

## CHAPTER 3

## Servetus' Theology

3.1 *De Trinitatis Erroribus*

This little book, prepared at Toulouse and published at Hagenau by John Setzer<sup>115</sup> in May, 1531, consists of seven chapters of 238 small pages (Cuthbertson 1912:12). Servetus' purpose was to attack the traditional views of Christianity and to restore pure Christianity. This version was also embodied in his last book, *Christianismi Restitutio*. He begins with the doctrine of Christ in this first book: "In investigating the holy mysteries of the divine Triad, I have thought that one ought to start from the man[Christ]" (ET, 2a. 6). "Most men tried to find Christianity "without having any fundamental understanding of CHRIST, and they attached little or no importance to the man, and gave the true CHRIST quite over to oblivion" (ET, 2a. 6). Servetus proceeds from the historical Christ, and proves, first, that this man is Jesus Christ, only a man; secondly, that he is the Son of God; thirdly, that he is God (ET, 2a. 6 & CR, 5). He tries to prove it based on certain verses of the Bible.<sup>116</sup> In his writing, he focuses on the humanity in opposition to those who begin with the Word, the deity, and the true Christ.

In the second book he describes Christ as the Son of God in light of Word and the person of Christ, based mainly on the beginning of the Gospel of John. He also states that the Holy Spirit is one of three Persons of God as follows (ET, argument, 70):

CHRIST, the Son of God, who descended from heaven, was the Word by uttering that God created the world. He became flesh as God's firstborn, and was the Son of God. He was both human and divine. God's Spirit, moving all things, *Operates* within us as the Holy Spirit, which is a person of the Godhead. It proceeds from the Son, not as separate being but as a ministering spirit. It is holy, one of three persons in the Godhead, and sanctifies us by dwelling within us.

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<sup>115</sup> He was a Protestant and printed several treatises of Melanchthon and other Reformers. See Gordon (1910:13-4).

<sup>116</sup> Servetus insists that the knowledge of the historical Christ is his first concern and that of the Word second. "The historical Christ is my only master, this man is Christ, the Son of God, the Savior. But everything else that concerns the discussion of the person of the Word is secondary, and it would be wise to direct all investigation towards the historical person of Jesus Christ since all depends on the knowledge we might have of the historical Christ"(CR, 78, Hillar 1997:200 & Hebrews 9; Micah 5; John 2).

His concept of the Word, by whom God created the world, is not that of one Person of the Godhead but of God's messenger: "λόγος means not a philosophical being, but an oracle, saying, a speech, a discourse, a declaration of God; for it is derived from the verb λέγω, which means *say*" (ET, 47a. 75 & CR, 48). Unlike in the traditional understanding, he explains the mystery of the Word as "a kind of disposition or dispensation in God, by which it pleased him to reveal to us the secret of his will". He quotes Tertullian and Irenæus who call it *οἰκονομία* and *dispositio* respectively (ET, 48a-b. 76-7).<sup>117</sup> He states that the Word became flesh and is now called Christ, who was a voice of God: "Before the speech became flesh the very oracle of God was understood to be within the darkness of the clouds, not being yet manifested; for the speech was God. And after the Word became man, we understand by the Word, CHRIST himself, who is the Word of God, and the voice of God; for, like a voice, it is uttered from the mouth of God" (ET, 48a. 77). God gave Christ the kingdom of God with power, force, might, and strength when God raised him from the dead. Through the resurrection Christ was glorified and given the glorious power, and could then atone and resurrect all creatures (ET, 54b-55b. 86-7). It is followed by the explanation of the Holy Spirit: "With regard to the Holy Spirit, I speak of an appearance in bodily form, in consequence of the Spirit's descending; but I speak of a *disposition* in us, and the former is limited to the latter. Hence I always say that the Holy Spirit is the activity of God in the spirit of man; and that outside of man it is not properly called the Holy Spirit" (ET, 85b. 132).

In the third book, he expounds the relationship between Christ and the divine Word that existed before creation, and was born by the first utterance of God. The Word "*was afterwards incarnate in Jesus as the Son of God*" and "*was not the Son, but a disposition of God*" (ET, 105). He insists that the Word existed as a disposition of God at the beginning of the world but was not extant after having become flesh: "Whoever believes that the Son of God is Christ will be saved, which is not only his chief foundation but the essence of Christian faith and foundation of Church. But the Lutheran departed from the foundation and never understood what justification is" (ET, 82b-84b. 127-130).

In the fourth book, he tries to explain the mysterious relationship between the Persons of the Trinity. The relations in the Trinity are not between individual Persons, but a kind of expression of God by which God lets human beings understand Him (ET, 85a. 131-2):

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<sup>117</sup> For more detail on dispensation see Tertullian "Against Praxeas" and Irenæus "Against Heresies".

God, in assuming a person in time past, showed us that the Trinity was to be manifold. The Scripture describes his acts now under the appearance of a breath, now under the Person of the Word, the Person of the Deity also appeared afterwards in various way, as under the form of a man, and under the form of a spirit. And God, when he began to employ in himself those dispositions which he was afterwards to manifest to us in various ways, *by his Word created the heavens, and all the powers of them by the breath of his mouth.*

Servetus continually speculates about the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity in his own style – disposition. He insists (ET, 92b. 143) that he believes in the Trinity as follows:

Yet they all then existed only by a *disposition*, but now in very fact; and the appearance of the persons which then in some secret way were *dispositions* with God, has now really taken place in diverse beings, and thus a real distinction of Persons has been made; one Person, that is, with the aspect of Deity, appearing in the Son, another in the Holy Spirit. And the absolute and distinct beings in which the Persons have appeared are, God the Father, a man the Son, and an angel the Holy Spirit. And just as the JESUS of Nazareth who preached in Judaea is the CHRIST, the Son of God, so the flame of fire which appeared was an angel and a sanctifying Spirit. And just as when I speak of the man JESUS CHRIST, I do not separate from him the divinity of the Father; so when I speak of a messenger or ministering spirit, I do not separate from it the character of divinity, that there may be in the Persons on divinity of the Father. For the difference between the Persons is to be judged in their ways of appearing, not just in a metaphysical plurality of beings of one Nature; in which matter all the philosophers have gone astray; for Scripture never pays attention to natures, but to appearances and *dispositions*.

He also expounds on the incarnate Word which “was united to the flesh, but *the Word became flesh*, because a change was made from the Word in flesh; a change was made from a Person into a being, as if the Person of the Word, when it became flesh, withdrew from God and came to man” (ET, 92b; 143). The incarnate man from the Word is called Christ, as John says that the law was given through Moses and the truth came through Christ (John 1.17).

In the fifth book, Servetus examines the names of God in the Old Testament, and then applies two names, יהוה and אֱלֹהִים, to Christ. He speculates on how and why each term refers to Christ (ET, 96b-99a. 148-53). Because אֱלֹהִים has plural forms it implies God and his Word. אֱלֹהִים as used in the Prophets implies Christ and יהוה in the Law implies the Father: “The more notable names of Divinity are *Elohim*, and *Jehovah*; the one the name of Christ, the other that of the Father, and of these we have now to speak with a view to a

fuller knowledge of Christ. I have interpreted Elohim as meaning God and his Word; and I say more plainly that Elohim was in Person man, and in Nature God” (ET, 96b. 149).

In the sixth book, Servetus shows that Christ is the only foundation of knowing the incomprehensible God by faith, but not philosophical speculation: “As by means of a visible likeness of the Word we understand God, so from effects we argue that there is one cause, from movements we reason that there is a prime mover, although of this Aristotle never had any real conception” (ET, 103a. 160). As John says, everyone who sees the Son can see the Father in him and none who sees Him but through the Son of God (John 1.18).

The seventh book contains a renewed attack on the idea of the Trinity, which would have been introduced into theology by the secular power of the Pope. The traditional concept of the Trinity did not come from the Scripture but was influenced by the Greek philosophy of Aristotle (ET, 111b. 173):

If therefore you consider well, an investigation of Paul condemns their metaphysics. But that I may the better explain this matter, I shall relate the origin of these fancies about the Godhead. Paul of Samosata, previous to the Arian and trinitarian philosophers, being entirely ignorant of the mysteries of CHRIST which are hidden in the Hebrew, by maintaining that CHRIST was a mere man, not God, and that he first existed then and not previously, scandalized the Greek philosophers, who were also ignorant of Hebrew, and infected by the contagion of Aristotle, and forced them to ascend to heaven without wings, where any one who would began to hunt for divinities in his own sense; and immediately there arose a countless swarm of heretics. And I suppose it was a sentence of divine punishment that the Pope was made King at the same time at which the Trinity arose; even as God also raised up many adversaries against Solomon at just the time of his sin.

