

Scriptures and Doctrine :: Calvin and Servetus

Calvin and Servetus - posted by theopenlife, on: 2007/7/26 22:35

For those honestly interested in a more balanced view, please read this article, which comes from thirdmill.org...

Calvin and Servetus
by Matthew Gross

It is hard to tell from the research that I have seen exactly how many people were executed during Calvin's time in Geneva. I would have to say that the modern day opponents of Calvin like to give the impression that executions happened every day. There is a number that is oft-repeated but rarely footnoted of 57 executions during 4 years "at the height of Calvin's power". I am unable to locate the source of this number, and a more moderate anti-Calvin source, Calvin: A Biography, by Bernard Cottret, puts the number at 38.

In considering these executions, it is important to note that Calvin never held any formal power outside the Church during his time in Geneva. The government of the church in Geneva was Presbyterian -- it had a pastor and a consistory, or board of ruling elders. Contrary to popular portrayal, the government of the church was not the government of the city. The government of the city was called "the Council". The consistory handled moral matters, and the maximum penalty it could impose was excommunication. However, for many years they could not even excommunicate someone without the prior approval of the Council. The maximum penalty that the Council could impose was death, however, even the Council's decisions could be appealed to another body called "The Council of Two Hundred", so named because it consisted of two hundred citizens of Geneva. Calvin himself was not a citizen of Geneva during the upheaval in Geneva, and thus was disqualified from voting, holding public office, or even serving on the Council of Two Hundred until very late in his life, and at least four years after he achieved "the height of his power" to which so many Calvin detractors refer. Thus, it is with this understanding, the understanding that Calvin held no formal secular power, and that any power he did have was subject to the review of two different citizen's councils that we turn to the discussion of the executions in Geneva.

Of the 38 executions accounted for in Calvin: A Biography, by Bernard Cottret, Calvin himself writes about 23, and the justification given is that they spread the plague by witchcraft. This is often given as mocking proof that Calvin really must have been an ignorant tyrant -- after all, we know that witchcraft isn't real, etc. But if you read the primary source, the actual letter to Myconius of Basel (March 27, 1545), you see that witchcraft, if it was a charge, was in addition to the charge of committing other malicious acts:

"A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered, who, for the space of three years, had spread the plague through the city by what mischievous device I know not. After fifteen women have been burnt, some men have even been punished more severely, some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners,--the conspirators do not cease, notwithstanding, to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment. You see in the midst of what perils we are tossed about. The Lord hath hitherto preserved our dwelling, though it has more than once been attempted. It is well that we know ourselves to be under His care."

When you read this quote, you see that these people were accused of actually trying to spread the plague, not by casting spells, but by smearing "the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment". Once again this seems innocuous, but it is possible that their "ointment" was spreading the disease if it contained blood or bodily fluid from someone infected with the disease. Even if it didn't work, the people putting the ointment on the door handles apparently thought it would. Thus, at the very least these inept bioterrorists would be guilty of what we call "conspiracy to commit murder". This is in addition to the charge of witchcraft, itself a capital crime in the Old Testament, which Calvin thought was directly applicable in Geneva.

Of the other executions, several are named to be executions for serial adultery, also a capital crime in the Old Testament. Contrary to what is commonly implied, this was not a group of all women or all poor people who were executed. Among the executed was a prominent Genevese banker who went to his death proclaiming the justice of the judgment -- Geneva did not discriminate on the basis of sex or class, as it often implied. It is debatable whether or not adultery should

ever be or have been a capital offense. Many people who think that it should not be one today think that it should not have been a capital offense in ancient Israel either. Thus, they reject the Old Testament law as unjust even when it was originally given. This is an error we should be careful to avoid as we debate whether or not these executions were just.

