

# John Calvin at Stake: Reconsidering the Genevan Reformer's Role in the Burning of Michael Servetus

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Date: 27 January 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you for that kind introduction. So this morning I'm going to talk about John Calvin, and I want to reconsider his role in the burning at the stake in Geneva of Michael Servetus.

Now, this topic first piqued my interest because I have many good Mennonite Anabaptist friends.

And if you get talking doctrine with them, they would often write off my Calvinism or my Reformed leanings.

And in part it was because Calvinists are typically Pato-Baptists, believe in infant baptism. Not all Calvinists, but so that was one problem for an Anabaptist, obviously.

And another problem was the issue of John Calvin being perceived as somebody who just burned you if you were an Anabaptist, or if you disagreed with his theology.

[ 1 : 06 ] And so I wanted to look into that, and that's how this paper that I ended up writing for Bruce came about. So we'll just jump into it here. Calvin at stake, reconsidering the Reformer's role in the burning of Michael Servetus.

Now, Michael Servetus was burnt at the stake for heresy in Geneva on October 27, 1553. John Calvin was at that time lead pastor in the Protestant city, and he played a central role in what's become known as the Servetus Affair.

As one scholar puts it very well, Servetus was burned, but the smell of smoke has clung to Calvin's clothing ever since. Many people's impression of Calvin is accurately voiced by Voltaire, who said that Calvin was the Pope of the Protestant party, holding absolute power over consciences, with the spirit of a tyrant.

Voltaire's contempt for Calvin stemmed from his holding Calvin solely responsible for Servetus' execution. So the question I want to ask this morning is, is this caricature of Calvin accurate when it comes to this event?

Was Calvin really an all-powerful and vindictive dictator, ruling the city of Geneva, and solely responsible for hunting down and trying and then executing Servetus, whose only fault was to disagree with Calvin's theology?

[ 2 : 50 ] As I said, this is a caricature often painted of Calvin. And I would like us to try and answer that this morning by going a little deeper into the historical context of this.

Now to start to answer this question, we need to look kind of at the history, their back history before all this happened. Though they likely never met prior to the trial in Geneva, Servetus and Calvin knew of each other for at least 20 years prior to that event.

Servetus was an amateur biblical scholar. He dabbled in theology. He was an editor by profession, editing many volumes. And he was a semi-professional geographer and a semi-professional physician.

I wouldn't recommend going to any of those. He was booted out of the Sarbon in Paris after insulting his instructors, calling them things like chimpanzees and dunces, because they didn't believe in the effects that the planets had on the workings of the human body.

So he was booted out. But oddly enough, some people still had him be their personal physician. Many believe he was actually the first person to theorize about the pulmonary circulation of the blood.

[ 4 : 24 ] Servetus studied in Paris, probably at the same time Calvin was studying law and then later reading theology.

But there developed some serious bad blood between the two of them. Servetus got caught up in the back-to-the-sources spirit of the Reformation.

He read the Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture, rejected the Roman Catholicism of his youth in Spain, but he kept his religious status after rejecting Catholicism secret.

He'd been corresponding with Calvin and he requested in 1534 that Calvin come and meet with him in Paris. Calvin traveled there at considerable personal risk to himself because, of course, he was condemned in France for his Reformed views.

But Servetus did not keep the appointment. I'm just guessing that may partly be responsible for the bad blood between them.

[ 5 : 36 ] Servetus wrote at least 30 letters to Calvin over the years. According to Roland Bainton, who's done probably the single most detailed study on this man, Michael Servetus, and he deals at length with Servetus and Calvin.

According to Bainton, Servetus adopted in his letters to Calvin a very condescending tone, instructing Calvin. And Calvin, according to Bainton again, replied courteously and at length.

But Servetus wasn't satisfied with that. He wanted to convince Calvin. And he urged Calvin to read very carefully excerpts from his book, The Restitution of Christianity.

I should mention at this point, Servetus was keeping his true identity secret. Oddly, though, he published 30 letters that he had written to Calvin in this book.

Which then circulated quite widely. So anyone who kind of knew Calvin knew who must be the author of this book. Now Calvin read what Servetus sent him and replied at length again, telling Servetus his own views were in his institutes.

[ 6 : 55 ] And Calvin sent a copy of his institutes to Servetus. Bainton tells us that Servetus annotated Calvin's institutes, filling them with insulting comments, and then sent them back.