When it first appeared, *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, was the cause of general disturbance within both Roman Catholic and Reformed circles. The speculative nature of the heresies made commentators consider Servetus having travelled to Africa and deriving his dogmas from the Koran. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that Servetus adduces proofs, passages, from the Koran (Henry 1849:169). He avowed to make the Scriptures the source of all his knowledge and his reasoning, and attributed the corruption of true Christianity to the philosophy of Aristotle and ignorance of the Hebrew language. The origin of true Christianity, he thought, went back to the pre-Council of Nicene: “He realized that the source of the corruption was a false idea of God, introduced as early as the Council of Nicæa when the Godhead was divided into three persons with one nature, and Christ divided into two natures in one person” (Odhner 1910:10-1). This doctrine of the Trinity,

he believed, crept into the church at the same time when the Pope's primacy rose. It came when Paul of Samosata<sup>118</sup> first clearly proclaimed the true doctrine. He claims this was but imperfectly comprehended in the time of the Apostles (ET, 111b. 173 & Dyer 1850:299).

The Reformers were especially troubled by the irregularities of Servetus, because he was considered one of them. Oecolampadius evaluates Servetus' thought on his first book (Willis 1877:72-4):

He opposes the orthodox doctors continually, and uses certain words in an arbitrary and unusual sense. He denies the coeterinity of the Father and the Son, a doctrine hitherto held sacred by all the Christian churches; and only recognizes the sonship from the moment of the engenderment, or rather of the birth of Christ. He even derides the idea of God having a son from eternity, and asks whence the heavenly father had his wife, or whether he were of both sexes in himself? He will only recognise the eternity of the Son of as an *Idea* in the divine mind: the Son was to be, but was not yet, until he appeared in the flesh. He will by no means concede that the Word of St. John was the Christ; yet he speaks of three persons in the one God; but it is with glossing and an arbitrary meaning attached to the word person, and with reasonings which if they sometimes make for his views, are at other times opposed to them, he neither thinking nor speaking as do the apostles, and writing the words of the fathers—of Tertullian and Irenæus specially—from the interpretation commonly put upon them. 'Along with all this and much more that is objectionable, there are still some things in the book that are good; nevertheless as a whole it could not but offend me. God grant that the writer acknowledge the rashness which has led him to speak so unadvisedly as he has done of matters which transcend our human intelligence, and that he may live to amend what he has said. As to the book, it would be well perhaps that it were either totally suppressed, or were read by those only who are not likely to be hurt by objectionable writings. The errors he has fallen into acknowledged, *he will retract* in his writings—*retractârit scriptis*. Perhaps he was not himself aware of their extent, or they were not seen by him as of such importance as they are in fact. But I leave all to your prudence and discretion, humbly commending myself and my work to your favour.<sup>119</sup>

In this letter of Oecolampadius we can see that he criticises Servetus for “neither thinking nor speaking as do the apostles, and writing the words of the fathers – of Tertullian and

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<sup>118</sup> Paul of Samosata studied at the Syrian School and insisted on the oneness of the godhead and the real humanity of Jesus. He was a “heretical bishop of Antioch ... His teaching on the Person of Christ was condemned at two, or possibly three, Synods at Antioch and in 268 he was deposed from his see” (Cross 1977:1052). Servetus might have followed the heresy of Paul of Samosata: “I shall relate the origin of these fancies about the Godhead. Paul of Samosata, previous to the Arian and Trinitarian philosophers, being entirely ignorant of the mysteries of Christ which are hidden in the Hebrew, by maintaining that Christ was a mere man, not God, and that he first existed then and not previously, scandalized the Greek philosophers, who were also ignorant of Hebrew, and infected by the contagion of Aristotle, and forced them to ascend to heaven without wings, where any one who would began to hunt for divinities in his own sense; and immediately there arose a countless swarm of heretics” (ET, 111b. 173).

<sup>119</sup> It is likely that Oecolampadius implies what Servetus' next treatise is, *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri Duo*, which would be published in 1532 in light of *retractârit scriptis*.

Irenæus especially – from the interpretation commonly put upon them.” Nevertheless, here Servetus seems to believe in the Trinity based on the Bible as well as the Fathers.

### 3.2 *Christianismi Restitutio*

In the book, *Christianismi Restitutio*, published in 1553, Servetus attempts to summarise all his theology. It shows his later study and reflects on his thought of his last twenty years. Servetus thought that by restoring the doctrine of the pure Christianity in his book he would be able to bring it back to its pristine simplicity. Monsieur Achille Chéreau negatively evaluates it as follows (Chéreau 1879:11-2, Cuthbertson 1912:32):

Far be it from me to attempt to analyse this book, a motley, confused, crude, and extraordinary collection of theological and scholastic lucubrations, which were in vogue in the middle of the sixteenth century, and which is no longer credited to-day, which makes us shrug our shoulders, but under their shadow human creatures were burnt. What one can discover more clearly is that Servetus, belonging to, the Arian, or Socinian sect, upholds there, with incomparable doggedness and unheard-of developments, their anti-trinitarian idea, denying the sacred Trinity, which he treats as sheer imagination—a myth, a metaphysical deity, a dog of Hades with three heads, a fiendish phantom, a monstrous fantasy, an illusion of Satan, and not willing to, acknowledge Three Persons in God. He declared himself strongly against the Romish Church, considering the Mass as a Babylonian imitation and as a ceremony of Satan’s. He boldly declared himself anti-papist, braving, at the same time, the anger of the Romish and the Calvinistic churches.<sup>120</sup>

Like the title of Calvin’s, *Institutio Religionis Christianae*, he named his book *Christianismi Restitutio* to indicate his desire to restore true Christianity (Bainton 1953b:160, Schaff 1993:733 & Zweig 1936:103). His aims were the perfect restoration “from the slavery to impious Babylon, and the utter destruction of Antichrist” to “the deliverance of the heavenly kingdom” based on the knowledge of God of “the Christian faith, of our justification, regeneration, baptism, of eating the Lord’s Supper” (Cuthbertson 1912:23). Two main streams can be detected: Neoplatonism and Anabaptism. Symphorien Champier influenced his neoplatonic views on the Trinity.<sup>121</sup> They are clearly demonstrated

<sup>120</sup> It was lectured by him in Paris during 1879.

<sup>121</sup> It was popularised by Symphorien Champier, founder of the Medical Faculty at Lyon, an illustrious physician, theologian, botanist, and astronomer who was a typical man of the Renaissance. After studying medicine in Paris and Montpellier, he settled in Lyon, and became a physician to the duke of Lorraine. Servetus became his *amanuensis* and student. He was certainly influenced by Champier’s philosophical humanism and was eventually prompted to study medicine in Paris. See Schaff (1993:736-7). In Plato’s *Republic*: “The sun is the child of goodness I was talking about. It is a counterpart to its father, goodness. As goodness stands in the intelligible realm to intelligence and the things we know, so in the visible realm the sun stands to sight and the things we see.”

when he uses the Idea of Plato to interpret the Idea of God as the Father of Light.<sup>122</sup> His Anabaptist views came from Strassburg (Bainton 1953b:130-1).

Like in *De Trinitatis Erroribus* he describes the historical Christ first. He pictures Christ as indeed the Son of God, but, as neither co-eternal, nor of the same substance with the Father. He insists that “if there were in eternity two incorporeal beings alike and equal, then were these Twins rather than a Father and Son; and were a third Entity added, like and equal to the other two, then were there a threefold Greyon produced” (Willis 1877:204; see *CR*, 56-7). He says that Christ combined the Word as pre-existed with the Father and became flesh but was not entirely human (*CR*, 15). Original sin was a misconception and infant baptism was absurd, for mortal sin could not be committed under the age of 20. He never admits that human corruption was inherited due to Adam’s transgression (*CR*, 365; Willis 1877:215-6). This was blasphemous in the eyes of both the Reformers and the Roman Catholics.

The book is subdivided into six parts. Part one consists of seven books,<sup>123</sup> the first five of which mainly explain the divinity of the Trinity and is similar to what he writes in *De Trinitatis Erroribus*. The last two books are *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri Duo* published in 1532. In the fifth book, he speculates about the Holy Spirit in light of the human body producing a human spirit. He insists that a spirit is contained in the blood. Maintaining that the blood contains the soul of man, he attempts to establish the relationship between the circulation of soul found in medicine and spirit in the Bible (*CR*, 1553 “The Description of the Less Circulation”, 203 & see *CR*, 169-70):

The vital spirit is that which is communicated through anastomoses from the arteries to the veins in which it is called the natural [spirit]. Therefore the first [i.e., natural spirit] is of the blood, and its seat is the liver and in the veins of the body. The second is the vital spirit of which the seat is on the heart and in the arteries of the body. The third is the animal spirit, a ray of light, as it were, of which the seat is in the brain and the nerves of the body. In all these there resides the energy of the one spirit and of the light of God. The formation of man from the uterus teaches that the vital spirit is communicated from the heart

<sup>122</sup> “quas Plato ideas appellat immutabiles” (*CR*, 138-9). For his idea of God’s light, see Hirsch (1980:571-2).

