

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 37 CALVIN AND SERVETUS

The same year King Edward VI died in England (1553), Michael Servetus was burned to death as a heretic in Geneva. Ever since, Calvin's Geneva has been stigmatized as a symbol of religious dogmatism, intolerance and cruelty. What people don't know is that Calvin's world agreed with the execution of Servetus, and that "there was no occasion for another capital punishment of heresy in the Church of Geneva after the burning of Servetus" (Schaff, 8:798).

Servetus was a Spanish scholar, physician, and Anabaptist who published a book attacking the doctrine of the Trinity, even "comparing the Trinity to Cerebus, the three-headed dog of Greek mythology. He denounced Trinitarians as heretics" (DeMar, *Reformation*, 208). He also denounced infant baptism as a diabolical invention and destructive of Christianity. A rejection of the Trinity and infant baptism were capital crimes. Europe was a Christian society, where every citizen was born and baptized as a member of both church and state. Therefore, to reject the Trinity was to reject Christianity and to reject infant baptism was to reject citizenship. Both Catholics and Protestants viewed the Anabaptists as revolutionary and dangerous to society.

The Roman Catholic Inquisition in Vienne, France condemned Servetus to die by burning. But he "escaped and made his way to Geneva where he arrived on Sunday, August 13, 1553. He was promptly arrested" (DeMar, 209). "When Roman Catholic authorities learned that the escaped Servetus was in Geneva, they demanded that he be returned to their jurisdiction. The Genevan City Council then offered Servetus a choice: he could either return to Vienne or remain in Geneva. Servetus chose to remain in Geneva and take his chances with Genevan justice [he probably hoped to benefit from the hostility the city council had towards Calvin]" (DeMar, 210). "Calvin's opponents had done all they could to hinder the trial of Servetus. Because they had tried to protect a man whom everybody condemned as a great heretic, they were now thoroughly discredited. Their power of opposition was broken" (Kuijer, *Church in History*, 198). On October 27th, Servetus was sentenced to burn to death.

Calvin agreed that Servetus should be put to death, but he disagreed with the Roman Catholic idea that the church "possessed both a religious and a secular sword" (RCUS pastor Mark Larson, *Calvin's doctrine of the State*, p.3). Calvin argued that it was the job of the state, *not* the church, to execute heretics.

Both Farel and Calvin pleaded with Servetus to cry "for mercy to God whom you have blasphemed" (Schaff, 8:784). "Calvin had asked that Servetus be spared the agony of being burned to death, urging the Small Council to use the more humane method of beheading. The government refused this request" (Larson, 85-86). If Servetus died without repentance, then (like all others who have died without repentance) he is suffering in "the fire that shall never be quenched" (Mark 9:43).

"Calvin was certainly at fault...in accepting the widely-held belief of the age that heretics should be put to death. We are all prone to judge men of former days by the standards of the age in which we ourselves live.... Perhaps God allows blemishes in his own children, while on earth, in order that men should not idolize them and put them, as it were, on pedestals" (S.M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History*, 109).

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Question 101: BUT MAY WE SWEAR REVERENTLY BY THE NAME OF GOD? **Yes, when the magistrate requires it, or when it may be needful otherwise, to maintain and promote fidelity and truth to the glory of God and our neighbor's good; for such an oath is grounded in God's Word, and therefore was rightly used by the saints in the Old and New Testaments.**

When the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "Do not swear at all" (Matt. 5:34), He was *not* abolishing the lawful oath required in God's law on certain solemn occasions. "You *shall* take oaths in His name" (Deut. 6:13); "and *swear* by His name" (Deut. 10:20; cf. Ex. 22:10-11). Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). Jesus Himself swore an oath when commanded to do so by the high priest (Matt. 26:63-64; cf. Heb. 6:13). The apostle Paul swore at least one oath. "I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth" (2 Cor. 1:23).

One of the ways Jesus fulfilled the law was to clarify its true meaning, in order to correct the scribes and Pharisees' perversions of God's law. They perverted the oath by saying it was okay to swear without using God's name. As Jesus pointed out, they swore by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by their own head (Matt. 5:34-36). "The Jews made a distinction between binding and nonbinding oaths. Instead of using the divine name (which would be binding), they swore 'by heaven or by earth or by anything.' ... that would be non-binding and would not incur the wrath of God" (Hendriksen, *Commentary*, James 5:12). But Jesus said that to swear by anything is to swear by God, for God stands behind everything (Matt. 23:21-22). Oath-taking is a very serious matter, and it is to be done only when necessary. In our daily conversations with people there is no need to swear at all. "But let your Yes be Yes and your No, No. For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Matt. 5:37). As Christians, living before the face of God, we are under oath at all times to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, out of thankfulness for our salvation (Eph. 4:15, 25).

In a court of law, especially, the oath is necessary – first and foremost because it promotes the glory of God. God is a God of truth; and the manifestation of truth is glorious to God. The oath also contributes to our neighbor's safety. Law and order depend on men speaking truthfully and being faithful to their word. Because of man's natural tendency to speak lies, the oath is required in this sinful world. There is no higher motive for telling the truth than the fear of God's wrath. An oath temporarily reminds sinners that they will be judged for what they say, and this does reduce the amount of exaggeration, distortion, and perjury. In our courts today, "So help me God," is being removed from the oath. Why then should people tell the truth?

Question 102: MAY WE SWEAR BY THE SAINTS OR BY ANY OTHER CREATURES? **No, for a lawful oath is a calling upon God, that He, as the only searcher of hearts, may bear witness to the truth, and punish me if I swear falsely; which honor is due to no creature.**

Only God can make the oath meaningful. The unbeliever will go to hell for lying; the untruthful believer will receive God's fatherly discipline (1 Cor. 11:31-32).

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