By 1546, Calvin had replied to Servetus for the last time. He wrote in a letter that he prayed God's spirit would give Servetus humility and would change his mind on his heretical views.

Calvin writes to a friend that he will waste no more time with Servetus. And in Calvin's words, He has written to me in so proud a spirit, you will lose time in asking me to bestow labor upon him, for I have other affairs which press more immediately upon me.

Calvin told a friend and fellow reformer, William Farrell, Servetus lately wrote to me, and coupled with his letter, a long volume of his delirious fancies, with the thrasonic boast that I should see something astonishing and unheard of.

He takes it upon himself to come hither, if it be agreeable to me. But, Calvin says, 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.

[ 8 : 20 ] Strong, strong words. Some obviously, and I think it makes sense that they would see in this foreboding remark, Calvin's intentions to destroy Servetus.

Servetus. But, Calvin's letter proves that, although he knew all along it was Servetus that wrote to him, he did not betray his confidence and expose him.

It's important to note that whenever Calvin wrote Servetus, he always used an alias for Servetus, and it's also important to note Servetus used an alias for Calvin as well.

You kind of had to do that if you were a hunted man in the time of the Inquisition. But the point here is that Calvin respected Servetus' secrecy. He didn't expose him as he could have.

And whenever Calvin wrote to someone who was in a Catholic country, he always uses that I can find. He uses the term a certain person.

[ 9 : 27 ] He doesn't even use Servetus' alias. So I think this practice probably puts the lie to the charge that Calvin was trying to hunt down Servetus.

Years later, however, Calvin would be involved in Servetus' exposure and arrest in France. And we'll look at that, how that came about.

Scholars debate Calvin's role in Servetus' trial and conviction of heresy by the Catholic Inquisition in Vion in 1553.

So earlier in the year that Servetus was in Geneva and burnt at the stake. Servetus' alias, whereabouts, and the fact that he had authored the restitution of Christianity were actually exposed in an exchange of letters between a Catholic man from Vion and his Protestant cousin, William de Tre, who was a Genevan friend of Calvin's.

Now, ultimately, at the request of French authorities, de Tre forwarded documents from Calvin, which did end up securing Servetus' conviction.

[ 10 : 40 ] Now, for some, this proves that Calvin was orchestrating Servetus' destruction. However, Calvin and de Tre both say in their own writings that Calvin only reluctantly gave up this information at the pleading request of his friend de Tre, which allowed de Tre to keep his word to his cousin in Vion.

It actually began as a... It actually began this interchange of letters between the two, the Catholic in France and the Protestant in Geneva. It began as almost a boast between them, writing back and forth, whether Catholic France or Protestant Geneva was a home for heretics or would allow heresy.

So that's how this began. Calvin did not believe, however, in assisting the papal sword to be the proper way to fight heresy.

Servetus avoided execution in France by the Inquisition by escaping from prison. He was out in the yard, in the prison yard, and he climbed up on the roof of the outhouse one day and hopped over the wall, and he was gone.

The Inquisition, however, burned him in effigy. So they did condemn him to burning at the stake. Now, long before this, Calvin judged Servetus to be a particularly dangerous heretic, and he spent no small effort trying to refute him and to warn others of Servetus.

[ 12 : 20 ] Servetus attacked foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, primarily the Trinity and also the deity of Christ as formulated in the Nicene Creed.

In Calvin's Institutes, Calvin compares Servetus to Arius, Sibelius, and other ancient authors of errors.

In Calvin's words, in our own day, there have arisen certain frenzied persons, such as Servetus, who have entangled everything with new deceptions.

It is of importance to discuss their fallacies. For Servetus, Calvin says, the name Trinity was so utterly hateful and detestable that he commonly labeled all those whom he called Trinitarians as atheists.

Now, an interesting fact I stumbled across, it seems that Servetus was probably the first person to ever apply the term Trinitarian to people who held to the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

[ 13 : 26 ] So, we have Servetus to thank for that. Regarding Christ's two natures and status as the eternal son of God, Calvin outlines the errors of Nestorius and Eutyches, then continues, in our own age too, a no less deadly monster has emerged, Michael Servetus.

For Calvin, Servetus' detestable impiety went against both the plain teaching of Scripture and the Orthodox doctors of the Church.

Servetus attempted to position Tertullian over against Nicene Orthodoxy, but Calvin refuted him. Calvin says, Even if Tertullian sometimes is rough and thorny in his mode of speech, yet he not ambiguously hands on the sum of doctrine that we defend.