<sup>123</sup> Its original title is “De Trinitate divina, quod in ea non sit inuibilium trium rerum illusio, sed vera substantiæ Dei manifestatio in verbo, et communicatio in spiritu” (*CR*, 3). He used the following titles for each book: *De homine iesu Christo, et simulachris falsis* (5-46); *de Trinitate divina liber secundus, quorundam locorum expositionem continens* (47-91); *de Trinitate divina liber tertius personæ Christi in verbo præfigurationem ostendens, visionem Dei et verbi hypostasium* (92-124); *de Trinitate divina liber quartus, nomina Dei, eiusque effentiam omniformem manifestans, et rerum omnium principia* (125-62); *de Trinitate divina liber quintus, in quo agitur de spiritu sancto* (163-98); *de Trinitate divina quod in ea non sit inuibilium trium rerum illusio sed vera substantiæ Dei manifestatio in verbo, et communicatio in spiritu. Dialogi duo* (199-286).

to the liver. For an artery joined to a vein is transmitted through the umbilicus of the foetus, and in like manner afterward the artery and vein are always joined in us. The divine spirit of Adam was inspired from God into the heart before [it was communicated into] the liver, and from there was communicated to the liver. The divine spirit was truly drawn into the mouth and nostrils, but the inspiration extended to the heart.

There is a suspicion that he copied this from Realdo Colombo's book, *De re anatomica* (Fulton 1953:68-71). Bayon (1939:100) says: "Since we have ascertained what Serveto's views were with regard to the passage of the blood across the lungs, they can be compared with the opinion of Colombo, clearly described and recorded in several pages of his *De re anatomica*."

Part two of *Christianismi Restitutio* has three books<sup>124</sup> and discusses Faith, the Law and the Gospel, Love, the Righteousness and the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. It seems to be an enlarged edition of his second book, *Dialogorum de Trinitate libri Duo* of 1532. Part three has four books<sup>125</sup> and discusses the Regeneration and the Kingdom of the Antichrist, as well as the practical side of Christian faith. Part four<sup>126</sup> contains thirty letters sent to Calvin. Part five<sup>127</sup> lists sixty signs of the Antichrist. It also contains his view on the Holy Spirit. He says that whoever wants to understand the 'Holy Spirit', who communicates with us, has to understand the 'human spirit' that is produced in the human body. The human spirit is made "by a mixture in the lungs of inspired air with blood which the right ventricle of the heart communicates to the left; *but this communication does not take place through the middle partition of the heart, as is commonly believed, but by a grand the blood is driven from the right ventricle of the heart by a long course through the lungs*" (CR, 170, Wilbur 1972:146-7). Such views caused de Fontaine to indict him in the trial of Geneva. Part six<sup>128</sup> is an apology on his view of the Trinity and on Ancient Discipline, especially regarding Melanchthon.<sup>129</sup> This defence demonstrates his thought quite fully.

<sup>124</sup> He named it: "De fide et iustitia regni Christi, legis iustitiam superantis, et de charitate" (CR, 287). He named the three subtitles: De fide et iustitia regni Christi (288-313); de legis et euangelii ac Iudæi et Christiani differentiis (314-36); de Charitate cum fide collata et operibus bonis (337-54).

<sup>125</sup> Named: "De regeneratione ac manducatione superna, et de regno Antichristi" (CR, 355). The titles of four books are: De orbis perditione, et Christi reparatione (357-410); de circuncisione verra, cum reliquis Christi et antichrististi mysteriis, omnibus iam completis (411-69); de ministeriis ecclesiae Christi, et eorum efficacia (470-524); de ordine mysteriorum regenerationis (525-76).

<sup>126</sup> Its fourth title is: "Epistolae triginta ad ioannem Caluinum Gebennensium concionatorem." (CR, 577).

<sup>127</sup> "Signa sexaginta regni Antichristi, et reuelatio eius, iam nunc præsens" (CR, 664).

<sup>128</sup> "De mysterio Trinitatis et veterum disciplina, ad Philippum Melanchthonem, et eius collegas, Apologia" (CR, 671).

<sup>129</sup> Among the Reformers, he confronted only Calvin and Melanchthon who were still alive. Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Capito, Luther, and Bucer had died before 1552.



The last part is “the best part of the whole book, and an excellent compendium of Servetus’ system of thought” (Wilbur 1972:142).

### 3.3 Servetus’ Theology

Servetus’ plan to publish his heretical books and criticise boldly the contemporary Christianity is described well in the title of his last book (Fulton 1989:84):

*Christianismi Restitutio*: The whole apostolic church is summoned to the threshold. Once again there is restored knowledge of God, of the faith of Christ our justification, of the regeneration of baptism, and of participation in the Lord’s Supper. And finally with the heavenly kingdom restored to us, the wicked captivity in Babylon has been ended and antichrist with his hosts destroyed. And at that time shall Michael stand up. And war broke out in heaven. [Vienne] 1553.<sup>130</sup>

He thought he ought to have restored the doctrine and teaching of Christianity that had been corrupted ever since the Council of Nicea<sup>131</sup> in 325. He writes: “In the time of Constantine the Great, the dragon began to drive the true Church into the wilderness. Christ ceased to rule from the moment when the true doctrine respecting him was corrupted, and the Divine essence divided into three persons” (CR, 396, Ford 1860:1860:36). Above all he wanted to restore the true doctrine of God and correct the error of Trinitarian thought. He thought that Trinitarianism, devised after the Council of Nicea, was a satanic invention preventing man from knowing the true God and was the starting point of the corruption of genuine Christianity.

The rivalry between Arius and Athanasius was fatal for Christianity. He speculates as follows: “And that rivalry between them, which from [Pope] Sylvester’s age<sup>132</sup> shook the

<sup>130</sup> The original title of the book is: *Christianismi Restitutio*. Totius Ecclesiae Apostolicae est ad sua liminavocatio, in Intergrum Restituta Cognitione Dei, Fidei Cristi, Justificationis nostrae, Regenerationis Baptismi, et Coenae Domini Manducationis Restitutio denique nobis Regno Coelesti, Babylonis impia Captivitate solua, et Antichristio cum suis penitus destructo. בשם הדין יעמוד מוכחד השם *kai éγενετο πόλεμος έν τῷ ούρανῳ* M. D. LIII.” See Servetus, CR, 1; Schaff (1993:733) comments that the Hebrew motto comes from Daniel 12:1 and the Greek one from Revelation 12:7. Zweig (1936:103) says the reason for naming it was, “in order to demonstrate to the world that Calvin’s *Institutio* must be counterblasted by a *Restitutio*.”

<sup>131</sup> The Council decreed the doctrine of the Trinity in 325 as follows: “We believe in one God, the FATHER Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus CHRIST, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*ὁμοούσιον*) with the Father; by whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the HOLY GHOST. [But those who say: ‘There was a time when he was not;’ and ‘He was not before he was made;’ and ‘He was made out of nothing;’ or ‘He is of another substance’ or ‘essence;’ or ‘The Son of God is created;’ or ‘changeable;’ or ‘alterable’— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]”

<sup>132</sup> He was Bishop of Rome from 314 to 335. It is said that he baptized Emperor Constantine and was offered the Donation of Constantine. He did not attend the Council of Nicea (325). See Cross 1977: 1329.

whole world because of the Arians concerning invisible persons and about the equality or inequality of natures, was an invention of the devil to alienate men's minds from a true knowledge of Christ, and to make for us some tripartite God" (CR, 22, Friedman 1978:97). He insisted on standing consistently on the Bible,<sup>133</sup> but neoplatonic emanationism was his consistent device which "enabled him to describe God in some philosophical sense" (Fridman 1978:46 & Wilbur 1972:143).<sup>134</sup> Although he insisted that the Bible was an infallible, and claimed that one who did not read the Bible could not really know God nor be a Christian (CR, 3-4). Even so, yet he consistently rested his arguments on Greek philosophy rather than on the Bible.

When he begins with the doctrine of Christ in the first book, Servetus consistently speculates about it in terms of a neoplatonic philosophical system that he learned from Champier (Wilbur 1972:144; Hirsch 1980:561-2). He deserved to be called "a sloppy and inconsistent thinker" (Friedman 1978:12). Hirsch concludes on the neoplatonic influence in Servetus' books thus: "To describe God's relation to the world Servetus uses much more frequently the terms communication and manifestation. They occur already in *Errors* but play a much greater role in *Restitution* ... In *Restitution* Servetus accomplished such a transformation with the strong support from Trismegistus, Plato and the Neoplatonic thinkers" (Hirsch 1980:575).<sup>135</sup>

A number of scholars have pointed out the many pantheist expressions that appear in his works (Schaff 1993:736).<sup>136</sup> One can conclude that the premises and conclusions of his

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<sup>133</sup> He confesses as follows: "In the Bible I find all philosophy and wisdom ... Pray read the Bible a thousand times, for if you have no relish in reading it, it is for the reason that you have lost Christ, the key knowledge, which you shall easily get again if you knock without ceasing." In other place he also does, "For I endeavor to learn those things which are contained in the Bible concerning God. But the things that I have acquired through philosophical conceptions are of no value for instructing us" (ET, 79a, 122 & 107b, 166).

