

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

5.1 Findings

5.1.1 What was Michael Servetus like?

What is Calvin's role in the trial of Michael Servetus? This is the topic of this thesis. We have followed his early life chronologically to comprehend who he was really like. We have also surveyed his theology and the circumstance of Geneva briefly to discover the trail. Afterwards it was followed by two trials of Servetus by which it was obviously demonstrated what his true crimes as well as characteristics in public are. Now we are here to evaluate the long journey and the allegations against John Calvin.

5.1.2 Servetus' Wanderings

Who was Michael Servetus? We can simply say that Michael Servetus was "a wanderer, a rolling stone, an adventurer, a coward, and a malicious blasphemer" (Prime 1910:4).²⁸⁸ He breathed and died in the free spirit of Aragón (Ford 1860:12). Like Don Quixote, he was busy with new discoveries and new adventures and had no hesitation in fighting those who he disagreed with (Zweig 1936:96).²⁸⁹ Not only did he have an illogical mind, an inordinate ambition, and a defective judgement, but he unsettled the minds of men and offended everyone he came in contact with by his pride, self-sufficiency, and dissimulation (Allwoerden, 1727:7, 23-6). He had a never-ending curiosity and desired by himself to know of the Christianity blossoming in the early Reformation. He tried to contemplate and theorise it into his own categories. As the result, he concluded that the Reformers were lacking in truly reforming Christianity in matters of the doctrine of God. He thought that he himself was a truly pious and devoted Christian who was able to restore true Christianity

²⁸⁸ Even Calvin calls him "brain-sick fellow" and "Spanish dog" (*Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, Beveridge 1844:61,257). Larson (1923:898) calls Servetus "a horrible blasphemer."

²⁸⁹ He often called him Don Quixote in the pages of 96, 103, "every Spaniard has some of the traits of a Don Quixote; but certainly the remark applies admirably to Miguel Servetus." Ford (1860:9) describes the historical background of Spain at the time of Servetus: "There is, doubtless, from the extravagance to which it was carried, and especially from the sarcasm of Cervantes, a want of appreciation of chivalry and its effects." Henry (1849:164) calls Servetus "Hamlet". "Soaring above both Romanism and Protestantism, he aimed at substituting a system of his own creation, the corner-stone of which was simple Theism. He aimed his stroke at the very heart of Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity. Confident in his system, and not less in his ability, he had for some years been leading the life of a knight-errant [Don Quixote], having wandered into Switzerland, and some parts of Germany, in quest of opposers with whom he might do battle" (Wylie 1899:200-1).

and thus perfect the Reformation. In the preface of his last book, *Christianismi Restitutio*, he confesses his own piety for the truth regarding Jesus Christ (CR, 4, Henry 1849:177):

O Christ Jesus, Son of God! reveal thyself to thy servant, that this great revelation may be clear to us in its truth. Give me now thy good spirit and thy mighty word; guide my pen and my soul, that I may be able to describe the glory of thy godhead, and to confess to Thee the true faith! This is thy works, which an inward impulse teaches me to attempt, being anxious for thy truth. I undertook the same in time past, and now again I feel myself urged thereto, for the appointed season is fulfilled. Thou hast taught us that thy light must not remain hidden, and woe to me if I do not proclaim thy Gospel.

However, throughout his life, doubting, lying, denying, insulting, arguing, hiding, and fleeing seemed to be his characteristics. He lived in an atmosphere of doubting anything around him. He began with lying about what he saw, did, and learned and could not help contradicting even his own ideas. He never hesitated to lie when he was in a disadvantageous position even though he took an oath on the Gospel. He had no scruples about arguing against those who held different views from his to the point of insulting them and could not endure different views from his. He was obsessed with a painful sense of rivalry. Consistently hiding his personal life from even his close associates with a new name as well as occupation, he is suspect of all truthfulness concerning everything around him. When threatened and endangered in his own situation, as a coward he was always fled into deceit: “Whenever threatened with any personal danger he exhibited the most childishly abject cowardice” (Prime 1910:5).

Servetus came from minor Spanish nobility and was born in 1509 or 1511. Even as to facts of his birth place it not easy to trust his own story. It is either Villeneuve or Tudéla. He changed and hid his testimonies in some cases. That we get facts of his personal life entirely from his testimony raises some suspicions as to their truthfulness (Lingle 1900:5). About his personal life before twenty little is known. He did not settle down anywhere but fled from place to place (Macdonell 1983:130). His restless and unfettered intelligence drove him to study a variety of topics. In some respects, Servetus, like a Renaissance man, had a wide knowledge, covering contemporary learning in geography, medicine, language, theology, astrology, and philosophy.²⁹⁰ Beza disagrees some of his admirers, however and criticises him as follows (Beza 1836:134):

The learning and services of Servetus in the medical profession, have also been named as aggravating the cruelty of his persecutors. But those writers, who, in

²⁹⁰ Due to the variety of his study, it is said that he has “an encyclopaedic mind” (Lecler 1960:325; see Mattison 1991:27).

their zeal to honor Servetus, have attempted to credit him with a discovery relative to the circulation of the blood, ought to know that Harvey was the author of that discovery. The learned Wotton, in honoring Servetus with this discovery, says that the very learned Charles Bernard could inform him no farther, only that he had it from a learned friend, who copied it from Servetus. The authority is, then, that a learned writer says a very learned writer was told it by a learned friend!

He continuously travelled to study one field after another, having left his hometown at the age of 15 and never returning. Theology, among a variety of topics, was his primary concern in life. The primary source of Servetus' theological ideas was his early Spanish background. He was strongly influenced in his early days by the contemporary Spanish religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.²⁹¹ His doctrine of God became based on anti-Trinitarianism. He goes so far as to say that he prefers Jewish circumcision and the Jewish view on the doctrine of God to biblical baptism and doctrine (CR, 443).²⁹² Standing on his opinion, another source of his learning, he contended, was the Bible in which he found true knowledge and the wisdom of God and philosophy, but it was not true (ET, 78b-79a. 121-2 & 107b. 166). He tried to quote many verses of the Bible to prove that the beginning of our faith was to believe in the historical Christ who is Jesus, and the Son of God, insisting that the terms the 'Trinity' – 'Persons', 'essence', 'substance', and 'hypostasis' – were invented by philosophers. It would seem that these two sources heavily influenced his own theology but his doctrine of the Trinity and baptism tended to be cast in the neo-platonic and philosophical thought and pantheism, rather than the traditions and doctrines of the Fathers and Creeds. His theology was based throughout on Greek philosophy rather than the biblical views, as he insisted (Schaff 1993:738 & Friedman 1978:45-6).²⁹³ It is true that one could not find the term 'Trinity' in the Bible, but Servetus seems to have devised the course of its entering into Christianity by himself rather than looking at the historical sources. He denounced the traditional doctrine of the Fathers but misused them to establish his own style. His non-biblical and non-traditional elements of theology were influenced

²⁹¹ The first two religions hold the Unitarianism: "God is here seeking to keep the Jews from believing in more than one God, for to this belief they were prone (even as we ourselves also to-day); and the Jews were wont to multiply their gods in proportion to the number of their cities" (ET, 29b. 46); Servetus often mentions them in his books, see ET (42b-43a. 66-7) & CR, (35, 399). Friedman (1978:17-8) concludes that Servetus' aim of writing his books was "for an additional audience of Jews and Arabs, Marranos and Moriscos." See also Pettegree (1990:43) & McWilliam (1995:195).