Now, I'm going to read you just one example of Servetus. As I was working on this, I kept being tempted to slide into the theology, just to dig into what was at the heart of Servetus' Trinitarian heresy.

This is not the time for that, but we can talk about that afterwards if you'd like. But I'll give you an example of the spirit that upset Calvin.

[ 15 : 01 ] In Servetus' words, out of this book, just recently published actually, I think, just was republished in English after I finished this, maybe a year ago it came out.

If the second person assumes Mary as it assumed Christ, then the sophists, and here he's talking about Orthodox doctors of the Christian Church, if the second person assumes Mary as it assumed Christ, then the sophists admit that Mary is Christ.

Christ bore the Son of Man. Christ is his own mother. Christ is man and woman. Pray, restrain your laughter if you can. He goes on, Basil the Great maintains with singular mistakenness that he is called begotten and not a created being, a son and not born.

Whether the third person proceeds from the Father or from the Son or from the Father only, as the Greeks say, it is very bitterly debated. Vain. It is an ancient problem, which I shall later solve with ease, he says.

Now Servetus goes on to slam the views of Gregory Nazianzus and Augustine on the nature of Christ as well. So you see, it was not only Servetus' doctrine, but his spirit and his rejection of all prior Christian theology on this subject that Calvin found so troubling.

[ 16 : 35 ] Servetus actually believed that the doctrine of the Trinity was invented by Satan to destroy the Church. And it was this doctrine Servetus had singled out from a very young age to try to disprove.

He brags often in his theological works that he learned theology from no one. He was convinced that in all theologians there is some truth and some error mixed and no one sees his own error.

And I think he's probably fairly accurate in that. Calvin's issue was that in Servetus' anti-Trinitarian and anti-Christological doctrines, Servetus actually believed that he did understand full truth and he was without error.

So we're going to pass over the specifics of his doctrine, but we will look at what some other of Calvin's contemporaries had to say about him.

Calvin was not alone in recognizing Servetus' heresy. This opinion was shared by Ocolumpadius, who hosted Servetus for 10 months in Basel and he attempted at that time to correct Servetus' errors.

[ 17 : 53 ] Ocolumpadius respond... Can you imagine having to spell that every time you wrote a letter? From Johannes Ocolumpadius. There's more vowels in there than consonants.

At least in English. Nationalism. He was Swiss, but I don't know. He responds to Servetus' view of Christ.

You deny the one person in two natures. Don't you see that in denying the eternality of the Son, you necessarily deny the eternality of the Father also?

In other words, if the Son is not eternal, how can we call God our eternal Father if there's no relationships between the Trinity that go back in eternity?

You're all familiar with Martin Boetzer, I would assume, as good Anglicans. He was German-Swiss, but you ought to know as Anglicans about Martin Boetzer.

[ 19 : 00 ] He was exiled from Strasbourg when it fell under Catholic rule again, and he accepted Thomas Cranmer's invitation to come to England and assist with the Reformation there.

At Cranmer's request, this is just a little Anglican aside, at Cranmer's request, Boetzer commented on the various editions of the Book of Common Prayer that Cranmer was working on, and he also became Regis Professor of Theology at Cambridge.

Now, when Boetzer was in England, he's famous for not getting entangled in controversies. So, people were trying to get him to take sides on clerical garb, and he said, no, I will not take sides on that.

There are far more important things for me to spend my time on. And there were other issues like that. He was known to be very gentle and conciliatory. He did not persecute Anabaptists in Strasbourg under his time there.

And he had known Servetus personally and treated him with kindness, allowing him to stay in Strasbourg. When he read Servetus' work on the errors of the Trinity, this mild Martin Boetzer called it a most pestilential book, and Servetus, a heretic who deserved to be disemboweled and torn to pieces for his blasphemy.

[ 20 : 28 ] Boetzer was also friends with Luther, so you can see maybe some Luther's language there. Theodore Beza was Calvin's successor in Geneva, and he writes in retrospect in his biography of Calvin this.

He says, I say of Servetus that the ancient, what the ancient fathers wrote concerning the twin monster, Paul, Samos, Satenis, and Arius, that with them originated those fires by which the whole church of Christendom was afterwards in a blaze, for punishment was most deservedly inflicted on Servetus at Geneva, not because he was sectarian, in other words, not because he broke away from the church or even held wrong doctrinal views, but because he was a monstrous compound of mere impiety and horrid blasphemy with which he had, for the period of thirty years, by word and writing, polluted both heaven and earth.