<sup>134</sup> Wright (1806a:73) states that Servetus used this reason to understand Scriptures. Hirsch (1980:571-5 & see 562-3) states that Servetus is influenced by Trismegistus more than Plato, quoting Servetus' CR, (144): "His authority was not Plato of whom one would think first in this connection but Trismegistus because of the then belief that the latter preceded Plato." In fact, he agrees with and quotes Trismegistus' idea (CR, 138, 144, 261).

<sup>135</sup> Calvin also points out that Servetus was influenced by Trismegistus in his *Institutio*, criticising his views on infant baptism. McNeill (1962, n. 60, 1358) observes the following: "Hermes Trismegistus (thrice greatest Hermes) was the name given by the Greeks to Thoth, the Egyptian god of letters and wisdom. The forty-two Hermetic books (mentioned by Clement of Alexandria) were ascribed to him. These writings perished, but some Neoplatonic imitations were circulated in the Middle Ages.

<sup>136</sup> For more detail see Saisset (1948:593-8, 605-11). Saisset is a very distinguished philosopher of the 19th century French school. He evaluates that Servetus' doctrine is based on the pantheism in a rational way. Servetus says that God has a thousand essences and an infinite thousand natures. He also insists that God himself manifests his essence as fire, air, stone, amber, a twig, etc. Such views are opposed to the traditional doctrine and express his pantheism; Harnack (1899: n. 1, 133) says: "What distinguishes him from most of the Italian Antitrinitarians is that his opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity was ultimately based on pantheism. Modalistic, Gnostic, and Adoptian elements furnished him aid in building up his Christology, which was constructed on Neoplatonic premises." See CR, 128, 588-9.

speculations on the Trinity are based on pantheistic philosophy rather than on biblical interpretation (Beza 1836:163). When Calvin assailed Servetus with this question: “What, unhappy man! If any one treating your God under this floor should say to not be scandalized at such an assertion?” he replied, “I, on the contrary, do not doubt but that this footstool, or anything else which you may point out, is the substance of God.” When Calvin objected: “Then will the devil actually be God?” he answered, “And can you doubt it?” (*Opera*, 496). He thus adopts the view that God embraces all substances. The deity in the stone is stone as the deity in man is man. Calvin charged him with pantheism in his *Institutio* (I. xiii. 20, 147-8):

For Servetus the name “Trinity” was so utterly hateful and detestable that he commonly labelled all those whom he called Trinitarians as atheists. I pass over the senseless words that he thought up to rail at them. This, indeed, was the sum of his speculations: God is assumed to be tripartite when three persons are said to reside in his essence; this is an imaginary triad, because it clashes with God’s unity. Meanwhile, he would hold the persons to be certain external ideas which do not truly subsist in God’s essence, but represent God to us in one manifestation or another. In the beginning there was no distinction in God, because the Word and the Spirit were formerly one and the same: but when Christ came forth as God from God, the Spirit proceeded from him as another God. But even though he sometimes colors his absurdities with allegories, as when he says that the eternal Word of God was the Spirit of Christ with God and the refulgence of his idea, and that the Spirit was the shadow of deity, yet afterward he annihilates the deity of both, declaring that as God metes out according to his dispensation there is a part of God both in the Son and in the Spirit, just as the same Spirit, being substantially in us and also in wood and stone, is a portion of God.<sup>137</sup>

Henry concludes: “That he here threw a cloak over his real doctrine is certain. Pantheistic and Platonic notions lay at the root of his system: Calvin endeavoured to prove this to him” (Henry 1849:200).

### 3.3.1 Against the Traditional Doctrine of the Trinity

Servetus’ theology, as developed in his book, *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, and later in *Christianismi Restitutio* deserves a closer look. First, Servetus argues that he can find no term ‘Trinity,’ ‘Essence,’ and ‘Substance,’ in the Bible (ET, 32a. 50):

Whether this article does deserve special mention, when it is the prime foundation of all faith, on which depends knowledge of both God and Christ, you must judge for yourself; and whether it is expressly mentioned, is learned from the reading of the Scriptures, although not one word is found in the whole Bible about the Trinity, nor about one word is found in about an Essence, nor

<sup>137</sup> Servetus says, “Deus in ligno est lignum, in lapis lapis, in Servetus habens esse lapidis, formam lapidis, veram substantiam lapidis.” – God in wood is wood, He in stone is a stone, having in Himself the being of stone, the stone of stone, the substance of stone (*CR*, 589).

about a unity of the Substance, nor about one nature of the several beings, nor about their other babblings and disputes of words, which Paul says belong to the knowledge which is falsely so called.<sup>138</sup>

The view on God as the prime foundation of faith, he thought had been misinterpreted by the Trinitarians. He contradicted the traditional view of the Trinity. In order to establish his own anti-trinitarianism he called upon some pre-Nicene Fathers. He refers to the voices before the Council of Nicene rather than after, being very critical of traditional Trinitarianists like<sup>139</sup> Athanasius, Cyprian (ET, 23b-24a. 37-8), Hilary (ET, 24b-26b. 38-41), Augustine, John of Damascus (ET, 39b. 62), Jerome (ET, 27a. 42), Peter the Lombard,<sup>140</sup> and John Calvin. Servetus faults Athanasius for his views on the ‘multiplicity’ of ‘substances’ in God (CR, 39, 396, 399),<sup>141</sup> and attacks Augustine and Peter Lombard for the cogency of their logic in the comment on Romans 12:36. He asserts that they were influenced by ‘philosophy’ only, when speculating on the Trinity: “A second authority which, according to Peter Lombard, very evidently supports the Trinity is, *Of him, through him, and in him are all things*. For Augustine explains this as referring to the three being: *of him*, referring to the first; *through him*, to the second; *in him*, to the third. But I do not believe that Paul, had he been questioned about this, would philosophise thus” (Friedman 1976:76; see ET, 26b, 41) He was not only against Augustine’s view on the Trinity, but defies him as follows (ET, 40b. 63):

Moreover, notwithstanding these derivations, they say, in opposition to Donatus, that the three beings are equal and of the same power; so that, according to Augustine, the Son is able to utter a son for himself, and a grandson for the Father; and consequently the third Spirit is able to impregnate a Chimaera, and to breathe forth offspring; yet he says that the Son did not beget because it was not necessary. They say that the third being is ours, but the second is not ours but the Father’s; and they say that the second being is united with the human nature hypostatically, that is, as wise, and that the other two are not in Christ.<sup>142</sup>

Servetus concludes that according to him the Word was begotten and that the Spirit was not begotten. God therefore had “a spiritual wife” or “hermaphrodite,” and that “he was at

<sup>138</sup> “Again, referring to what is proclaimed in Mark: *Hear, O Israel, they God is one ... and there is none other but him*; and the second commandment is about one’s neighbor, on which two commandments it says that the whole law haugeth, and the prophets. Thus among all the commandments of the Law there is no command to believe in an imaginary Trinity” (37a. 58).

<sup>139</sup> Servetus attempts to attack each of them throughout Book I.

<sup>140</sup> Servetus deals with him in ET (26b, 27b, 28b, 37a, 39a, 42a) and CR, (26, 28, 30, 39, 41, 46, 77, 510).

<sup>141</sup> He boldly criticises Athanasius who formulated the erroneous doctrines of God in the Council of Nicene in 325.

<sup>142</sup> He deals with Augustine in 26b, 40b, and 41b.

once father and mother.” Servetus misunderstood Athanasius and Augustine on the Trinity (ET, 40a. 62). He also disregards Lombard’s view on the Trinity (ET, 28b. 44-5):

Lombard, following others, establishes his triad of beings by the passage: *The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob*. If they were speaking of the Trinity in the proper sense, it might be left pass, even if this passage does not prove it. But it is proved by the passage, *Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. In the name of the Father, because he is the prime, true, and original source of every gift. In the name of the JESUS CHRIST, because through him we have the reconciliation of this gift, *neither is there any other name under heaven wherein we must be saved*. And in the name of the Holy Spirit, because all that are baptized in that name receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as we say, in the name of his Imperial majesty, in the name of the glory of God. And Peter, in the Clementine Recognitions, speaks not of three equal beings, but of a threefold invocation of the divine name. Because there are three wonderful *dispositions* of God, in each of which his divinity shines forth; and from this you might very well understand a Trinity.<sup>143</sup>

Servetus, who opposed the views of post-Nicene Fathers, relies on the pre-Nicene Fathers to support his views. Among them Irenæus and Tertullian were by far the most important sources for Servetus: “Before I proceed further, in order fully to get at John’s aim we must know that the older tradition of the Apostles understands by the mystery of the Word a kind of dispositions or dispensation in God, by which it pleased him to reveal to us the secret of his will. And Tertullian very often calls, *οἰκονομία*, and Irenæus calls it *dispositio*” (ET, 48a. 76).

