning to Servetus soon after, *ibid.*, 44–6 [No. 443].

⁶⁹ BuA 2, 639 [No. 904]; BCorr 6, 42–3; and Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 526, 539.

⁷⁰ BuA 2, 646–7 [No. 914]; and BCorr 6, 64–5 [No. 449].

Oecolampadius stated that he had also written to Capito to ask him to support Bucer in repairing the damage that Servetus had done in their church.⁷¹ But apparently Capito did not take this admonition well since Oecolampadius felt compelled to later respond to a letter from Capito, in which he repeatedly appealed to their friendship and explained that he had written the previous letter with the intent to ‘remove the disease,’ and not to irritate, attack, overthrow, or blame his friend.⁷² Oecolampadius, however, reiterated that ‘such familiarity you have with enemies of the church still makes me anxious and concerned.’⁷³ He called for Capito to prove that he was a worthy minister and one who rightly handled the gospel by refusing to allow enemies of Christ, like Servetus, from having fellowship with them and receiving the Lord’s Supper.

In addition to these letters to his colleagues, on 26 September 1531, Oecolampadius specifically urged the Synod of Basel to reject the teachings of Servetus. He brought before the Synod a brief confession of faith, which would eventually be adopted into the First Confession of Basel (1534).⁷⁴ In his appeal, Oecolampadius specifically named *De Trinitatis erroribus* as one of the books that made it necessary to adopt a unified faith confession like the one he proposed.⁷⁵ The confession included specific language about the Trinity, which ruled out the teachings of Servetus and disavowed charges that Servetus made against the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.⁷⁶ Oecolampadius concluded his proposal with the declaration that any teaching to the contrary was abominable, and called for anyone who contradicted the confession to prove their views from the scriptures.⁷⁷

Oecolampadius died in November 1531. He did not witness the publication of Servetus’s second book, *Dialogues on the Trinity* (1532). In the preface of this book Servetus stated:

What I recently wrote in the seven books against the received opinion on the Trinity, kind reader, I now retract all things. Not because they are false, but because they are incomplete and were written as if from a child to children Moreover, what came out in the previous book as foreign, confused, and incorrect, ought to be ascribed to my inexperience and the carelessness of my printer.⁷⁸

Though he changed some of the language, and slightly modified his understanding of the relationship of the Word and Christ the man, the basic views on the Trinity were not

⁷¹ BuA 2, 646–7 [No. 914]. See BCorr 6, 65 n. 8; and Capito, *Correspondence* 2, 465 [No. 454]. None of the extant letters from Oecolampadius to Capito include this request.

⁷² BuA 2, 681 [No. 932]; and Capito, *Correspondence* 2, 464 [No. 450]. Oecolampadius insisted, ‘The letter in which I admonished you, my Capito, is not of an angry man,’ acknowledging that his first letter may have appeared too vehement since he did not include all the typical formalities.

⁷³ BuA 2, 682 [No. 932]; and Capito, *Correspondence* 2, 464 [No. 450].

⁷⁴ See *Reformed Confessions*, 89–96. The First Confession of Basel can be found in German and Latin in *Collectio confessionum*, 78–84, 85–104. For the modern text-critical edition, see *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* 1/1, 576–83.

⁷⁵ BuA 2, 688–9 [No. 935]; and Staehelin, *Das theologische Lebenswerk*, 504.

⁷⁶ For example, the proposed confession reads, ‘I confess one most simple God by nature, not three Gods, but three persons of one nature, coeternal and coequal in nature, excellence, and blessedness, in which there is no before or after, no greater or lesser.’ BuA 2, 688 [No. 935].

⁷⁷ Ibid., 690. Oecolampadius stated, ‘These things are indisputable for me, and I anathematize contrary teachings as abominable. Brothers, I plead according to this faith, that we are harmonious and that we are not ashamed of what is confessed. But if there are those who contradict or consider these doubtful, we ask that they show it from the shared scriptures.’