This is what, I think this is what helps us understand that Calvin's concern here was pastoral. Calvin wasn't refuting Servetus in order to win theological arguments.

He was trying to protect the flock. In Beza's comment, we see a hint at what the big concern around Servetus was. Servetus wasn't just a sectarian, and he wasn't just endangering his own soul with heterodox personal beliefs.

He was, for the reformers, the worst kind of heretic. He was the publishing kind. Calvin believed it useful to refute Servetus' grosser deceptions, in Calvin's words, with which he has bewitched himself and certain others, and Calvin hoped that godly readers would recognize that the crafty evasions of this foul dog utterly extinguished the hope of salvation.

[ 22 : 33 ] Calvin clearly saw himself as God's watchdog over the flock, and Servetus as a heretical wolf endangering the flock. So when Servetus showed up in Geneva shortly after escaping the Inquisition in France, everyone took it very seriously.

But why would Servetus, I wondered this, and if you're wondering this, you're in good company, scholars are still divided over why Servetus would escape the Inquisition only to come straight to Geneva.

Servetus knew Calvin was there, and he knew that Calvin had provided the material evidence for his conviction by the Inquisition.

Servetus said he was just passing through, but this kind of seemed suspect. He said he didn't want to be recognized by anyone, he was just going to go through, but he did show up in church for Calvin's Sunday morning sermon.

And you understand at that time Geneva was kind of a refuge for people fleeing persecution, Catholic persecution in Europe, and especially people fleeing from France, which is where Servetus spent most of his adult life working.

[ 23 : 54 ] So he risked a lot in showing up at Geneva that he might be recognized, and indeed he was. Someone recognized him, someone who had come from Lyon, where Servetus had been, recognized him, and after the service they alerted Calvin.

Now Calvin reported Servetus to the civil authorities, and he initiated charges of heresy against Servetus. So Calvin was the one who reported him after he was reported.

Servetus was reported to him. The town council imprisoned Servetus, and a trial began, which lasted from mid-August to late October.

In the 16th century, civil and church authorities agreed that heresy was dangerous, but it threatened more than just souls. Civic order and public morality were at stake.

Now, obviously, in today's society, people view religion as a private and personal matter. But in late medieval and early modern thinking, heresy constituted not merely irregular personal piety or unusual religious beliefs, but it was seen as a potentially destabilizing and destructive force in society as a whole.

[ 25 : 25 ] Heresy was not just a matter of doctrinal error. It actually carried with it the stigma of moral corruption, and it poisoned, it was seen to poison the community.

We need to remember that in the 16th century, the church and state were still very much bound together. Your citizenship was reckoned on the basis of your baptismal status and what church you were baptized in and where.

renouncing your infant baptism was therefore seen as renouncing your citizenship, and that's why often Anabaptists were persecuted.

Denying the Trinity or the full deity of Christ was not merely heretical therefore, but in the mindset of the day, it was understood as attempting to undermine the traditional moral fabric of Christian society.

So, in continuity with medieval Christendom, Catholics saw a link between religious faith and public order. He says, Calvin says that the civil government does indeed have spiritual responsibilities, and everyone in the day believed that.

[ 26 : 47 ] The civil authority sphere was to guard the freedom for, and outward practice of orderly religion, and the church's role was to ensure and defend true piety and pure doctrine.

So, on the one side, it was about the ethics and the morality of lived-out religion, and on the other side, it was about the church's responsibility was doctrine and piety, true holiness.

So, in other words, both magistrates and ministers were agents and servants of God. They were committed to the same cause, but they just differed in their spheres of action.

Servetus was tried in civil court, therefore, for heresy, and his judges were the city councillors. The Genevan council, that happened to be in power at the time, was perennially jealous of its authority.

group. This is the same council that had previously banished Calvin for his insistence on the church's authority to excommunicate people that they were disciplining.

[ 27 : 58 ] And this city council had argued it was the civil authority to carry out excommunication and to carry out church discipline. Calvin was a foreigner at this time.

The city council did not allow him to hold a Genevan citizenship, which meant he was excluded from the dispensation of any kind of civil or criminal justice.

He could not vote or anything like that. He was a Frenchman. So, therefore, Calvin's role at Servetus' trial was not one of judge, as he is typically pictured.