Although he cites from a dozen ancient authorities, he fails to interpret them correctly: “Servetus’ use of patristic sources was innovative and eclectic, taking half his Christology from Irenæus and half from Tertullian at the cost of misunderstanding both” (Friedman 1978:111). Calvin pointed out the incorrect citations from Justin Martyr and how Servetus failed to understand the views on the Trinity of Tertullian and Irenæus during the trial in Geneva (*Opera*, 498, 522-30 passim).<sup>144</sup>

Servetus seeks to justify his anti-trinitarian views by pointing to the corrupted ideas of the post-Nicene period, which was the watershed of power, and in which Athanasius and the Papal office promulgated the corrupt views of Satan. He dated the corruption to the fourth century, the time of the Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester, when the church and

<sup>143</sup> He deals with the opinion of Peter the Lombard in 26b, 27b, 28b, 37a, 39a, 42a-b.

<sup>144</sup> For Tertullian see 522-530 and for Irenæus see 530-33.

state were united.<sup>145</sup> The result appeared in the Council of Nicene, which promulgated the Persons of the Godhead. He resolved to clean the evil elements in corrupting Christianity, explaining that the trinitarian heresy came about (DT, B7b. 211):

At the instigation of the wicked adversary, with the design invented by someone concerning a confusion of natures, we have been deprived of knowledge of Christ; for in that way there will be confusion in every generation, if you call a mixture of seeds confusion. And consequently this very confusion will prove for me that this is a true generation in which man is mingled with God, and seed of the latter with the seed of the former.

The Reformation was regarded by Servetus as the revival of the ancient heresy holding the Nicene Christology, justification of faith,<sup>146</sup> and predestination,<sup>147</sup> and as the reemergent gnosticism in Irenæus and Tertullian (Friedman 1976:77-80). He likens the trinitarian God to ‘a monster with three heads,’ Cerberus, of the Greek mythology, “the monstrosities”, and “the Tritoités” (ET, 38a. 59). He also has no scruples about calling all Trinitarians “Tritheist” and “Atheist” (ET, 21b. 34).<sup>148</sup> Servetus’ own view of the Trinity seems very Arian and Unitarian, and even Atheist (*Institutes*, I. xiii. 20, 147).<sup>149</sup>

He avowed to the ‘Persons’ of the Trinity and the ‘eternal personality’ of Christ during the trial of Geneva. But, he understood the term ‘Person’ as ‘disposition’ in the original sense of a mask used by players on stage, and not in the traditional sense of a distinct hypothesis or real personality that has its own proper life in the Divine essence from eternity and was manifested in time in the man of Jesus (ET, 85a-b. 132). When he addresses the Trinitarians, who believe in the real distinction of Persons of the Trinity, he scolds them (Henry 1849:262):

You say that the Jews and the Turks do not worship God aright. But what is the notion you yourself have formed of the hell-hound? To what a monster do you not pray! Calvin is drunk when he teaches that man has no power of free action, and yet expects him act as if he had. You too are drunk, when you

<sup>145</sup> “Quod totum plane a Constantini et Syluestri tempore factum videmus...” (CR, 398).

<sup>146</sup> He emphasises justification by nature rather than by faith and explains it in detail in his book, CR (328-33). For example, “People are said by nature and indiscriminately observe the justification similar to Law from innate divinity with works which natural reason teaches” (331). Servetus maintains that even Elizabeth and Zacharias were justified because they were the parents of John. See 329.

<sup>147</sup> He criticises the errors of the predestination but also defends human free will more violently than justification by faith: “Potestatem, optionem, et electionem liberam nobis dat Deus. Deut. 11. et 30. Iosue. 24. et Iere. 21. et Ecclesiastici. 15... Exemplum aliud liberatatis clarum habes in peccato primi angeli et primi hominis, quod mere liberum suit” (CR, 301).

<sup>148</sup> “Athei vere sunt trinitarii omnes” (CR, 31). Cf. Rilliet (1846:215). Rilliet, a Unitarian clergyman and impartial historian, was influenced by Dr. John McCrie. He tries to re-establish the life of Calvin, investigating carefully all the manuscripts and correspondence of the times, which have a bearing on this case of Servetus. He published his study in 1844 to restore Calvin’s fame.

<sup>149</sup> He describes his view on the Trinity based on Arian views. See CR (22, 37). Mattison (1991:32-6) argues that Servetus was not an Arian.

exhort to the true love of God, and at the same time say that it nowhere exists. But most of all do you show your error and drunkenness in your belief in the Trinity, in your false conclusions respecting the two natures, which so drive you into a corner, that you are compelled to allow that the Holy Ghost might die in a mule, since you have asserted that your invisible Son of God died in a man.<sup>150</sup>

He not only rejects the Trinity as both the Jews and Islam did, but also regards this doctrine an obstacle to spreading the Gospel (ET, 42b-43a. 66-7; see Friedman 1978 18-9, 100-1):

How much this tradition of the Trinity has, alas! been a laughing-stock to the Mohammedans, only God knows. The Jews also shrink from giving adherence to this fancy of ours, and laugh at our foolishness about the Trinity; and on account of its blasphemies they do not believe that this is the Messiah who was promised in their law. And not only Mohammedans and Hebrews, but the very beats of the field, would make fun of us did they grasp our fantastical notion, for all the works of the Lord bless the one God. Hear also what Mohammed says; for more reliance is to be given to one truth which an enemy confesses than to a hundred lies on our side. For he says in his Alcoran that CHRIST was the greatest of the prophets, the spirit of God, the power of God, the breath of God, the very soul of God, the Word born of a perpetual virgin by God's breathing upon her; and that it is because of the wickedness of the Jews toward him that they are in their present wretchedness and misfortune. He says, moreover, that the Apostles and Evangelists and the first Christians were the best of men, and wrote what is true, and did not hold the Trinity, or three Persons in the Divine Being, but men in later times added this.

He confessed that he found these errors in Christian doctrine. He found these errors in light of Mohammedan and Jewish literature. He frequently quoted from the Koran (CR, 399). He insists that the disciples of Jesus did not know of the doctrine of the Trinity (CR, 35.). Beza concludes about his view on the doctrine of God as follows: "According to him, God is the infinite ocean of substance – the essence of all things. Not only the devil is in God, as also depraved spirits – but hell is no other thing but God himself. As God is the principle and end of all things, so they return at last to him; and in going into eternal fire, demons shall go to God himself. But it was the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that he set himself chiefly to impugn" (Beza 1836:143).

### 3.3.2 Inconsistency and misunderstanding the doctrine of the Trinity

#### 3.3.2.1 *On the Persons of the Trinity*

It is not easy to systematise Servetus' doctrine of the Trinity, because he explains his ideas in various places and his thought is not always clear. His rambling explanation of the

<sup>150</sup> Larson (1923:909) also says that Milton, like Servetus, rejects two natures in Jesus and is a pantheist. See

Trinity led John Wesley to claim that he was a Trinitarian (Faulkner 1910:640).<sup>151</sup> At first glance Servetus seems to be trinitarian, as indicated by expression such as: “Behold the single, *one*, which you were seeking; and in a most singular way are they said to be one, because in the three there is one and the same Godhead. And so I admit one Person of the Holy Spirit; and I admit Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one Godhead; and this is the true Trinity” (ET, 64b. 100). In other places, his view on the Trinity appears different. He does not use the expression ‘Person of the Trinity’ but ‘disposition,’ ‘dispensation,’ or ‘economy’ and treats the Holy Spirit as the same person in God as the Father and the Son (ET, 28b-29a. 44-5):

And Paul in all his epistles says, *God the Father and the Lord JESUS CHRIST; from God the Father and the Lord JESUS CHRIST*. And in the Scriptures there is frequent mention of the existence of God the Father, and of the Son, and of seeing and praying to them; but of the Holy Spirit no mention is made, except where it speaks about doing something, as by a sort of casual statement; which is noteworthy, as though the Holy Spirit denoted not a separate being, but an activity of God, a kind of in-working or in-breathing of the power of God....

... And Peter, in the Clementine Recognitions, speaks not of three equal beings, but of a threefold invocation of the divine name. Because there are three wonderful *dispositions* of God, in each of which his divinity shines forth; and from this you might very well understand a Trinity. For the Father is the whole substance and the one God from whom these degrees and personations proceed. And they are three, not by virtue of some distinction of beings in God, but through an *οἰκονομία* of God in various forms of Deity; for the same divinity which is in the Father is communicated to the Son, Jesus Christ, and to our spirits, which are the temples of the living God; for the Son and our sanctified spirits are sharers with us in the Substance of the Father, are its members, pledges, and instruments....<sup>152</sup>

He clearly states that the Holy Spirit is not a Person of the Trinity, but part of God’s activity. It is certain that such a view was influenced by the Islamic concept of the one God: “Hear also what Mohammed says ... He says, moreover, that the Apostles and Evangelists and the first Christians were the best of men, and wrote what is true, and did not hold the Trinity, or three Persons in the Divine Being, but men in later times added this” (ET, 43a. 67).

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Breuer (1999).