⁷⁸ Servetus, *Dialogorum . . . libri duo*, A1b; and *Two Treatises*, 188.

substantially different from what he wrote in his first book.⁷⁹ After the publication of his second book, Servetus fled into anonymity for nearly two decades under the pseudonym, Michael de Villeneuve, until he emerged again in 1553 after publishing his third theological writing, *Christianismi Restitutio* [The Restoration of Christianity].⁸⁰

Oecolampadius's later influence on Calvin and the Geneva trial

Despite the fact that he had died 22 years earlier, the legacy of Oecolampadius continued to affect the Reformers' approach to Servetus in 1553. In a general and indirect way, many of the views and practices of church government, pastoral oversight, and church discipline established by John Calvin in Geneva had been previously advocated and implemented by Oecolampadius in Basel.⁸¹ In a more direct and specific way, Oecolampadius's previous interactions with Servetus served as key testimony which shaped the outcome of Servetus's trial.

On 4 April 1553, Servetus was arrested by Roman Catholic authorities, and imprisoned in Vienne.⁸² However, he escaped during the trial, so when the Catholic authorities reached their verdict, they could only burn him in effigy. A few months later, Servetus was recognized while traveling through Geneva and arrested on 13 August 1553.⁸³ When the formal process of the Geneva trial began on 17 August, Servetus was asked a series of questions about his life, including his past relations to Oecolampadius and his time in Basel.⁸⁴ The letters written by Oecolampadius were brought out as evidence against Servetus in the first interrogation.⁸⁵ Servetus claimed that he had never seen the letters.⁸⁶ While it might be possible that somehow neither of these letters ever got to Servetus, it seems quite unlikely since he was living with Oecolampadius when they were written. It would also be highly unlikely he never saw them after that, since they were published in 1536 in Basel, in the same month and by the same editor who published Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁸⁷

During later interrogations, Servetus also claimed that along with Bucer and Capito, Oecolampadius had initially agreed with his views on the Trinity, but did not know that Oecolampadius had later changed to a different position on the Trinity.⁸⁸ Even a

⁷⁹ For example, Servetus admitted that the Word is Christ, but argued that the Word did not have any substance (i.e. flesh) until Christ was born, and then the Word ceased, and only came into existence again with Christ's resurrection when the Word returned to its original state as God. See Servetus, *Dialogorum*, B8a; and *Two Treatises*, 211–13.

⁸⁰ During the years he went by the name Villanueva, he published works on science, geography, astrology, and annotated the *Sanctis Pagnini* Bible. He also studied medicine and became a physician, and remained active in the Catholic church while pursuing his own theological studies.

⁸¹ See Kuhr, "Calvin and Basel," 19–33; Demura, "Calvin's and Oecolampadius' Concept," 180, 187–9; Demura, "Church Discipline"; Kuhr, *Die Macht des Bannes*; and Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation*, 249, 393.

⁸² *CO* 8, 833–72; and *BuA* 2, 838 [No. 1010]. See Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 158–64; and Hillar, *Michael Servetus*, 144–7. Both Bainton and Hillar note that when Servetus gave a summary of his life, he omitted all references to his interactions with Protestants.

⁸³ *CO* 8, 725.

⁸⁴ *CO* 8, 725–832; *BuA* 2, 838–41 [No. 1010]; and *Registres de la Compagnie* 2, 3–54. For an English translation of many of the proceedings, see Hughes, *Register*, 223–85, 290–1. See also Hillar, *The Case*, 156–74; and Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 190–2.

⁸⁵ *CO* 8, 744, 779–80, 843–4.

⁸⁶ *CO* 8, 744; *BuA* 2, 838–41 [No. 1010]; and Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 184.

⁸⁷ *BuA* 2, 766–72 [No. 981]; and Heckethorn, *Printers of Basle*, 175–6. The title of the publication was *J. Oecolampadii et H. Zwinglii epist. libri IV*. The first two letters in this publication are the letters from Oecolampadius to Servetus, see *ibid.*, Book 1, A1a–2a. It is also likely that Calvin read the letters at that time, though he could have easily accessed them at a later point. See Staehelin's comments in note 6 in *BuA* 2, 841 [No. 1010].