But rather, he was an expert theological witness for the prosecution on the charge of heresy. Now, having refuted Servetus for years, Calvin was probably the foremost expert on what Servetus actually believed.

And by the time this trial happened, many of the men who had known Servetus and had tried to enter into conversation about theology with them had died by this point, like Bootser and I think Aquampadius was already dead.

[ 29 : 20 ] I think Bollinger was the only one who was still alive other than Calvin. When Geneva requested evidence from Servetus' earlier trial in France, the Catholic Inquisition wrote back demanding that they send Servetus back to France to be burned.

The Geneva City Council gave the choice to Servetus. Do you want to finish your trial here or do you want to go back to France where you kind of know how this is going to end?

And Servetus chose to try his chances in Geneva. Now, that's actually saying something.

It seems that Servetus believed Geneva was probably more likely to be lenient than Catholic France or Spain, and even if not to accept his views, at least to permit them.

After years of attempting to gain him for our savior, Calvin says, he came to hope the sentence of death would be passed. In a letter to Heinrich Bollinger, Theodore Beza states that Calvin pleaded the cause of the church against Servetus and the council.

[ 30 : 42 ] Yet Servetus continued in his impiety. The outcome was uncertain. Beza goes on to say in this private letter, what will come of it I do not know.

Let us pray the Lord to purge his church of these monsters. Now, the relevance of that is that if Calvin was the all powerful tyrant of Geneva at this time, the verdict ought to have been a foregone conclusion.

But it wasn't. So Beza's writing to a colleague, to a private mutual friend of his and Calvin's, and he has no reason to be anything but honest with Bollinger.

So when he says that the verdict is up in the air, this is not the unguarded confidence of Calvin's right-hand man, but I think genuine uncertainty in a situation which could go either way.

And I think it was uncertain because of the enmity between Geneva City Council and Calvin. This is a scene of, I don't know if you can make it out very well, but Calvin is holding his hand over the cup and over the bread.

[ 31 : 59 ] And this fellow here, Philip Berthelian, has pulled his sword out and is demanding he be given communion. I'm not sure if it got to swords, but Calvin certainly did shield the elements and make a stand and I'll explain what happened.

The Servetus trial came in the midst of a long battle between the pastors consistory, so that was the church leadership in Geneva, which was made up of all the pastors plus twelve lay elders.

And there was a long battle between the pastoral consistory and the city council in power at the time, which Calvin affectionately termed the Libertines, which were led by Amy Perrin.

A colleague of Calvin assumed that Servetus had come to the city actually to take advantage of the city council's dissatisfaction with Calvin. Calvin had a considerable moral authority in his pulpit and his pen, but he was not liked by all.

And tensions between church and state at this very point in which Servetus was in prison in Geneva were reaching a critical point. A member of city council, Philibert Berthellier, had been excommunicated by the pastors of the city, but he refused to recognize their authority to do that, and he appealed to his fellow city councilors to lift that ban.

[ 33 : 37 ] Now, the council, being his friends who were in power with him, granted him permission to attend the Lord's Supper, but Calvin warned the council he would resist if Berthellier came forward to take communion.

On Sunday, September 3rd of 1553, Calvin declared from the pulpit that he would not serve the elements to any whom the church had barred from the table.

Now, sensing a showdown, I think council wisely and also secretly urged Berthellier not to partake, not to go forward and demand communion.

So this may not have happened. Calvin was unaware, however, that council had told Berthellier that. He did not know.

And when he was preaching from Acts 20 on that Sunday, he quoted Paul's words of farewell in Ephesians to Calvin. He quoted it to his own congregation, thinking it was possibly his last sermon in Geneva.

[ 34 : 46 ] Now, along with Berthellier, among the city council members appointed to try Servetus' case were other council members who previously kicked Calvin out of the city.

Perrin and Berthellier were kind of Calvin's most staunch critics and enemies in the city. Both were likely sympathetic towards Servetus, at least to some degree, we don't know for sure.

We do know for sure neither one liked Calvin at all. This conflict was playing out while Servetus sat in a cell in Geneva. And the written discussion of the trial over heresy charges took place September 2nd to the 5th.

And this communion showdown happened on the 3rd. The civic council versus church consistory was only resolved two years later.

So all that to say the Servetus trial was not playing out in a city or a circumstance over which Calvin presided unchallenged.

[ 35 : 58 ] The council sent letters, the council trying Servetus, sent letters to the other Swiss Reformed cities and church authorities asking them for advice in the Servetus case.