<sup>151</sup> Faulkner (1910:640) deals with how Wesley thought about Calvin in the short article: “Wesley makes a reference to Calvin in his defence of lay preachers.”

<sup>152</sup> He insists that it follows the Clementine’s Recognitions. Cf. “Recognitions of Clement”: “Therefore the name God is applied in three ways: either because he to whom it is given is truly God, or because he is the servant of him who is truly; and for the honor of the sender, that his authority may be full, he that is sent is called by the name of him who sends, as is often done in respect of angels: for when they appear to a man, if he is a wise and intelligent man, he asks the name of him who appears to him, that he may acknowledge at once the honor of the sent, and the authority of the sender.”



The term 'disposition', borrowed by Servetus in stead of 'Person of the Trinity', has a different meaning to that of the traditional view. It is a key to understand his view on the Trinity. He asserts that his own view on the Trinity is derived from Tertullian<sup>153</sup> and Irenæus ("Against Heresies" IV. xx, 487-92), where he explains the Trinity and the relationship of the Father with the other beings of the Godhead (ET, 48a. 76-7). The Greek *οἰκονομία*, 'disposition,' used by Servetus instead of 'Person,' is translated as management, direction, office, arrangement, order, or plan (Bauer 1979:559-60). Servetus uses the terms as aspects or manifestations to describe different 'functions' of the one God, by which, God disposes or manages himself in two different ways for the different forms of his activity: the Son and the Holy Spirit.

There is no thought that the Son and the Holy Spirit are independent or eternal manifestation of God but are 'expressions' of the divinity. He considers the Persons as no less than representative of Being, and they appear in various ways. To Servetus, the meaning of Person is nothing less than a virtual image, not reality (ET, "Heresies", 94a. 145):

For in a way altogether similar we say that the Word in the Person of CHRIST was with the Father from the beginning in the Person of the Word; and CHRIST is the Person of the Word, and the Word is the Person of CHRIST, and there is but one Person and one aspect, because the very thing that shone forth in the Word is CHRIST himself; so that if I have a mirror, although you see me face to face, and also in the mirror, yet you see but one person. And thus it amounts to the same thing when, having mentioned Christ, or having mentioned the eternal Word, you say this: He was the Son from the beginning; because, whatever you may mention, he was from the beginning the Son in Person, not in reality. Indeed, Persons are spoken of because of the absence of beings, and Persons are incompatible with beings.

Consequently, he proclaims (ET, 29a. 45):

"For the Father is the whole substance and the one God from whom these degrees and personations proceed. And they are three, not by virtue of some distinction of beings in God, but through an *οἰκονομία* of God in various forms of Deity ... this is why they are called distinct Persons, that is, manifold aspects, diverse forms and kinds, of deity."

Although he admits that the one God exists, he understands that the different aspects or appearances of the one of God could be called the Son or the Holy Spirit. Willis (1877:64-5) says of his misconception of the term 'Person' of the Trinity:

<sup>153</sup> Servetus must have borrowed Tertullian's idea here. See Tertullian, "Against Praxeas" (ii. 598).

Had we not our author's explanation of the way in which he understands the word *person*, this would make his conceptions, in so far, not different from the orthodox interpretation of the mystery. But his language here must be regretted, for it is misleading, the word *person* with Servetus not signifying, as we have seen, any real or individual entity distinct from other entities, but property, appearance, or outward manifestation. The second and third persons, therefore, as understood by Servetus, are to be thought of as dispositions or modes of God, the universal Father, and nor as individuals or persons in the usual acceptance of these words, through of them it is that distinct personages have been made, and spoken of as being at once God and other than God, as being three and yet no more than one.<sup>154</sup>

### 3.3.3 On Jesus Christ

Servetus states that Jesus Christ is at the centre of the Bible, of his theology, and all of religions (Odner 1910:18). Historically, Jesus is the starting point of his theology. Yet he is confused with his own explanation of the doctrine of Christ, Jesus, and the Son of God according to philosophy, even though he insists that his theology is based on the Bible.

Servetus explains (ET, 93a. 143) that the Word is Christ Himself: "Reflect upon this continually; for I say that the Word was in the law as a prefigure of CHRIST." In his second book he presents another source to prove that Christ is the Word: "In order to prove that the Word is Christ himself, I was saying that the *λόγος* and *אֱלֹהִים* (ET, 96b-99a. 148-53) were the same thing" (Servetus, "DT", A3a. 190). *אֱלֹהִים* is the name of Christ, and *יְהוָה* is the name of the Father, by which he attempts to distinguish Christ from the Father. Although it seems that Servetus upholds the eternity and deity of Christ when he says the Word is Christ, he also says (ET, 93a. 143 & see 78b-80a. 123-4):

Moreover, John did not say, the Word was the shadow, and CHRIST is the truth. John, both in his Gospel and in his Epistle, says of the Word, *was*; but now, after its being manifested, there is no such Word, but the very being itself of which the Word was a type. For we never read of the Word, *is*, but, *was*. But now there is the Son, JESUS CHRIST, because what was in the Word exists as flesh, and the Word became flesh; that is, the Person became a being, the shadow became light, as Paul says, *Our glorifying became truth*; that is, just as we glorified in the Word, so it was in fact. The Word, which was in the law as a shadow, became the truth.

The Word changed into the flesh and no longer exists in the same mode, but as the Son, Jesus Christ. He goes on, saying that the Word once existed but no longer exists in the same mode (DT, A3b. 191):

<sup>154</sup> The idea of Servetus, who regards the persons of the Trinity as modes, is not invented by him but influenced by modalists – the Sabellians, Photinians, etc. See Harnack (1899:1-113 *passim*).

By the very fact that God speaks, he disposes himself by the very fact of making himself Creator; for he is otherwise than he was before. By the very fact that he is speaking, he is already manifesting himself, who hitherto in the silence was known to no one. By saying, Let there be light, he brings himself forth from the unknown darkness of the ages into light, and presents himself to view in some distinct character. This John calls the Logos, and Moses Elohim; and this itself was Christ with God, and the Word was God, and God himself was the very light itself. Which light, according to that dispensation, represented by the figures of angels, lay hidden until its appearance in the face of Christ. I was right, therefore, in saying<sup>155</sup> that there is now no such Word, because there is now none according to the dispensation under which the oracle was in the darkness of the cloud, in the time of Moses. Again, if there is now such a Word as there once was, where is the oracle, where the tabernacle, where the cloud, where the darkness, where the Cherubim, where the glory of the Lord which appeared there? Is not the fullness of all these in Christ?

If so, the Word seems to be neither eternal nor divine. Christ in the New Testament replaces the Word in the Old Testament (See *CR*, 195). However, as the Word had existed now Christ came in flesh, which means, from a Person to a being or from God to man. He explicitly distinguishes the Word from Christ as well as from the Son who is called man in the Bible (ET, 93b. 144):

“If you show me one iota by which the Word is called the Son, or mention is made of the begetting of the Word, I will confess myself as one beaten, though he has kept my language to the very letter, as Christ says; who when Scripture says the Word will himself also say the Word; when it says the Son, will say the Son; that is, once the Word, but now the Son.”

The same confusion on the relationship between the Word, the Son, and Christ can be detected here (ET, 2a. 6). Who is the Son of God, Jesus, and Christ? He maintains that the Bible consistently calls Jesus a human being.<sup>156</sup> Jesus is “a man’s proper name, and CHRIST is a surname” (ET, 2b. 6). Jesus was anointed by God, which limits Jesus to the human nature (ET, 3a. 7). Jesus is “called the Son of God for reason that the power of God is instead of the seed of man” (ET, 7a. 13). Jesus is the Son of God, who is called the Father of Jesus Christ, but not the Word, because Jesus was designated at baptism and proved to be the Son of God by resurrection (ET, 10a. 18 & 54b. 86).<sup>157</sup> Servetus would distinguish between Christ and Jesus, who would have different origins to becoming Son of God. Christ did not become the Son of God by adoption like us but by “a real begetting by God”

<sup>155</sup> Servetus must imply that “the Word was united to the flesh, but, *the Word became flesh*, because a change was made from the Word into flesh a change was made from a Person unto a being, as if the Person of the Word, when it became flesh, withdrew from God and came to man” (ET, 92b. 143).

<sup>156</sup> “If he were God, he could be God only in a sense in which man is capable of being God” Bainton (1953b, 46).

<sup>157</sup> In the Bible the Word does not apply to the Son of God but Jesus. See *CR* (689).