So the bulk of the executions were for conspiracy to commit murder and for adultery. In addition to these, there was one girl who was executed for striking her mother – another capital crime in the Old Testament which could be, at least in ancient Israel, justly enforced by the penalty of death in certain instances. We are not told by history whether Calvin approved of this execution, but if he did, it was because he believed that it was the proper application of Old Testament law. Of the other executions, history has only given us details of two – the beheading of Jacques Gruet and the burning of Michael Servetus. Gruet was executed for heresy and sedition. He attached an anonymous note to Calvin's pulpit threatening to kill Calvin and overthrow the government of Geneva if they did not flee the city. He was arrested, tortured for 30 days, and, upon confession, beheaded. History does not tell us whether Calvin approved of the torture; if he did he was wrong to do so. The execution, for conspiring to overthrow the government, may have been justified given the danger to the citizenry that such a conspiracy entailed. Either way, Calvin did not have the authority in Geneva to arrest, torture, or execute anyone. Those were the decisions, not of Calvin or the church Consistory, but of the Council and of the Council of 200.

This brings us to Servetus. He was arrested for heresy, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by the Council. After escaping from prison when he was on trial for heresy in Lyons, Servetus traveled to Geneva on his way to Italy. According to Schaff's Church History, Servetus stayed at Geneva for about a month, taking few pains to conceal his identity. After attending services in Calvin's church one Sunday, Servetus was arrested on charges of heresy. Calvin believed that it was just and right for heretics to be put to death. In this regard, he was not different from Servetus who also believed that heretics, specifically the heretic John Calvin, should be put to death by the Genevese Council.

During the trial it was Calvin's job as expert witness to prove that Servetus was a heretic. Calvin's expert reason and clear thinking triumphed when Servetus chose to hurl insults at Calvin rather than offer a defense. It is important to note that at this time the Council was not controlled by friends of Calvin but by his enemies, the patriots and libertines. This is probably why Servetus felt that he did not have to offer a substantive defense against charges of heresy. We have a written record of the debate because each was required to write their statements and responses for review by the churches of four other prominent protestant cities.

During the time that the other cities were reviewing the debate Lyons requested extradition, but Servetus pleaded to stay in Geneva and protested that he would accept the judgment of the Genevese Council rather than be sent back to Lyons. He had reason to believe that the libertines on the council were on his side, given their intense hatred of Calvin. However, in the end, after receiving recommendations of guilt from the four cities, and in light of the publicity the trial had generated throughout Europe, the libertines and the patriots on the Council decided that Servetus was not worth saving. In a show of bravado intended to send a message that they could be just as "tough on crime" as John Calvin was, they sentenced Servetus to death by burning. When Servetus heard, he could not believe it. Despite Calvin's intercession on behalf of Servetus that he be put to death humanely, the Council refused and Servetus was burned on October 27, 1553.

Calvin went to his deathbed believing that the execution was just because Servetus was a blasphemer and a heretic – a murderer of souls. I stand with Calvin in believing that the state is charged to uphold the law of God, however, I differ with him as to the best way that the state can do this. I believe that Constantine proved once and for all the negative consequences inherent whenever the state enforces orthodoxy – all you get is fake believers scared to air their dissent openly. Calvin was wrong to suppose that heresy should be punished by the state and by death. Even if Calvin was right that heresy was "spiritual murder", the proper solution would have been excommunication and no more.

Here are some additional resources, both positive and negative –

http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/8_ch13.htm this link is from Schaff's Church History. If you want the background and the big picture, this is good.

http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/8_ch16.htm this is Schaff's chapter on Servetus.

http://www.christainhistory.com/articles/death_penalty.html this link is basically a compilation of history-text quotations that put Calvin in a bad light.

Re: Calvin and Servetus - posted by theopenlife, on: 2007/7/26 22:37

Oops! Sorry, this was meant to be a reply within Jesse's thread about executing heretics!

My apologies,

Re: - posted by roaringlamb (), on: 2007/7/26 22:44

Thank you for posting this brother.

Re: - posted by strawrifle (), on: 2007/7/27 0:29

wowee a balanced view by a fan, and he still sounds frightful :-P