Every one of them pronounced Servetus guilty of gross heresy and most of them explicitly advocated execution, others implicitly.

Calvin, the council found Servetus guilty of heresy and they did opt for execution. Bruce Gordon is a biographer of Calvin and I think he explains very well the importance of this verdict for the Protestant Reformation at this time so I'm going to read a quote from him.

Why had the Protestant Reformers so readily agreed to the execution of Servetus? We have to shed modern sensibilities and enter the world of the 16th century.

By the early 1550s the Protestant Reformation was facing a resurgent Catholic church which at the Council of Trent was clearly defining its theology and discipline.

[ 37 : 12 ] The Protestant churches continued to be severely damaged by accusations that they were spawning heresy and heretics. The unwanted Servetus case came at a vital moment when Protestantism was forced to define itself against heresy.



Failure to condemn Servetus and his evident denial of fundamental doctrines would have been catastrophic for them. Gordon's basically saying if they hadn't done they hadn't reached the conclusion they did with Servetus then Catholic accusations that Protestantism was just a cesspool of heresy they would have seen.

Servetus had already been condemned by the Catholics in agreement with the evidence they had received from Calvin and that made matters even clearer.

Bollinger's response to Geneva City Council's request for advice gives you a good example of what Gordon was talking about. Bollinger says this, God has given you an opportunity to wash us all clean from the suspicion of being heretics or favoring heresy.

If you show yourselves vigilant and ready to prevent this poison from spreading further. End quote. So, it was a crucial moment for the Protestant Reformation.

[ 38 : 44 ] Ronald Wallace states that the Trinity had been the foundation of not only Catholic doctrine but Christian civilization. And to spread denial of such a doctrine was viewed as spreading treason and moral anarchy.

There was likely no place in the world, in the Protestant world or the Catholic world, where Servetus would have met with anything but a sentence of death. Execution in, not in heresy per se, there were many who were tried actually in Geneva for heresy prior to this, and none had been executed for heresy.

Many Anabaptists had been exiled, but none executed. But execution for a heretic that published very widely was preferred to exile, because exile just allowed heretic to continue writing and publishing.

The Protestants burned bodily what the Catholics had already burned in effigy. And council insisted on Servetus burning at the stake, likely to show they were as serious as the Catholics were.

However, Calvin advocated for a less brutal mode of execution. Christians executing heretics cannot be justified, and I'm certainly not trying to do that today.

[ 40 : 17 ] But given its historical context, it can be understood. good. So in the 16th century, no enlightened civil leader believed that the government did not have the right to execute blasphemers and heretics.

Catholic scholar Brad Gregory notes that moderns think of the cruelty of burning someone at the stake, but he says Calvin emphasized that it was more than cruel to spare the wolves and expose the sheep to their possible soul murder.

through poisoning of false doctrines. Since every soul Satan seduced was lost to the hope of salvation, heresy required swift and severe retaliation, just to stop greater damage.

Alistair McGrath reminds us that no less a theologian than Thomas Aquinas taught that if a heretic remained absolutely unrepentant, then for the sake of saving others, he'd be separated from the church by excommunication and then left to the secular judge to be exterminated from the world by death.

What Aquinas taught. Such a response to unrepentant heretics was presupposed in this day. It's just what you did. Gregory notes the mindset of the day in, he puts it in today's lingo, that allowing heresy to spread was religious reckless endangerment by spiritual serial killers.

[ 41 : 55 ] Indeed, heretics were worse because their victims lived on to harm others in turn. You might think of it this way, you might think of the 16th century and the prior tradition as viewing heretics kind of like vampires.

So they didn't just kill whoever they bit turned into a vampire also and just spread a plague of eternal damnation. All this is to say religious tolerance, which I think the Protestant Reformation did a big part in ushering in religious tolerance.

And actually this, the Servetus affair set off a very broad discussion about what should happen to heretics. and it sort of started a ball rolling that advanced the conversation on religious tolerance.

However, religious tolerance came in the wake of the Reformation. It didn't ride the bow wave of the Reformation. Gregory reminds us that we, Brad Gregory, that we need to not sort of color the 16th century with our own lenses.

eternal damnation was literally what happened to heretics who died at odds with Christ. So images like slaying the wolf for the sake of the flock or cutting away the putrid flesh to save the body, for them those were not metaphors.