(CR, 9b. 16-7). Jesus was human, but Christ “took the form or appearance of a servant ... as one among men ... *found in fashion as a man*” (CR, 20a. 32) and “puts the flesh on and off like a garment,” (CR, 68a. 107) quoting Job 10:11.<sup>158</sup> Only Christ revealed in the flesh became “the Son of God because apart from the flesh he could not have been accorded this name” (*Institutes*, II. xiv. 6, 489).<sup>159</sup> “Christ is called a man, since even an earthly king is called Christ” (ET, 3b. 8; cf. 1 Sam. 7.3; 2 Sam. 22.51; Isa. 45.1). Christ is not called God, who is the Father of Christ and greater than him. Following Arian thought, Servetus distinguishes Christ, in his nature, from the Father. He was entirely different from the Father, who alone is God. The implication is that Christ is not God. He also insists that Christ never calls himself God (ET, 12b-13a. 21-2):

If CHRIST is God in that way, there will then be more than one God. Here I propose that CHRIST alone shall be my teacher, in order that he alone may defend me, for out of his words all your arguments can be refuted. To that argument of the Pharisees, the Master himself replies, *I said, Ye are Gods*. CHRIST there makes clear that he is God not in Nature but in appearance, not by nature but by grace. For when he was accused of making himself God, he spoke of gods, ascribing that sort of deity to himself. Also, seeing that he adds, *If he called them gods unto whom the word of God came*, how much more shall the Son of man, whom the Father sanctifies, be called not merely Son, but even God ... For that only the Father is called God by nature is plainly enough shown by Scripture, which says, God and CHRIST, CHRIST and God. It so joins them as though CHRIST were a being distinct from God. Likewise, when it says, God is the Father of JESUS CHRIST, a difference is noted between God and CHRIST, just as between father and son. And also when it says, *the CHRIST of God, the God of our Lord JESUS CHRIST, the head of CHRIST is God* ... For what if I say that Jesus Christ is the great God, and along with this what he himself says in speaking most simply: *The Father is greater than I*; am I therefore an Arian? For when Arius held the very foolish view that the Son was of different Substance from the Father, having also no appreciation at all of the glory of CHRIST, he introduced a new creature, more exalted than man; although he might nevertheless have excluded this and every other distinction, and have admitted, *The Father is greater than I*.

The Father, greater than Christ and the head of Christ, manifested Himself by the Word.

On the incarnation, by which the Word became Christ, Servetus says (ET, 49b. 78):

Let us therefore understand the meaning of John as to how the Word of God became flesh; because God determined his own dispositions to be manifested in the flesh, and all those things which God hitherto wrought by his Word, or by his own voice, are now wrought by the flesh, CHRIST, to whom has been committed the rule and all power, who reconciles, renews, sums up all things in himself. It is also understood in very truth that the Word which was in the beginning became flesh, because this flesh was begotten by a voice uttered from the beginning, not otherwise than as if I, uttering a word from my mouth,

<sup>158</sup> “Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me with bones and sinews” (Job 10.11).

<sup>159</sup> He also says that Christ can be called the Son of God figuratively. See *Institutes* (II. xiv. 7, 491).

produced gold or pearls; for then it might be said, properly speaking, that my voice became gold. For the almighty Word of God was able, without the bond of material things, to change into fleshly substance; and therefore Christ himself is now called, the Word become man, the Word become flesh.

The Word was the mode prior to Christ, in whom God now acted. Servetus consistently argues that Christ is different from God and did not exist before the incarnation. He is not eternal and existed as the Word before the incarnation. The Word before incarnated was eternal, but the Son united with the man Jesus was not eternal (ET, 111a. 172):

There was, then, an oracle, a *hypostasis* of God, a Person of CHRIST, the divinity which was Son to God himself alone. Yet to us CHRIST alone is called Son. The being was future to us; but to God nothing is future. There was in God the very image of a being that is not, but will be tomorrow. For this is the height and depth of the divine *economy*; and the Word, which formerly was with God, has to us become the Son. And it makes no difference, even if you say that the Son was with God; indeed, I say that CHRIST was with God, who afterwards came and was incarnated.

Servetus expounds on the beginning of the Son of God: “The will to beget the Son was begotten in God from the beginning, and extended itself by act to the creation itself” (*Institutes*, II. xiv. 8, 492).<sup>160</sup> The Son of God was born in the beginning as man bearing the essential image of God and became the first-born among creatures. He asserts that the term ‘Son of God’ in the Bible is always used of the man of Jesus, and never of the Word (CR, 689). This is why when Servetus died he shouted: “Jesus, the Son of the eternal God”, but not: “eternal Son of God”.

In a way it appears that Servetus accepted the same God to be the Father and the Son. But this would be as a husband and wife are one in the flesh of their son. In this way God and man are one in Christ and one in Itself (CR, 269). He recognises the divinity of Jesus but excludes his eternity. Like with the Unitarians’ concept of adoptionism he exclaims: “One sole hallucination the philosophers had, which deprived them of this knowledge. They say that the Substance of God can not be mingled with the Substance of man. Oh, pitiable madness! What else is the mystery if the incarnation but a mingling of man with God?” (DT, B6a. 209).

Then how are the two natures of Christ to be understood? He first points out that everyone was blind and confused, because of philosophical thinking (DT, B6b. 209-10):

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<sup>160</sup> Servetus speculates whether Christ was an angel from the beginning. Calvin, *The Commentary of the Twelve Minor Prophets, Hosea*, (1845:421).

Besides, the philosophers say that this is a confusion of Natures, because the Nature of God is here confused with the Nature of man. It is to be deplored that we are so imbued with philosophical habits of speaking that we rendered blind in examining the divine mysteries, and wish to seem wiser than God himself. In the first place, this is to be noted: that the term, Nature, is improperly applied to God; for that which is inborn in any being from birth, and is characteristic, is called his Nature. Hence one ought to declare that this flesh of Christ, since it is born of God, has a divine Nature, even until death.

Thus, Servetus is confused in his own speculation about both the divinity of Jesus Christ and his humanity. He expounds the two natures as follows (ET, 92b. 142-3):

From this is discovered the truth of the common opinion by which they say that two Natures united in Christ make one Person, and one Son, because there is one Nature of the Word, another Nature of the flesh; and these two are one Person, because the Word became flesh. In which opinion there are as many errors as there are words; and they do not understand what Person means; and they misuse the term when in this metaphysical fashion they speak of Nature of God, and not, the Nature of the Word; because the being of the Word is a Person assumed in the Nature of God. Indeed, hitherto it ill suggests the Nature of God, which we know not how to call in to court; and we transgress the limits of Scripture. And I shall never take the Nature except for the being itself, which is God.

He says that in ascending into heaven Christ indeed had two natures, although Christ had been only flesh. Therefore, Christ participates in both deity and humanity. His explanation is so speculative that the biblical point of view disappears (ET, 11b. 19-20):

Rejecting these quibbles, then, we with a sincere heart acknowledge the real CHRIST, and him complete in divinity. But since this divinity of his depends upon the Mystery of the Word, let us for the present say roughly that God can share with a man the fullness of his deity, and give unto him the name which is above every name. For if we admit as touching Moses that he was made a God to Pharaoh, much more, and in a way far more exceptional, was CHRIST made the God, Lord, and Master of Thomas and of us all. And because God was in him in singular measure, and because through him we find God propitious, he is expressly called Emanuel, that is, God with us; nay more, he himself is EL. Again, if we are given by God the privilege of being called sons of God, with Christ the privilege will be the broader, not only of being the Son of God, but also of being called and of being our God; for, *Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive divinity, that is, to receive the power, riches, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing.* And there is in him another and a manifold fullness of Deity, and other unsearchable riches of his, of which we shall speak below, which are all qualities that God shares with man.

Both natures of God and man remain in Christ so that Christ can partake in God and man. He is not simply a creature but a partaker with creatures. In Christ, we can be partakers as sons of God. He maintains that there is a difference between the two natures: "But there is this difference, that he is himself partaker of flesh and blood, whose flesh and blood are

nevertheless the flesh of God and the blood of God. Again unless he were partaker with creatures, he could not be said to have become a truly mortal man, though nevertheless his incarnation made him truly mortal” (DT, B8a. 212). At the Incarnation the partaking happened and the Word ceased to exist, but with the resurrection Christ returned to his essential position as the Word as God (DT, B8a-b. 212-3 & CR, 195):

This dispensation of the incarnation was followed by another admirable one in the resurrection, in which the existence of the creature, which he acquired through his incarnation, was laid aside just as if it were an accidental thing. There is nothing now in Christ which is animal. Christ has been wholly perfected and glorified by his resurrection, so that he has returned to the original state of the Word, and exists as God, and is in God, as before. This appears in the figure of the rod, which was taken back into the hand of Moses in the same condition in which it was before it turned into flesh. The return from man to God took place in the same way as the proceeding from the Word into flesh took place before.