²⁹² Calvin calls him "hic bonus Rabbinus" (*Opera*, 620).

²⁹³ He borrowed the platonic philosophy as a tool to explain how to understand the incomprehensible God rather than Aristotle philosophy.

by the heretical thoughts around him.²⁹⁴ He, pretending to be a Protestant, met several of the Reformers like Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and Wolfgang Capito and even lived in the house of Johannes Oecolampadius. Finally he corresponded with John Calvin through a third person, Jean Frellon. While meeting and corresponding with each of them, he felt hostile to them and felt that he had no affect on them, and gained no support for his thoughts. Afterward, disguising himself as a Roman Catholic, he lived quietly and happily in the house of the Archbishop of Vienne, Pierre Palmier, for roughly twelve years. Throughout his life he suffered from the obsession of restoring pure Christianity.

In his life he left a series of writings and letters. His publications were these: Letters; *De Trinitatis Erroribus*; *Dialogorum de Trinitate Duo*; Ptolemy's Geography; the Bible of Santes Pagnini; *Syroporum Universa Ratio*; *Apologetica Disceptio pro Astrologia*; *Christianismi Restitutio*. The most controversial writings were *De Trinitatis Erroribus* and finally, *Christianismi Restitutio*, published respectively in 1531 and 1553. In these two books he speculates on Christianity, specially on the Trinity and on baptism. In the first book, *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, he simultaneously opposed these traditional doctrines: Original sin, millennium, righteousness, and redemption. In the second book he expresses his whole theology. It seems significant that he wrote so many books, even in so short a life but it is hard to find any consistency in his theology: "Despite this vast literature it is difficult to study Servetus' religious views. Original texts are relatively rare, and once discovered and read, his logic is scattered, and his literary style difficult to follow. Unlike many other radicals, Servetus' eclectic views cannot easily or completely be categorized" (Friedman 1978:14). It is recognized that there was no integrated system in his theology (Bainton 1932:78; Friedman 1978:17, 21-2 & Chéreau 1879:11).²⁹⁵ Sometime readers would be confused with his explanations. Servetus is apt to confuse the usage of terms in his books. The term 'Person,' for example, is not used consistently. It is not easy to see and find a concise concept (Friedman 1973: 91-3). There is no systematic formation in them

²⁹⁴ We can see the Jewish influence in his first book, "I can not here refrain from sighing, when I see the replies that Rabbi Kimchi made against the Christians on this points" (ET, 56b. 89 & see 42b-43a. 66-7). "Pray what Turk, Scythian, Barbarian could bear these disputes of words, as Paul calls them, without laughter?... Hear also what Mohammed says; for more reliance it 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 spirits 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."

²⁹⁵ "His language and philosophical points are subtle, commanding a healthy respect just to obtain a rudimentary understanding of what he means, let alone how to classify it. That he himself seems to have either changed theological opinions or so revised his earlier articulation of them that they appear contradictory to his later work complicates the matter as well" (Breuer 1999:n.p.).

nor position: “Additionally, no church bears his name and, consequently, no satisfactory conventions of scholarship have developed to provide a framework through which his ideas might be approached and understood. In many circles Servetus has been remembered more for his contribution to religious dissension and controversy than as a builder of new religious forms” (Friedman 1978:14). He was unsuccessful in appealing to the contemporary Reformation and came to be regarded as heretic by both Catholics and Protestants because of his action in spreading errors through writings. In the end his crimes of heresy, blasphemy, and sedition resulted in burning him at the stake by the Council of Geneva on October 27, 1553: Servetus “was condemned, by the majority of his judges, not at all as the opponent of Calvin—scarcely as an heretic—but essentially as seditious. Politics acted a much more important part than theology, towards the close of the trial—they came on the stage with the Attorney-General” (Rilliet 1846:131) Although at his trial he was at first accused in religious matters, it became a civil matter and finally he was condemned by the Council which governed the civil trial. He had committed three grievous crimes, which were punished by the civil government of Geneva that examined his entire case. By contemporary civil law as well as by the Canon Law, the Council seriously weighed these three crimes. We can clearly understand that the trial of Servetus by the Council “was not case of heresy, pure and simple, but one of heresy complicated with the political crimes of blasphemy, sedition and conspiracy” if we investigate the actual contemporary circumstance (Shields 1983: 355-6). The law commanded burning to death by fire for any convicted heretic (Willis 1877:474; Kingdon 1995:30 & Wilbur 1972:179). We must not forget that he was not at all condemned by Calvin, but by the Council of Geneva in accordance with the contemporary law (Minton 1909:220). Calvin’s influence was not allowed in the matters deciding the penalty of the crime at Geneva. In the eyes of the Council his heresy was not only regarded as the civil crime, but by promoting heresy the civil peace was endangered and this was sedition. The independence and peace of Geneva, freed from the tyranny of the Roman Catholic, could be maintained only if there were religious peace. The religious unity was the guaranty of holding the independence and peace of Geneva. This peace was also the precondition for reformation in Geneva. His view on infant baptism was regarded as Anabaptist, and this threatened the civil peace of Geneva like it had Germany and parts of Switzerland (Wylie 1899:329).

