

Was Calvin responsible for the burning of Servetus?

The execution of Michael Servetus is a favourite slander of anti-Calvinists. Over and over his enemies claim that Calvin engineered the cruel death of this man. Is this true? First we have to establish the contemporary situation. The church and state were connected in those days, and had been for centuries, and the civil power exercised penalties for breaking certain religious laws. This was accepted by all and was the common application of the Justinian Code. Unrepentant heretics, especially those guilty of blasphemy, were executed. In the case of Servetus, he had broken the civil law of all European countries.

Servetus was a Spaniard (Miguel Serveto) who studied law and later maths, astrology and medicine (the first to discover pulmonary blood circulation). He was an arrogant, lying and deceitful man but possessed a spark of genius. In 1531 he published *On the errors of the Trinity*, claiming the doctrine was devilish. This united Catholics and Protestants in condemnation. He later taught pantheism, denied the pre-existence of Christ and was filled with a variety of other heresies. He was sentenced to death by the Inquisition in 1552 but was arrested while on the run in Geneva, ignoring Calvin's warning not to come. The town council holding him was actually opposed to Calvin at the time. This council tried him and, with the approval of all the other Reformed Swiss cities, condemned him to burning in 1553.

Calvin had no control in this having no political power and at that time could not even vote. He was required by the council to bring the charge as the leader of the church; that was his only part in this. Despite many abusive attacks on him by Servetus (including calling him a murderer & a sorcerer), Calvin helped him prepare his defence by providing books from his own library. Calvin even pleaded that the sentence be mitigated and prayed with him in jail.

Though guilty of blasphemy and heresy, the principal charge against Servetus was sedition for seeking to undermine the government by creating a new political party and teaching rebellion. Indeed, his arrogant, obscene and violent behaviour shocked everyone and sealed his fate. The whole Christian world agreed on the execution of Servetus and Geneva had no option to let such a man go free.

Calvin neither instigated the trial, nor had any controlling influence upon it of any sort. The government of Geneva (which included supporters of Servetus and enemies of Calvin) executed Servetus as a subversive rebel, not just as a heretic. He brought his punishment on his own head by foolish behaviour and ignoring Calvin's warnings. The charges against Calvin are utterly false.

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