[ 43 : 30 ] Those who tried heretics reapplied Augustine's dictum of martyrdom. It's not the punishment but the cause that makes a martyr.

And they would say that this also distinguished lawful prosecution of a heretic from unjust persecution.

It was the doctrine that determined the difference. So in the 16th century, wrong doctrine was not a human right. For people of Calvin's day, God was supreme over human authorities, and the soul was supreme over the body.

So if you punished criminals for earthly crimes, such as murder, then you had to hold a heretic who was killing people's souls, you had to hold them to an even higher standard, and sometimes the punishment was, so the punishment had to be at least as strict for a heretic.

You don't have to read this. It's Deuteronomy 13, and this is the passage, the chapter of Scripture that, whether you were playing for the Catholics or playing for the Protestants in the Reformation era, this is the passage that everybody used to justify the killing of heretics.

[ 44 : 57 ] anyone who's leading you away from God and says, come, let's follow a false God, they ought to be killed. From his writings, Calvin clearly viewed Servetus' Trinitarian errors as worse than his denial of infant baptism.

In a letter, Servetus wrote to one of Calvin's co-pastors in Geneva, he calls the doctrine of the Trinity a three-headed Cerberus.

I don't know if you've seen Harry Potter, but that's Ron, Hermione, and Harry facing down what Servetus called the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

This letter and Servetus' infamous denial of the Trinity obviously came up at trial. Interestingly, Calvin pushed almost as hard on Servetus' denial of infant baptism, what was called the Anabaptist error.

And it's interesting to ask why would Calvin do that? And obviously scholars are split over that question, but in a nutshell, I think the most likely reason Calvin brought that up was, you've got to remember, he was working toward a conviction of Servetus.

[ 46 : 30 ] And Servetus was a very odd mix of Anabaptist and extreme apocalyptic beliefs. So if you're a city council trying Servetus, who's a very apocalyptic Anabaptist, you're probably thinking of an incident that happened 19 years earlier, where a city council was deposed, put down in the city of Munster, and the Anabaptists rose up, declared the civil government, well, there was a lot of bloodshed, they killed a lot of opposition to them, they believed that they had been told to reestablish the kingdom of David on earth, their leaders reestablished polygamy, they took away all private property and made all things common, and they were waiting the return of Jesus and or David very, very soon.

and they ultimately, they kind of were betrayed from inside and they had to be put down by an army that had gathered around Munster, but at the cost of a great amount of lives.

So if you're the city council and you hear Servetus talking about his apocalyptic visions attached to his Anabaptism, you can imagine why they may have been even more worried than just about his Trinitarian heresy.

Servetus writes to, in his very last letter to anyone in Geneva, he writes to one of Calvin's co-pastors, and he, in this letter, it's very hard to tell if he thinks he is the right-hand man of Michael the archangel coming at the end times, or if he thinks he's the reincarnation or the incarnation of Michael the archangel, to put down all the enemies of Christ.

It's hard to tell, and Roland Bainton thinks Servetus saw himself as the right-hand man, the armor bearer of Michael. Others think he thought he was Michael the archangel.

[ 48 : 50 ] He had calculated that the end times were here in his day, and he calculated from Revelation 1260 years since the fall of the church in the time of Constantine.

So the end was either 1565, which began in Constantine's, you know, 1260 years after Constantine's reign, or 1585 after the Council of Nicaea.

1565, but as he calculated it, the end was nigh. At Servetus's request, Calvin went to see him post-sentencing after he'd been sentenced to burn at the stake.

Calvin remonstrated with Servetus to repent, and Bollinger's description of Servetus after hosting him for 10 months gives us a little window into how Servetus likely responded to Calvin's pleading for repentance.

Bollinger's words are he was dogged in his errors, and he believed he was more interested in debate than in truth. Servetus did not heed Calvin, Servetus went on firm in his own beliefs, and he was believing himself to be riding to war with Michael the archangel, he told Calvin.

[ 50 : 30 ] Calvin did not accompany Servetus to the place of execution. He asked Feral to do that, his friend. and fellow pastor, and Feral did, and he preached to Servetus to repent.

He pleaded with him, he prayed for him. Again, we have to look at this practice, it just might seem like adding insult to injury to have somebody telling you to repent while you're at the stake.

But from the 16th century mindset, what was going on was the hope for a last minute recantation, that the heretic might be spared, or, perhaps, as the heretic was dying in the flames, a last minute cry for mercy would mean that they would only suffer flames in this life and not in the next.