5.1.3 Servetus' Heresy

What brought Calvin into the Servetus' trial had to do only with theological matters because he was a heretic and a blasphemer. Why was Servetus condemned a heretic? In which aspect was he a heretic and a blasphemer? Not only was Calvin entirely sure that Servetus was a heretic as well as a blasphemer but so were other Reformers and so were the Swiss Churches. Servetus publicly not only opposed the doctrine of the Trinity but called God a three-head monster and watch-dog of the underworld, Cerberus (Servetus, *CR*, 59, 119), frequently throughout his books: "In more than 100 places he wrote that the Trinity was a three-headed Cerberus (a hell-hound)" (Prime 1910:7). According to the sentence decreed by the Council of Geneva one of his crimes was blasphemy: "He blasphemes detestably against the Son of God, saying that Jesus Christ is not the Son of God from eternity. He calls infant baptism an invention of the devil and sorcery. His execrable blasphemies are scandalous against the majesty of God, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit" (*Opera*, 829). Servetus had no scruples about speculating and describing God basing his thoughts on pantheism, Neoplatonism, and on Islamic belief. He insists that everything around us is full of God's presence as well as a part of God and even the devil will be substantially God, which is an entirely pantheistic point of view (*Opera*, 496).²⁹⁶ In light of Neoplatonism, Servetus describes God like the sun that engages in self-elaboration and self-expression (ET, 102a. 157-8):

Just as God is called the source of being, so is he also called the source of light, the Father of Spirits, the Father of lights; nor do I understand light as meaning here the assertion of a quality. But inasmuch as the rays of being, and shining angels, flow from God, the breach of being comes out of his storehouse, from the Father's breast, as sons from a father's bosom; manifold rays of divinity proceed, which are all Essences of God, and he is them.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Servetus even says that God fills everything and even hell – "Denique Deus omnia implem etiam ipsum infernum implet" (*CR*, 240).

²⁹⁷ Servetus interprets the concept of light in his book in detail. See ET, 145-54, 162 passim. "For that the Word was light does not presuppose that he was a ray really distinct from the Father, but because God is light, the Word was God himself, and the light was with God" (DT, A3b-4a. 192). Milton has the same opinion as Servetus: "God the Father is the material of the cosmos, and also will or destiny – the fundamental (perhaps Servetus means the psychical and physical) law which governs all spirit, matter, and motion—all relations between cause and effect; God the Word is the energetic force in the universe, the power of action, creation, effectual strength – it is God exhibited as power or might; God the Spirit is nothing definite; he is illumination, vitality, irradiance. The three aspects of godhead are found in the cosmos as a whole (where they constitute the Trinity or God) and in every portion of the cosmos—in every rock, stream, tree, animal, man, and angel. In all living things, from the lowliest herb to man, we have substance, energy, and animation. Without these nothing can exist, at least it cannot exhibit the mysterious life-giving principle. Just as my body, my strength, and my warmth or animation are all myself—and none of these more so than any other—just so are the Father, the Word, and the Spirit all the same thing; they are but differing aspects of God in the universe" (Larson 1923:918).

As a rationalist, Servetus' theology based on the platonic philosophy, and Calvin's theology, stand opposite each other.²⁹⁸ He mainly concentrates on the doctrine of Christ based on the neo-platonic philosophy which is his starting point to open his own theology by which he expounds the Trinity: "Again, what is said of light is confirmed by the same John in his Epistle; for that the Word was light does not presuppose that he was a ray really distinct from the Father, but because God is light, the Word was God himself, and the light was with God" (DT, A3b-4a. 192). He speculates that Christ is a mode of God's self-expression, a spiritual being created through wisdom and light by the Father, who became the Son by combining the Word with flesh.²⁹⁹ In order to support this he quotes Trismegistus' view: as Trismegistus tells of the light of the Word as the original light as well as the light of the mind.³⁰⁰ We are surely aware that his view on the light came from the platonic philosophy. Servetus does not consider Christ as separate Person of the Trinity but a mode or appearance of God. He directly denied the eternity and divinity of Christ (CR, 56-7). The three Persons of the Trinity were essentially different manifestations of the same God. Each function is the same but each manifestation depends on the historical context and the circumstance. His expression on Christ is apt to follow Mohammed's conception: "Son was sent from the Father in no other way than as one of the Prophets" (ET, 94b. 145 & see 43a. 67 & Durant 1957:480).

In addition, he completely rejected infant baptism and said that the proper age of baptism was 30 years old because adults only could appreciate the benefit of baptism like a new illumination. He not only rejected infant baptism but went so far to curse it as "an invention of the devil and the witchcraft," and, "a murdering of the Holy Ghost" (Henry 1849:250; Rilliet 1846:215). Such views at that time were heresy as well as blasphemy both for the Roman Catholics and the Reformers alike: "Michael Servetus of Navarre was indeed the veritable effigy for Catholic and Protestant alike of all that seemed execrable in

²⁹⁸ "The Platonic concept of the One reflected in the Many and the mystic notion of the immanence of Christ in the human soul were inherently difficult or impossible to reconcile with the Calvinistic dogma of predestination, sorting out from all eternity the elect and the damned. Impossible too was an attempt to reconcile rationalistic views of the relativity of all human knowledge with theocratic claims to infallibility in the understanding and interpretation of scripture" (Haller 1850:433 & Sill 1993: 308-9).

²⁹⁹ Servetus, CR, 138, 595, 728-9; "There is one brightness of the sun and another of the moon, another of fire and still another splendor of water. All these were disposed in light by Christ, the architect of the corporeal and spiritual. He created the material elements and substantially endowed them with light forms, bringing forth light from his treasurer." 153, trans. Hillar 1997:249.

³⁰⁰ "Ea ipsa verbi lux Trismegisto dicitur archetypa lux, et archetypus animæ, idque rectissime" (CR, 144). Servetus follows Trismegistus in his views on the Trinity and infant baptism. Calvin also acknowledged it: "At length he calls upon Trismegistus and the sibyls to witness that holy washings befit only adults" (Institutes, IV. xvi. 31, 1358).

the Radical Reformation” (Williams 1962:3).³⁰¹ On the theological ground of the sixteenth century he deserved to be condemned as a heretic as well as a blasphemer.

5.1.4 Calvin’s Role in the Trial

5.1.4.1 Duty and Passion

What caused Calvin to stand so firmly in the position accusing Servetus of heresy? (Wadkins 1983:431- 41).³⁰² Heresy not only amounts to severing part of the Church, the bride of Christ in the religious matter but also infringe the covenant between God and His people. For the sixteenth century Bainton (1953b:77) sums up the case of Servetus:

... heresy is the supreme crime because it is *lèse majesté* against the divine sovereign, because it destroys souls for eternity rather than merely shortening life in the body. It is worse than matricide because it rends Holy Mother Church, the Immaculate Bride of Christ. It was worse than treason because it breaks the bond of civil society and disintegrates Christendom; it is worse than counterfeiting because it devaluates the truth God.

