

The Execution of Michael Servetus

The execution of Michael Servetus (c. 1511–1553) is one of the most debated events in the life of John Calvin (1509–1564). It has left an indelible stain on his reputation and, unfortunately, the retelling of the story is often dependent on the historian's relationship to Calvinism.

Calvinists are prone to defend their champion while withholding less than flattering evidence. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a penchant for non-Calvinists to portray Calvin as an intolerant, murderous villain, which has led to myths that Calvin personally arrested, tried, judged and killed Servetus. Even famed atheist Christopher Hitchens asserts, 'Calvin himself [was] a sadist and torturer and killer, who burned Servetus (one of the great thinkers and questioners of the day) while the man was still alive.'

This dynamic produces an environment where one is hard-pressed to find an accurate account of what transpired. Did Calvin want Servetus to be executed? Did he try to lure him to Geneva to be killed? Was Calvin the Pope of Geneva that dictated the direction of the trial? Did he murder Servetus? What did irenic reformers such as Philip Melanchthon (1497– 1560) and Martin Bucer (1491–1551) think should be done with Servetus?

(The Trial of the 16th Century: Calvin & Servetus by Jonathan Moorhead, United Kingdom: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., Kindle, 2021, Page 8 of 99)