⁸⁸ *CO* 8, 766–7. See especially the proceedings on 23, 24, and 28 August, items XVIII.4, 9; XX.4–5; XXI.4

cursory survey of what Oecolampadius taught in his biblical lectures before, during, and after the arrival of Servetus in Basel easily demonstrates that Oecolampadius's views on the Trinity consistently remained quite opposed to what Servetus was espousing and later published.⁸⁹

The imprisonment and trial of Servetus continued for two more months with Calvin and the ministers of Geneva identifying numerous places in Servetus's writings that contradicted the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.⁹⁰ In early October, the ministers of Zurich wrote to the Genevan Senate:

Servetus provoked this enormous evil here more than twenty years ago, when the Master Johannes Oecolampadius of blessed memory, at that time attempted to bring him back to the way. And at that time the teaching of Servetus was likewise condemned by those who were first preaching the gospel in these regions.⁹¹

Later in the trial, when the Genevans consulted the Swiss cities of Berne, Zurich, Basel, and Schaffhausen for their views, Calvin also directly sent communication to some of the leaders of the churches, including Simon Sulzer in Basel.⁹² Bruce Gordon describes how Calvin 'poked and prodded at soft points to goad the Basle church into stating its support' of Geneva's decisions by reminding them of how Servetus had gravely offended Oecolampadius.⁹³ It had become apparent that some in Basel were supportive of Servetus.⁹⁴ The official response from Basel during the trial stated:

We certainly remember that twenty three years ago in this city, trouble was exhibited by [Servetus] toward the most excellent master Oecolampadius, the protector of this church. He seriously objected with written words to no avail, so already then the most perceptive man of God carried the view that this was going to bring grave loss to the Christian religion unless it was crushed by the hand of the Lord.⁹⁵

The previous relationship Servetus had with Oecolampadius served as one key element in the decisions against Servetus.

⁸⁹ During that time period, Oecolampadius was in the process of preparing his lectures on the book of Hebrews for publication; he was in the midst of lecturing on the Gospel of John when Servetus arrived, and a month after the publication of *De Trinitatis erroribus*, he began lecturing on the Gospel of Matthew; see *BuA* 2, 736–40, 756–8, 774–7 [Nos 969, 976, 983]. In all three of these commentaries, Oecolampadius frequently refuted Trinitarian heresies. In both John and Matthew, he stated that all heretics go wrong by either denying that Christ is man or that Christ is God. Even if Oecolampadius was not directly refuting the views of Servetus, he definitely affirmed the opposite of what Servetus taught. For several examples, see Oecolampadius, *Annotationes*, 4b, 5a–5b, 6a, 14b, 15a–b, 16a, 16b, 63a, 186b, 206b, 208b; Oecolampadius, *Enarratio*, 11b, 15a; and Oecolampadius, *In epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 7a, 7b, 9a, 11a–b, 12a, 13b, 35b–36a.

⁹⁰ *CO* 8, 501–8. On the treatment of Servetus during this time, see Kleinstuber, "An Eye for an Eye."

⁹¹ *CO* 8, 858.

⁹² Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 182.

⁹³ Gordon, *Calvin*, 221. See footnote 11.

⁹⁴ Pietro Vergerio reported to Bullinger on 8 and 14 October 1553 that there were supporters of Servetus in Basel; *CO* 14, 635–6, 641–2. The movement for tolerance that later emerged from Basel at the instigation of Sebastian Castellio did not become significant until after the execution of Servetus. In November 1553, when Calvin wrote to Bullinger that he planned to write a short book (later published as *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra Trinitate, contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani* [Defense of the Orthodox Faith on the Holy Trinity Against the Enormous Errors of the Spaniard Michael Servetus]) partly in response to those in Basel who were spreading insults and rumours because of what happened to Servetus, Bullinger encouraged Calvin to write the book, but not to mention the supporters in Basel so they would not be made 'immortal.' See *CO* 14, 671, 683–4, 698.

⁹⁵ *CO* 8, 822.

The reputation of Oecolampadius

One of the primary reasons why Oecolampadius's name carried weight in the trial was because later Reformers consistently recognized him as a pillar of gentleness, but also a strong opponent of Servetus. In the foreword to a re-publication of all Oecolampadius's commentaries on the prophets, Bullinger defended Oecolampadius from accusations about strange teachings by reminding his readers about the way Oecolampadius dealt with Servetus.⁹⁶ He wrote:

If truly there was anyone hostile to the divisive, the seditious, the schismatics, and the heretics, our Oecolampadius was most hostile to them. Most of the man's writings prove this; the testimony of the whole church in which he was ministering testifies to it – and add the eulogy of all the good men to whom Oecolampadius was known. For they all call him a sincere, pious, peaceful, mild, and tranquil man with the meekest spirit ... But yet already then he began to attack Michael Servetus the Spaniard – the bottle, the fuel, and the dispenser of prodigious errors and heresies – and was not ignorant about how greatly the most impure man was going to blaspheme pure doctrine and harm the church of Christ.⁹⁷