So Calvin felt it was his duty to eliminate heretics from the world, fearing God’s wrath against them if he did not. He could never ignore those who spread poisonous heresies in Geneva as well as throughout the world and gave himself to the protection of the truth. Neither could he endure blasphemies against God. Servetus had secretly come to Geneva and intended to destroy the establishing of a Reformation there. Calvin’s enemies, the Libertines, knew well that Servetus hated him and they exploited the occasion to defame or harass Calvin, allowing Servetus to do what he desired at Geneva. Such a conspiracy and threat to the peace and the Reformation of Geneva caused Calvin and the Council of Geneva to be concerned about him. According to the duty of pastors as outlined in the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, there were several crimes they never could tolerate with a fraternal heart: heresy, schism, and blasphemy. It was obligatory, that if the pastors found even one of these serious crimes, they should investigate it and then report it to the magistrate: “As to the other crimes of which the first investigation belongs to the ecclesiastical Consistory, the clerks or elders with the ministers are to be watchful for them. And if any one is convicted of them, they are to make a report to the Council with

³⁰¹ In his book there are several new tendencies contained in *Christianismi Restitutio*, for example, the Gnostic influence.

³⁰² Watkins argues that Calvin’s theological system would allow or cause him to accuse Servetus, assuming Calvin’s thoughts: “theology proper, or the doctrine of God; ecclesiology, or the role of the elect in building God’s Kingdom on earth; and hermeneutics, the way in which the Scriptures are interpreted to support a position.” Although he assumes the three reasons based on Calvin’s thought, he admits, “I am hesitant to regard these firmly held doctrinal beliefs as the only influences behind Calvin’s actions.” So he tries to explain, “proper circumstance coupled with these beliefs” and *Operated* them.

their advice and judgement; thus the final sentence of punishment is to be reserved to the Seigneury” (Calvin 1975:232). Calvin followed this regulation when he reported Servetus’ coming to Geneva to one of Syndics who had the authority to arrest Servetus. But he never forgot showing Christ’s love to forgive and wait for the sinner. In the letter to Trie on February 13, 1546 Calvin showed his passion of saving him from errors but Servetus did not accept his love (*Letters*, vol. II, 30-1 on February 13, 1546 & see *Opera*, 833):

SEIGNEUR JEHAN—By cause that your last letter was brought to me at my going away, I had not leisure to reply to what was enclosed therein. Since my return, at the first leisure that I have had, I have been quite willing to satisfy your desire; not that I have had great hope of late of being profitable to a certain person, judging from the disposition in which I see him to be; but in order to try once more if there shall be any means of bringing him back, which will be, when God shall have wrought in him so effectually, that he has become entirely another man. Since he has written to me in so proud a spirit, I would fain have beaten down his pride a little, speaking more harshly to him than is my wont; but I could scarcely do otherwise. For I do assure you that there is no lesson which is more necessary for him than to learn humility, which must come to him from the Spirit of God, not otherwise.

Servetus, on the other hand, had no scruples about insulting Calvin openly at the trial of Geneva because he thought that Calvin accused him of heresy to the inquisitor of the Roman Catholics at Vienne. Calvin’s patience eventually wearied with Servetus his arrogance (Lingle 1900:8). In the last interview with him, Calvin stated as follows (*Opera*, 460, Hillar 1997:310):

I reminded him gently that for more than 16 years I did not spare anything in order to gain him for our Lord, even to the point of risking my own life and if he would agree with reason, I would faithfully dedicate myself to reconcile him with all good servants of God. Even though he abandoned the struggle I have not ceased to exhort him benignly by letters; in short I have used till the end all human means until having become irritated against my good and saintly admonishings, he burst against me in I do not know what type of rage or anger.

This is the true heart of Calvin toward Servetus, who in contrast had such a strong competitive spirit of rivalry and of personal hatred toward Calvin. Calvin regretfully expresses that Servetus did not intentionally repent and was so very distant from any hope of repentance (Castellio 1935:287).³⁰³ He showed no sighs of repentance up to the last

³⁰³. The article is translated from French: *Traité des hérétiques*, into English, which was published by Eugène Choisy at Geneva in 1913. This article is a reply to Calvin’s “Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra trinitate contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani, ubi ostenditur haeticos iure gladii coercendos esse et nominatim de homine hoc tam impio iuste et merito sumptum Genevae fuisse supplocum (1554)” in *Opera*. In it Castellio uses the pseudonym name of Vaticanus against Calvin.

chance.³⁰⁴ He continued to offer Servetus the heart of Christ for the lost but he still refused it. He concluded about him as follows:

I begged him to ask with all his heart forgiveness of the Son of God whom he had disfigured by his derangement negating that he assumed our body and that he resembled us in his human nature, and doing this he refused to recognize him as our savior. Seeing that I do not accomplish anything by exhortations, I did not want to be wiser than my Master would permit me. Therefore following the rule of Saint Paul I separated myself from the heretic who had condemned himself, carrying in his heart the sign of his condemnation. I have reported this in order that everyone could know that I was directed during the life of Servetus by modesty rather than by fear, and did not invent any dispute against him, hoping even for a favorable outcome of the case.

Calvin laboured with Servetus to lead him to repent and to recant his heretical statements, patiently pointing out his errors in his books, letters and debates. However, Servetus never did repent, knowing full well what the severe consequences of his actions would be (McNeill 1954:175). The historian Beza (Beza 1836:109-200) says of one cause of Calvin's sharing in the trial:

Calvin was not influenced by any feelings of private revenge, or of personal malevolence against Servetus, as many, contrary to all the evidence of the truth of history and biography, have asserted. He was anxious to remove all heretical opinions, and to watch over the purity of the faith of the church at Geneva, as well as of all the Protestant churches. This was one cause of his bringing Servetus to trial, and his desire to convince him of the error of his opinions, and to convert, him to the belief of the truth as it is in Jesus, was another.

We can now recognize that Calvin's real motivation was not personal animosity but the heart of Christ to win his soul from sin. Calvin hoped that the trial would lead him to find his errors and faults and to repent of them.