The more important event at His resurrection was: “Christ’s body is itself the body of divinity, and His flesh is divine, the flesh of God, the blood of God. Christ’s flesh was generated from the “*cælestis de substantia Dei* [the heavenly substance of God]” (CR, 73-4). The *cælestia* [celestiality] of Christ through the resurrection enables man to regenerate the spirit of man and not to breathe in the incorruptible nature any more like new creature (CR, 227, 232). In Him we can partake in His deity that communicates to us and enjoy with the true participants in Him (CR, 16 196). In order to apply His *cælestia* to each of us the function of the Holy Spirit is required of us who can accept it. Servetus not only would “speak of the Spirit as a divine activity in man rather than as a person of the Godhead or agency of the infrastructure” (Friedman 1978:71) but also would regard the Holy Spirit as a dispensation of God and as not a third person of God (CR, 183).<sup>161</sup> Because the Holy Spirit is not a distinct being but an activity of God himself, the Holy Spirit “is called the Spirit of CHRIST, and the Spirit of the Son” (ET, 31b. 49).<sup>162</sup> The Holy Spirit manifests His *cælestia* in various ways (ET, 22a. 35):

“For by the Holy Spirit it means now God himself, now an angel, now the spirit of a man, a sort of instinct or divine inspiration of the mind, a mental impulse, or a breath; although sometimes a difference is marked between breath and Spirit. And some would have the Holy Spirit mean nothing other than the right understanding and reason of man.”

<sup>161</sup> “Ergo spiritus sanctus non erat tertia res, sed erat dispensatio Deitatis per Angelum.”

<sup>162</sup> He contends that making the Holy Spirit the third Person resulted from the philosophers who made an imaginary Trinity. See 21a. 33-4.

How can we understand the incomprehensible God? Through the Holy Spirit. Servetus reasons this out in his own way. He begins by speculating on the progressive revelation of God to the world. יהוה, the source of being and parent of beings (ET, 100b. 155), revealed Himself through the Word which was “internal reason and external conversation” of God (CR, 47). Christ comes from the Word as “the Demiurgos, and makes of him the architect and fashioner of the world – *ille mundi Architectus Christus* – Creator, even of the elements from which, intermingled, are educed the substantial forms of things” (Willis 1877:201). This reasoning is based on neoplatonic philosophy. Through Christ we can comprehend God.

Servetus then speculates on the incomprehensible and imaginable knowledge of God who revealed himself to us in four progressive revelations throughout history. The first revelation in creation is “to be premised that God is in all ways incomprehensible, unimaginable; nor can we form any conception of God himself unless he adapts himself to us under some form which we are capable of perceiving; and this the master shows us in John v, 37” (ET, 119a. 184). The second revelation, through His servants, is to be demonstrated in the variety of His names in the Old Testament: יהוה, אלהים, and שדי, all used in the Old Testament, refer to God who expressed Himself through His different names (ET, 100b-101a. 155-6). God, “out of the mere good pleasure of his will, determined to manifest himself to the world through his oracle, as if I were to make my voice heard among those who do not see me; and thus, at the time of the law, he was manifested to all the people” (ET, 119a. 184). The third aspect is similar to the second: “Thirdly: he manifested himself to the Prophets by his oracle more clearly, yet obscurely under the form of a kind of pattern, in whose likeness Adam was formed; since in his oracle there shone forth the original image, or the first figure of the world, namely, CHRIST” (ET, 119a. 184). With His partial knowledge we can understand His nature and being to some extent, though imperfectly. In the fourth or last revelation we see Him clearly and distinctly: “Fourthly: from what has been said above, learn what has been clearly and distinctly manifested to us; for the oracle has come to be flesh, and we have seen him” (ET, 119a. 184). Servetus hardly mentions neither the death nor the public life of Jesus Christ, but theorises about him so as to establish his own system against the contemporary view on the Trinity.



### 3.3.4 On Anti-Infant Baptism

Servetus also thought that the wrong practice of baptism was a corruption of true Christianity.<sup>163</sup> He desired baptismal regeneration, but rejected infant baptism, as did the Anabaptists. His rejection of, and views on, infant baptism eventually became the most serious heresies his examiners were concerned with. He was suspected of being an Anabaptist, and of disturbing the peace of the city. According to his argument, baptism should be preceded by the preaching of the Gospel, the illumination of the Spirit, faith, and repentance. It also required the intellectual assent of the individual. To follow Jesus' example, baptism should not be available before thirty years of age (CR, 372, 412-3, 472, 500, 564-5).<sup>164</sup> He maintained that adults of thirty years could be reborn, as Adam had been born as an adult of thirty years (CR, 412). Further reasons for being baptised at thirty years was that David was anointed as king at thirty years, and Joseph was moved from jail to the palace at the same age (CR, 412-3).

Servetus infers that no one was a fit subject for baptism before he had reached the adequate maturity of understanding the significance of his actions. He asserts that there is no relationship between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. Circumcision was performed on individuals after expression of faith: He went so far as to say that infant baptism was “an invention of the devil and witchcraft” and “a murdering of the Holy Ghost” (Henry 1849:250; Rilliet 1846:215). Further, he says that infants, like adults who do not believe in Christ, are under condemnation (CR, 534).<sup>165</sup>

In the conclusion of the third part of his last book Servetus has no scruples in calling infant baptism “a detestable abomination, a quenching of the Holy Spirit, a laying waste of the Church of God, a confounding of the whole Christian profession, an annulling of the renewal made by Christ, and a trampling under foot of his whole kingdom” (CR, 576, Wilbur 1972:145).<sup>166</sup> He maintains that children who die without being baptised are not allowed to enter heaven (Henry 1849:261).

<sup>163</sup> Servetus thought that the two roots of restoring the pure Christianity resulted from recovering: “His proposed reconstruction of Christianity springs largely from two roots, the one the speculative doctrine of God, the other the more nearly practical doctrine of baptism” Wilbur (1972:143).

<sup>164</sup> Calvin summarises clearly the baptism arguments of Servetus and answers to them in his *Institutio*. See, *Institutes* (IV. xvi. 31, 1353-58).

<sup>165</sup> Milton also condemned infant baptism (Larson 1923:911).

<sup>166</sup> “Pædobaptismum esse dico detestandam abominationem, soiritus sancti extinctionem, ecclesiæ Dei defolationem, totius professionis Christianæ confusionem, innouationis, per Christum, factæ, abolitionem, ac totius eius regni conculcationem.”

For Servetus, the Trinity was the first root to corrupting true Christianity and infant baptism the second one. The Council of Geneva therefore examined him on his relationship with the Turks, and considered him an Anabaptist (*Opera*, 774). Calvin summarised the reasons why Servetus objected to infant baptism in his *Institutio* (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xvi. 31, 1352-8).<sup>167</sup> Against the first argument that he insisted on the perfect baptism, Calvin replies that it would be completed at death and that “it is foolish to seek in a man on the first day that perfection to which baptism invites us to advance by continual steps throughout life” (*Institutes*, IV, 1354; cf., III. xvii. 15, 819-20). On the eighth argument, Calvin replies that “by baptism they are admitted into Christ’ flock, and the symbol of their adoption suffices them until as adults they are able to bear solid food. Therefore, we should wait for the time of examination, which God expressly requires in the Sacred Supper” (*Institutes*, IV, 1355). Calvin answers Servetus’ thirteenth argument, on the matter of infants attending the Lord’s Supper. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth arguments, he points out Servetus’ wrong understanding of the regeneration of infants: “Again, he [Servetus] objects that infants cannot be considered new men because they are not begotten through the Word... the doctrine of the gospel is an incorruptible seed [I Peter 1:23] to regenerate us, if we are indeed fit to receive it; but when we are not old enough to be taught, God keeps his own timetable of regeneration” (*Institutes*, IV, 1357). In the last reply Calvin indicates the following: “In the final place, he [Servetus] reasons that if infants, without understanding, can be baptized, baptism can be administered by children at play as a farce and a mockery” (*Institutes*, IV, 1358). Calvin concludes to Servetus’ objection on infant baptism (*Institutes*, IV, 1358):

Let him quarrel with God over this matter, according to whose precept circumcision was common to infants before they attained understanding. Was it therefore something for children to play with and fool over, so that they could overturn God’s holy institution? But it is no wonder that those reprobate spirits, as if agitated by a frenzy, drag in the crassest absurdities in defence of their errors. For God justly avenges their pride and obstinacy by such irrationality. I trust I have made plain how weakly Servetus has supported his little Anabaptist brothers.

Servetus gave as much offence with his passionate opposition to infant baptism as with his opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity, to both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. In the conclusion section of the fiftieth book of his *Christianismi Restitutio*, Servetus claims that “whoever accepts the Pope to be Antichrist, may also truly believe that the papistic trinity, Pædobaptism, and the other sacraments of popery are the teachings of

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<sup>167</sup> Calvin points out here the twenty objections of Servetus against infant baptism.

demons. Oh! Christ Jesus, Son of God, Oh! Most merciful Redeemer, who has so often delivered your people from this Babylonian captivity of Antichrist, from his hypocrisy, tyranny, and idolatry. Amen.”<sup>168</sup>

<sup>168</sup> “Quisquis vere credit, Papam esse Antichristum, vere quoque credet, Papasticam trinitatem, Pædobaptismum, et alia Papatus sacramenta, esse doctrinas dæmoniorum. O Christe Iesu, fili Dei, liberator clementissime, qui toties populum ab angustiis liberasti, liberanos miseros ab hac Babylonica Antichristi captiuitate, ab hypocrisi eius, tyrannide, et idololatria, Amen” (CR, 670).