That's how it was viewed. If the heretic remained unrepentant to the end, this sentence, this brutal sentence of death, would be a warning to others in the community, both against heresy and against sedition, because they were tied together.

But Servetus was resolute to the very end, and he cried to Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, for mercy, not Jesus, the Eternal Son of God. So we're getting close to the end here.

[ 51 : 55 ] I don't want to deny that Calvin played a key role in the tragic Servetus affair. He did, by any measure. But he was not a Genevan dictator who was solely responsible for it.

It was not until much later when there was a sizable influx of other French Protestants from France coming into Geneva that Calvin actually gained the support that he needed to go forward with some of the further reforms he had envisioned for Geneva, and that a favorable town council came to power.

Now Calvin, as we mentioned, Calvin had advocated for a death sentence for Servetus, but city council, kind of flouting Calvin's judgment to the very end, they denied his request that Servetus be beheaded, and they insisted on being at least as brutal against heresy as the Catholics, and they burned him at the stake.

This is the Reformation wall in Geneva. This is, this was an age filled with cultural and social conflict.

The world was turning upside down in the era of the Protestant Reformation, and there were many executions on all sides for heresy.

[ 53 : 29 ] Bruce mentioned earlier today in conversation that some believe the church killed way more people in these inter- religious battles and doctrinal wars than were ever martyred by pagans or by non-Christians.

But in this era, Calvin's oddly been singled out as a persecuting tyrant. Marilyn Robinson, who's in her own right a very good Calvin scholar and aficionado, she summarized the way many villainize and reject Calvin without truly knowing why.

She says, people know to disapprove of Calvin, though not precisely why they should. His misdeeds are somehow of a kind to forbid attention.

To the extent that Christians today, I would say, do cite a reason to reject Calvin, it's often his doctrine of predestination, which I think is misunderstood or is formulated in words Calvin himself wouldn't have put it in.

But I've also in many conversations had people bring the Servetus affair up and say, this is why I could never really give Calvin a sympathetic listening. They perceive Calvin as being an absolute dictator in the city and just having his way and putting to death or exiling people who disagreed.

[ 55 : 10 ] Marilyn Robinson again reminds us, we're often too quick to damn figures from history for actions that we take little time to contextualize or to understand. She says again, we're forever drawing up indictments against the past and then refusing it to let it testify on its own behalf.

So this is the Reformation Wall. And this is also the Reformation Wall. Clearly somebody has believed Calvin does have blood on his head.

Alistair McGrath also recognizes this imbalanced and oddly virulent treatment of Calvin by many people specifically over the Servetus Affair.

In McGrath's words, post-enlightenment writers have every right to protest against the cruelty of earlier generations. And they do. We shouldn't seek to justify what happened in the Servetus Affair.

But we should try to understand it. And McGrath says, to single out Calvin for particular criticism suggests a selectivity approaching victimization.

[ 56 : 24 ] To target him in this way when his involvement was, to say the least according to McGrath, oblique, and overlook the much greater claims to infamy of other individuals and institutions raises difficult questions concerning pre-commitments of Calvin's critics.

McGrath notes that Servetus was the only individual put to death for his religious opinions in Geneva during Calvin's lifetime.

And I would want to qualify that. He was not the only one executed when Calvin was a pastor in Geneva. He was the only one executed specifically for his religious opinions.

There were others executed for anarchy and sedition and whatnot, again tried by the city council. In Brad Gregory's words, what happened here was a responsible early modern act of tough love, enacted for the sake of others and for the common good.

That was just the perspective of the day. So if Calvin cannot be excused for his role in this death of Servetus, and I don't think he should be excused for it, but he ought at least to be contextualized and understood.

[ 57 : 48 ] Calvin, Alistair McGrath notes, lived in an era which, lacking many of the sensitivities of 20th century liberal thought, regarded the execution of heretics as routine.

Calvin's support for the death sentence in a case that all contemporary religious and civil authorities regarded as particularly heinous, and from a specially dangerous heretic, makes Calvin little more than a child of his age, rather than an outrageous exception to its standards.

So, whether Calvin acted rightly as he, as in the eyes of his Protestant, Reformed, and Catholic theologians of his day, or whether he acted wrongly, I would say in hindsight, in retrospect, what we can say is Calvin certainly did act as a shepherd of the flock was supposed to act when confronting a wolf in 1553.

So, thank you. all of riage