But the main reason Calvin got involved in the case of Servetus was his zeal for glory of God. He simply could not overlook the spread of heresy as well as blasphemy both of which were like a poison to him. The crimes of heresy and blasphemy had been crimes at Geneva long before Calvin had come to Geneva, indeed before he was born (Waterman 1813:118). The contagious poison of heresy in the Genevan Reformation led him to be willing to be involved in this trial (Wilbur 1972:163). His zeal for God's glory is revealed in detail in his commentary on Deuteronomy 13 (Calvin 1880:85):

Hence, too, we are admonished, that zeal for God's glory is but cold among us, unless true religion is held to be of more value than the preservation of a single city or people. But if so many together are to be dragged to death in crowds,

³⁰⁴ "The wretch man, up to the last, showed no sighs of repentance...." (Miller 1980:1035).

their impudence is more than detestable, and their pity cruelty itself, who would take no account of God's injured majesty, so that one man may be spared. And since we are created to no other end, and live for no other cause than that God may be glorified in us, it is better that the whole world should perish, than that men should enjoy the fruits of the earth in order that they may contaminate it with their blasphemies.³⁰⁵

In light of his zeal for the truth Calvin notes three elements in the case of Servetus (*Letters*, vol. II, 428-9, a letter to Sulzer on September 8, 1553): First, with what monstrous errors he has corrupted every doctrine of religion and what foul inventions he has entangled Christianity, and overturned all the principles of our religion. Secondly, with what obstinacy he has conducted himself; with what diabolical pride he has despised all admonitions and with what inexorable headlines he has spread his position. Thirdly, with what arrogance he this day asserts his abominations. Blasphemy and heresy were serious matters in Geneva in the sixteenth century. They were called poison and seen as the devil killing souls (Junkin 1982: 27-8; Brown 1815:24). Calvin preached about the heretic in October, 1555: "The 'heretic' threatens insurrection in the community... The 'heretic' was a 'scandal'—or 'plague'—in both the church and society. Agitation was the evidence of 'heresy,' and piety required that unrest and falsehood should be rooted out. Finally there was no line between sin and crime—or doctrinal aberration and civil disorder" (Holtrop 1993:220). Sending his second letter to Servetus through Frelon Calvin concluded that Servetus was a virtual Satan or an enemy of God who "was busy with tearing down the kingdom of God" (Lingle 1900:8).³⁰⁶ In a letter to the pastors of Frankfurt, Calvin says that a large number of copies of the work of Servetus, printed at Vienne, were carried by a huckster to the fair of Frankfurt, but a pious man, when he discovered the impiety of the books, suppressed them. When Servetus was retained in prison at Geneva, Calvin instructs them (*Letters*, vol. II, 423 on August 27, 1553):

The author himself is held in prison by our magistrates, and he will be punished ere long, I hope; but it is your duty to see to it that this pestiferous poison does not spread farther. The messenger will inform you respecting the number and the repository of the books. The bookseller, if I mistake not, will permit them to be burnt. Should anything stand in the way, however, I trust that you will act so judiciously, as to purge the world of such noxious corruptions.

³⁰⁵ Bainton (1935:74) criticizes the use of the Old Testament by Calvin: "Zeal for His glory must almost denude us of our nature and make us ready to repudiate the love of wife and child. This was no idle talk. Calvin was not devoid of human feeling, he could be tender and moving; but his ideal was Abraham sacrificing Isaac, save that for Calvin all too often no ram was caught in the thicket."

³⁰⁶ Calvin wrote, "for I have other business that concerns me more nearly, and I shall make it matter of conscience to devote myself to it, not doubting that he is a Satan who would divert me from studies more profitable" (*Opera*, 833, Willis 1877:160).

Calvin's sense of the duty as well his as zeal for the glory of God led him to stand firm at the heresy trial: "Calvin's zeal was founded upon his conscientiousness: this is the key to his whole being ... Both he and the council acted from so deep a sense of duty, that it had a powerful influence on every one, as if, in the pressure of the times, thus it was willed by the Spirit of God" (Henry 1849:229). Cuthbertson says of the reformers' attitude at that time against heresy: "In the minds of the Reformers there were certainly urgent and vital reason why such a course of libel for heresy should have been pursued but the heresy might have been deviated from its course by even humaner methods" (Cuthbertson 1912:20). In Calvin's mind the pastor's duty is that "the servant of the Church must denounce the heretic, and confute him theologically; but his condemnation is the exclusive function of the magistrate, one of whose most sacred duties is to punish attacks made on the Divine Majesty" (Rilliet 1846:90). Emerton says of Calvin's zeal for the truth in the matter of Servetus' case that "he threw himself into this prosecution of Servetus with all his energy because he believed that upon its success depended the victory of truth over falsehood and right over wrong" (Emerton 1909:158). Calvin's determination in the trial prevented the heresy from poisoning the Genevan Reformation. This is why Calvin was willing to get involved in it. If another person with heresy came to Geneva, Calvin would have acted with the same action as he pursued in the trial of Servetus. The reason for participating in the case of Servetus was his imperative duty as well as zeal for the glory of God with a heart for Christ.

5.1.4.2 Role

In reference to the contemporary circumstances of Geneva, Calvin was not directly involved in the trial of Servetus but only passively. In the matters of deciding the penalty and of leading the questioning in various phases in the trial of Servetus, Calvin was completely absent. The first allegation regarding Calvin's role concerns why he provided the inquisitors at Vienne with the crucial information regarding the authorship of *Christianismi Restitutio*. It was not Calvin but de Trie who initially sent a letter to Arneys expressing his surprise that the French Roman Catholic Church tolerated such a blasphemer as the author of such a heretical book as *Christianismi Restitutio*. And de Trie was surprised that the private letters of Calvin to Arneys were used as the crucial evidence to accuse Servetus of heresy: "My dear cousin," he writes, "When I wrote to you the letter which you communicated to those who are in charge, I did not expect that the matter should go so far. My intention was only to demonstrate to you the zeal and devotion of those who call themselves pillars of the Church in spite of the fact that they suffer such a

disorder among themselves and yet persecute so harshly the poor Christians who simply wish to follow God” (*Opera*, 840; Lingle 1900:9 & Cunningham 1989:326). He made clear in the letter of March 26, 1553 to his cousin not only that such an idea was his, but that furthermore Calvin had nothing to do with this issue: “And it is not because he does not wish that such blasphemies were not repressed, but because it seems to him that his duty as one who does not have the sword of justice in his hands, is rather to convince heretics by the doctrine than to persecute them by such a means. But I insisted on him reproaching him for the neglect which he could impart to me if he did not aid me” (*Opera*, 842, Hillar 1997:276). The book, *Christianismi Restitutio*, was secretly published in January, 1553, when Servetus was living in the archbishop’s house of Vienne as his personal physician. No sooner had about thousand books been printed than it was circulated to France, Italy, and Germany. One of them found its way into the possession of de Trie, the former Roman Catholic, a friend of Calvin and also a cousin to Antoine Arneys, of Lyon. He and Arneys corresponded frequently with each other, and eventually it was Arneys who informed one inquisitor of the Roman Catholic Church, Matthieu de Ory, about it. When Arneys, at the request of Ory, requested the whole book and the more letters, de Trie confessed this: “I have to confess that it was with big trouble that I obtained from Monsieur Calvin the material which I am sending” (*Opera*, 842, Hillar 1997:276).³⁰⁷ It is likely that Calvin was asked to provide some proofs as to the identity of Servetus. However, he only reluctantly handed over part of the information to de Trie (Dyer 1850:314-7, especially, 316-7). De Trie confessed that he did not obtain them easily, even to the extent that he got himself trouble as a result (Weiss 1908:23).

