

“Agency of Calvin in the Death of Michael Servetus”

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“It has long been the delight of both infidels and some professed Christians, when they wish to bring odium upon the opinions of Calvin, to refer to his agency in the death of Michael Servetus. This action is used on all occasions by those who have been unable to overthrow his opinions, as a conclusive argument against his whole system. "Calvin burnt Servetus!-Calvin burnt Servetus!", is a good proof with a certain class of reasoners that the doctrine of the Trinity is not true—that divine sovereignty is anti-scriptural, and Christianity a cheat.

We have no wise to palliate any act of Calvin’s which is manifestly wrong. All his proceedings in relation to the unhappy affair of Servetus, we think, cannot be defended. Still it should be remembered that the true principles of religious toleration were little understood in the time of Calvin. All the reformers then living approved of Calvin’s conduct. Even the gentle and amiable Melancthon expressed himself in relation to this affair, in the following manner. In a letter to Bullinger, he says, “I have read your statement respecting the blasphemy of Servetus, and praise your piety and judgment; and am persuaded that the council of Geneva has done right in putting to death this obstinate man, who would never have ceased his blasphemies. I am astonished, that anyone can be found to disapprove of the proceeding.”

Farel expressly says, that “Servetus deserved capital punishment.”

Bucer did not hesitate to declare, that “Servetus deserved something worse than death.”

The truth is, although Calvin had some hand in the arrest and imprisonment of Servetus, he was unwilling that he should be burnt at all. “I desire,” said he, “that the severity of the punishment should be remitted.” “We endeavoured to commute the kind of death, but in vain.”

“By wishing to mitigate the severity of the punishment” said Farel to Calvin, “you discharge the office of a friend towards your greatest enemy.”

“That Calvin was the instigator of the magistrates that Servetus might be burned,” says Turritine, “historians neither anywhere affirm, nor does it appear from any considerations. Nay, it is certain that he, with the college of pastors, dissuaded from that kind of punishment.”