Calvin had also affirmed the reputation of Oecolampadius's meekness in 1545, in addition to identifying him as a key voice against Servetus.⁹⁸

When the Geneva Council received the concurring opinions of the Swiss churches that Servetus should be punished for persisting in spreading his dangerous teachings, it was only a matter of time before he was executed.⁹⁹ It had been long established, according to the Justinian Code (sixth century AD), that the denial of the Trinity warranted capital punishment.¹⁰⁰ So, on 26 October 1553 the Geneva Council condemned Servetus to be burned alive along with his books. His sentence began by stating that '23 or 24 years ago,' he printed his first book despite 'the admonishments and corrections expressed to him by the learned evangelical doctors of Germany,' who also reproved the book 'as full of heresies.'¹⁰¹ The beginning of Guillaume Farel's hand-written summary of Servetus's final moments names only Oecolampadius specifically among those who wrote against Servetus.¹⁰² As these closing words indicate, the trajectory of what happened to Servetus on that day had been set in motion long before by his interactions with Oecolampadius.

⁹⁶ Although this was published five years after the execution of Servetus, it indicates the reputation and perception of Oecolampadius almost thirty years after his death. On the volume itself see Staehelin, 'Oekolampad-Bibliographie,' 209.1a.

⁹⁷ Bullinger, 'Praefatio,' in Oecolampadius, *Commentarii*, iiiii a–b.

⁹⁸ Calvin to Melancthon, 21 January 1545 in Melancthon, *Melancthons Briefwechsel* 4, 3803; CO 12, 11 [No. 606].

⁹⁹ The four Swiss cities all recommended punishment for Servetus, though none of them specifically demanded or objected to execution. Some authors note that Sulzer responded with a clear denunciation of Servetus's errors but his letter was not as strongly worded as Bullinger's. See Hillar, *The Case*, 172; Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 204; Gordon, *Calvin*, 219, 221; and Van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ An English translation of the Justinian Code is in *The Civil Law*, 12.9–15. Book I, Title I, is "Concerning the Most Exalted Trinity and the Catholic Faith, and Providing that No One Shall Dare to Publicly Oppose Them." It stated, 'in accordance with the rules of the apostolic discipline and the evangelical doctrine, we should believe that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute a single Deity, endowed with equal majesty, and united in the Holy Trinity.' Wadkins wonders if it is 'possible and comprehensible that Calvin might have given more authority to a cultural standard than to his own hermeneutic.' See Wadkins, "A Recipe for Intolerance," 431–41.

¹⁰¹ CO 8, 827–30. English translations can be found in Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 179–82; and Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 207–9.

¹⁰² Guillaume Farel wrote this summary on the title page of his copy of *De Trinitatis erroribus*. An image of this page and its inscription in Latin is in Bainton, *Hunted Heretic*, 212–13.

Conclusion

Although he could not have known it at the time, from July 1530 to April 1531 Oecolampadius was indeed ‘housing a heretic’ who would later be executed for his antitrinitarian views. He was the first Reformer to dialogue with Servetus about his views on the Trinity, the first to condemn them as blasphemous and bring it to the attention of others, and the first to urge others to refute his writings and disassociate themselves from him. Based on these early exchanges with Servetus and the reputation of Oecolampadius’s meekness, later reformers appealed to Oecolampadius as one of several key witnesses, even decades after his death.

The intent of this portrait has not been to try to defend or minimize the responsibility of Calvin and Geneva or to justify the ‘intolerance’ of the sixteenth century exemplified in the Servetus affair. Instead, it has shown that Oecolampadius shared the view of the Reformers that the teaching of Servetus was toxic and a disease which had to be eradicated, or it would destroy the church. A man like Oecolampadius who displayed hospitality and courtesy could also take a strong stance against heresy such that later sixteenth-century Protestants could appeal to his writings without feeling a great tension between Christian gentleness and supporting the conviction of a heretic. Oecolampadius’s role in the pre-history of the Servetus affair further substantiates the contention that Calvin was not alone in believing that the gravity of what Servetus taught was so dangerous that it (and he) had to be suppressed.

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