Some would blame Calvin for providing private and confidential letters as evidence of Servetus’ identity as the author of the book. It seemed to be Calvin who broke the mutual privacy between Calvin and Servetus. But it was Servetus himself who had already printed things which Calvin had noted without permission from Calvin and had distributed this. Killen criticises Servetus’ conduct in these words: “If there was any breach of faith, it was undoubtedly committed by the Spaniard heresiarch” (Killen 1843:12). It is likely true that Calvin unwillingly provided the conclusive evidence through de Trie to identify Servetus, but no one can show historical proofs that Calvin accused Servetus directly of heresy and turned him in to the Roman Catholic Church, which decided his sentence and penalty (Prime 1910:2). Calvin’s material was indeed used in evidence to identify Servetus as a

³⁰⁷ This was sent to Arneys on March 26, 1553.

heretic; nevertheless, it is clear that he only grudgingly gave it to de Trie. He never told him to write letters nor conspired with him to accuse Servetus to the Roman inquisitors (Dyer 1850:314).

Calvin's opponents also blame him for reporting Servetus' presence in Geneva to the Council. Even if it be true, the charge is empty. If Servetus was a heretic or blasphemer, Calvin should report him according to the contemporary law, as it was the duty of any citizen to give information to the Council that was in charge of judging whether he was accused or not and whether the accusation proceeded the further or not (Prime 1910:6-7). Moreover, as a pastor of Geneva, Calvin had to investigate a heresy and to report it. When the investigators commanded him to attend the examination or submit the proofs that Servetus is a heretic, Calvin had to obey them. It was his duty. He honestly recollects about it in his letter: "He at length, in an evil hour, came to this place, when, at my instigation, one of the Syndics ordered him to be conducted to prison. For I do not disguise it, that I considered it my duty to put a check, so far as I could, upon this most obstinate and ungovernable man, that his contagion might not spread farther" (*Letters*, vol. II, 428 a letter to Sulzer on September 8, 1553) Calvin's role in this was to bring Servetus before the lawful magistrate who was to proceed to the next action.

Some one has called Calvin "one of the last great figures of the Middle Ages" (Bainton 1953b:210), "Antichrist," or "*par excellence* the medieval scheme of the heretic" (Holtrop 1993:787) but this is hardly the case. Voltaire says the case of Servetus was the first "religious murder" committed by the Reformation (Zweig 1936:138). Fulton calls Calvin "the archinquisitor" (Fulton 1953:19). Especially, in matters of the trial of Servetus, Calvin has been "charged with pursuing him with malevolence and fury,—with brutal and furious treatment of him at his trial, with dissimulation and malevolence towards him after his condemnation,—That he acted in all this affair from motives merely personal" (Waterman 1813:114). Even on the Protestant side, writers, like Frederic W. Farrar, have spoken bitterly of Calvin saying "he ruthlessly burnt Servetus" (Farrar 1961:351).

But such allegations do not do justice to the actual facts and the dates. On the contrary, an investigation into the evidence shows that Calvin was entirely excluded from the civil matter and Calvin's role in treating Servetus was actually very sympathetic. The correspondence between them in 1546 shows it. It was Servetus who grossly insulted Calvin even in the progress of the trial, calling Calvin a 'dog' and 'heretic' (Lingle

1900:11). The personal accusations of Servetus against Calvin to the Council were so severe that the judges were ashamed and disgusted (Collins 1968:177). Servetus on his part “passes the lie direct some sixty times, calls Calvin Simon Magus nearly a score of times, and repeatedly assaults him as impudent, ignorant, know-nothings, ridiculous, sophist, crazy, sycophant, rascal, beast, monster, criminal, murderer. Calvin was wise enough to say nothing in reply” (Wilbur 1972:174). In the dreadful sentencing of Servetus to burning at the stake, his supports, the Libertines, never appealed to the Council to reduce the punishment but exploited him. Calvin disagreed with Servetus in matters of theology but nevertheless he stood by him at the hour of death: “At the supreme hour one man alone comes forward to attempt a mitigation of the punishment of Servetus. Who is that man? He is John Calvin. He earnestly interceded with the Council, not that the unfortunate victim might be spared, but that the sword might be substituted for the fire; but he interceded in vain” (Wylie 1899:334-5). Calvin even visited Servetus with permission shortly after the Council sentenced him, counselling him to turn to God (*Opera*, 460, Hillar 1997:310):

When one of them asked what he wanted to tell me, he responded that he wanted to ask my forgiveness. Then I simply stated as it was the truth, that I have never persecuted him for any personal offence, I reminded him gently that for more than 16 years I did not spare anything in order to gain him for our Lord, even to the point of risking my own life and if he would agree with reason, I would faithfully dedicate myself to reconcile him with all good servants of God.

What we must not forget is that “Calvin was one ‘those, who disapproved the burning’ of Servetus, and used his influence with the magistrates to prevent this species of punishments, but without effect” (Brown 1815:20). And we also know that Calvin and the pastors with a heart of love implored the Council for a milder form of execution but in vain (Bouwsma 1992:27). The Council, which was in full control to judge all criminal cases at Geneva restricted Calvin’s role and acted as follows (Shields 1983:356):

This Council ruled Geneva as an oligarchy. Calvin was himself subject to it and but its decree he had once been banished from Geneva, and recalled after three years, only because of a revolution in public opinion. Since his return he had acquired no new control of it, nor was its personal now under his influence. It was largely composed of his opponents. His colleagues, the ministers, as a class, had been disqualified from sitting in it. The presiding judge, or chief syndic and captain of the republic, Amied Perrin, was leader of the party of Patriots, the native Genevese, who hated Calvin as a foreigner and innovator and had lately rendered the Calvinist refugees helpless by depriving them of the of the right to bear arms ... In fact the whole Council was in conflict with Calvin on a point of jurisdiction between the civil and ecclesiastical courts in matters of religious discipline.

Therefore, Calvin was not ‘one of the last great figures of the Middle Ages’ nor ‘the first religious murder’ nor ‘the archinquisitor’: “The question may reasonably be asked, where was possible his dictation and dragooning of a court, a majority of which were his impalpable enemies. There is no evidence at all of the most remote nature to justify the assertion that any influence was exerted by Calvin, or possessed by him with which he could influence that court” (Prime 1910:19). Calvin played no role in the sentencing and the execution of Servetus based on the contemporary circumstance, but was only called as an expert regarding theological points of view as an “expert witness” (Woodbridge 1988:212; Boettner 1954:416) and “religious prosecuting attorney” (Robinson 1959:48; Lingle 1900:12) but not judicial and political prosecutor. In his capacity as an expert theologian he extracted from Servetus’ writings heresy and blasphemy and identified him as the author of them (Cameron 1981:114). Schaff says of his role: “Calvin conducted the theological part of the examination of the trial, but had no direct influence upon the result” (Schaff 1993:767). Calvin himself explains that “from the time Servetus was convicted of his heresy, I have not uttered a word about his punishment, as all honest men will bear witness; and I challenge even the malignant to deny it if they can” (*Opera*, 461, Schaff 1993:768).³⁰⁸ The reason Calvin got involved was that it was his duty to defend the truth against a heretic and blasphemer who would destroy the Church in the theological aspect. Judging the accusation and proceeding with the trial belonged entirely to the civil power.

5.1.5 Fair Trial

Some may wonder if the trial was carried out fairly or if Servetus was mistreated during the trial (Zweig 1936:119-25; Macdonell 1983:142). Was Calvin at an advantage due to it? One must consider these facts. First, both the accuser – de la Fontaine – and the accused – Michael Servetus – were imprisoned at the beginning of the trial. This arraignment was to proceed “before a justice of the peace and grand jury in determining *prima facie* evidence of guilty and the cause for a prosecution” (Shields 1898:361-2). After the arraignment the Council approved the accusation as justified and the trial should proceed further. Secondly, the trial went on in five phases and in all of them Servetus had the ample opportunity to defend himself.³⁰⁹ And he did. In each phase he got ample time to defend himself: “Among other things, he loaned him books out of his own library that he might have every opportu-

³⁰⁸ “Ex quo convictus est, me nullum de poena verbum fecisse, non solum boni omnes viri mihi testes erunt sed malis etiam concedo ut proferant si quid habent.”

³⁰⁹ The documents and records of the trial at Geneva are written in full in *Opera* (725-832).

nity to make the best possible defence” (Lingle 1900:12). He not only defended himself before the judges in writing but openly accused Calvin that he belonged in prison like he was. He petitioned several times to the Council. There were both oral and written charges and counter charges between the accuser and the accused. Thirdly, there is a strong suspicion that Servetus had more than usual access to the Council where Calvin’s enemies, the Libertines, supported Servetus and even instructed him continuously. He not only was given paper and ink and clothes but, through the jailer, communicated secretly with the Libertines in the Council.³¹⁰ Furthermore, according to the court custom, before the final decision “the courts had the right to resort to an additional round of questioning, now under torture” to admit the crimes (Kingdon 1995:25), nevertheless, Servetus never suffered any torture during the trial of Geneva (Durant 1957:482).

Besides, Servetus was asked if he wanted to go back to Vienne but he besought the Council not to send him back. He chose the trial of Geneva rather than that of Vienne. Uncertain as to how to proceed with the final decision of Servetus’ guilt, the Council even consulted Geneva’s allies at Berne, Zürich, Schaffhausen, and Basel. This idea had already been developed in an agreement between the Libertines and Servetus (Collins 1968:180). When the Council sent the churches another thirty-eight charges selected from Servetus’ writings and all the recorded materials processed during several phases, Servetus was permitted to retract any of his opinions, to refute any of the propositions, and to defend himself against anything which he judged to be unjustly alleged. To make his defence he had enough opportunities and as much time as he pleased. We know that Servetus and his supporters anticipated their positive replies, but in their reply there was “no word of toleration, no expression of pity, no plea for mercy” (Macdonell 1983:143). Taking three days, the Council now gathered all the information with the responses of the Swiss Churches to judge the stormy debate, and finally passed down the sentence of Servetus’ death by burning on October 27, 1553. Servetus, to the end held not only to a spirit of victory over Calvin but had an assurance of acquittal until he heard the responses of the Swiss Churches. It was truly a fair trial in which Servetus was always able to express and defend freely his opinions as much as he could. It is unreasonable to argue that Servetus was unfavourably treated in jail and in the process of the trial (Williams 1962:103). His

³¹⁰ According to Shields’ drama (1898), it is said that Claude de Genève was ordered to treat Servetus well. “*Claude. (Bowing low)* I have My orders from the Captain-General To humor thee with certain privileges, That may befit so learn’d a prisoner ... *Claude.* My orders were to grant some privileges:– Here is a most distinguished visitor.” Then he let Berthelier visit Servetus.

trial was just. Even Bolsec, the bitterest of all Calvin's enemies, agrees that the execution of Servetus was just after reviewing the trial (Bungener 1863:239):

Bolsec, speaking of Servetus, declares that he experienced 'No regret at the death of so monstrous a heretic.' Servetus, adds he, was 'unworthy to converse with men;' and as for himself, he would wish that 'all his like were exterminated, and the Church of our Lord well purged of such victim.' Thus, we find the most ardent of Calvin's enemies, the one who seemed to think that Calvin would willingly have sent him to the stake, Bolsec, in short, interrupting his calumnious pages to declare that in his view the death of Servetus was just!

Shields (1983:380-1), who looks through the trial of Servetus, concludes that the trial of Servetus was fair and legal as follows:

The Judges had kept with the law throughout the trial. They had put the accuser in peril with the accused before entertaining the case. Day after day they had listened to the examination of the prisoner on the political charges, as well as to his discussion with an expert divine. They had then impartially excluded the parties, and referred the case to the higher courts, as well as churches, of the Swiss confederations. The judgement of Berne, as their protectorate, was almost mandatory. They also had before them a judgement on the same case by the civil court of Lyons. The State attorney showed them that the imperial code since the time of attorney showed them that the imperial code since the time of Constantine agreed with the existing edicts of the republic as to the penalty due for the crime which had been proved. There could be no question of their jurisdiction; the prisoner himself, after denying it, by his own act concealed it. Finally, they had consulted with the other burgesses entitled to sit with them in a full session of the Senate; and their unanimous sentence was then accepted as final by all parties.

Servetus was indeed treated fairly and justly at his own trial.

5.1.5.1 Civil Trial

The civil Council was entirely in charge of the whole trial and the Consistory had nothing to do with the trial: "The name of Servetus does not even appear in its [Consistory's] records" (Shields 1983:356). It is clear that Calvin was never involved in it but directed to present the proofs extracted from Servetus' heretical writings by the Council. The condemnation, execution, sentence, and execution of Servetus were entirely controlled by the Council (Wadkins 1983:437; McGrath 1990:116). The trial was a civil trial, which was carried out by the Council, not by Calvin (Russell 1814:15). "Servetus was given a court trial lasting over two months and was sentenced by the full session of the civil Council, and that in accordance with the laws which were then recognized throughout Christendom" (Boettner 1954:412). The detailed social and political environment of Geneva at that time can give us ample evidence that Calvin could not direct any procedure at the trial but only attended it as an observer and a debater with permission of the Council. This was

consistent with the independent position and self-government of the church as Calvin wished. After throwing off the yoke of the Duke of Savoy in 1530 and bishop Pierre de La Baume in 1533 Geneva had gained the right to administer civil and criminal justice from them. The full juridical authority and the right to execute criminal sentence was transferred to the Syndics in the Council. Abraham Kuyper said in connection with it: “The duty of the government to extirpate every form of false religion and idolatry was not a find of Calvinism, but dates from Constantine the Great and was the reaction against the horrible persecutions which his pagan predecessors on the Imperial throne had inflicted upon the sect of the Nazarene.”³¹¹

Moreover, the Council did not want any interruption from foreign power nor from Calvin. They were never to tolerate a foreign interference into the central feature of the Genevan administration. Calvin was rigorously excluded from the dispensation of civil and criminal justice which did not belong to the pastors but the magistrates. The pastors’ duty was not to judge heretics but to investigate them and to report them to the Syndics who were in charge of judging them. This is why Calvin reported Servetus’ coming to Geneva, followed the direction of the Council in the trial, and requested the less punishment of decapitation on behalf of him. The Council even entirely disregarded Calvin’s requests of keeping Berthelier, one of Syndics, under excommunication, as well as his request to attenuate the punishment.³¹² Beza speaks of how weak Calvin was in political influence (Beza 1836:183-4):

It may be asked where, and in what respect, Calvin had any influence over the senate that condemned Servetus? It must be admitted, that the senate who refused, at Calvin’s request with ministers, to mitigate and change the punishment of Servetus,³¹³ were under the control of Perrin, and not of Calvin. Calvin, in a letter to Farel, declares, that ‘from the time that the senate pronounced the charges against him (Servetus) to be proved, *I never uttered a word concerning his punishment.*’³¹⁴

Because Calvin’s role was so restricted, his influence as to the sentence was negligible. Shields says of his limited role: “The truth is, that Calvin had been peremptorily set aside by the judges, who were then as anxious to absolve Berthelier as to punish Servetus, and

³¹¹ He, the statesman-theologian from Holland, had never lectured Calvinism in America (Kuyper 1931:129).

³¹² “... this stake was not Calvin’s wish; he had protested, and the Government erected the stake in order to show that it had the power of rejecting Calvin’s request for mercy” (Penning 1954:217).

³¹³ For Calvin’s trying to change the punishment see Smyth, (1856:105 & *Letter*, vol. II, 417 on August 20, 1553).

³¹⁴ “Ex quo convictus est, me nullum de proena verbum fecisse, non solum boni omens viri mihi testes erunt sed malis etiam concedo ut proferant si quid habent” (*Opera*, 461).

even wished by the latter act to enforce their claim to the former” (Shields 1986:381).³¹⁵ McGrath also makes clear that the trial of Servetus entirely belonged to the Council (McGrath 1990:115-6):

The trial and execution of Michael Servetus as a heretic have, more than any other event, coloured Calvin’s posthumous reputation. It is not entirely clear why scholars have singled out the execution of Servetus as somehow more notable or significant than the mass executions carried out within Germany after the abortive Peasants’ War (1525) and after the ending of the siege of Münster (1534), or the ruthless policy of execution of Roman Catholic priests in Elizabethian England ...

... Furthermore, the trial, condemnation and execution (including the selection of the particular mode of execution) of Servetus were entirely the work of the city council, at a period in its history when it was particularly hostile to Calvin.

5.1.5.2 The Libertines

The affairs in the trial of Servetus, which was entirely under the authority of the Council, were totally dominated and exploited by Calvin’s opponents (Latourette 1975:759). The Libertines, his opponents, who had gained power in the election in 1553 with a sweeping victory, were determined to weaken Calvin’s position. They tried to acquit and release Servetus, through an appeal to the Council of Two Hundred. They even plotted to banish Calvin from Geneva once more like in 1538. Throughout the whole trial of Servetus the majority of the Council was personally hostile to Calvin (Walker 1969:333). Berthelier and Perrin, who were leaders of the Libertines and members of the court, supported the accused, Servetus, not because they supported or followed his theology but because they hated Calvin. They attempted to exploit the trial to discredit or annoy Calvin (Pettegree 1990:42). They accorded with Servetus not only to change the mode of trial from oral to written but also to refer the trial to the Swiss Churches. They were already aware that the Bernese had been against Calvin in the Bolsec’s matter. They plotted to change the mode of debating from oral to written on behalf of Servetus. They helped him to petition to the Council several times, informing him of the custom of Geneva. Servetus was totally directed and controlled by them. Yet, when they got into a disadvantageous position they simply withdrew from the front to the back and gave up saving him: “An ill-advised, last-ditch attempt by Ami Perrin to save Servetus collapsed, and Perrin had in the end to comply with a death sentence by burning which was carried out against Servetus late in October 1553” (Mullett 1989:42). We can see how cunningly Servetus was deceived and

³¹⁵ Mullett (1989:42) observes the limits of Calvin’s powers in the Council: “The sentencing of Servetus, when Calvin’s request of a less savage punishment was turned down, provides an apt illustration of the limits of his powers.”

exploited as a trivial tool by the Libertines and why Servetus had no scruples in accusing and insulting Calvin before the Council. Their attempt and plot were in vain, however. In the end Servetus became their victim rather than their tool (Rilliet 1846:201). The Libertines' complicity with Servetus is described well by Wilbur (1972:182):

The whole truth, therefore, seems to be no more than the Libertines had no interest in Servetus or his doctrines as such, but they simply made a tool of him, secretly encouraging his defiant attitude as a means of annoying Calvin, while another case was pending in which they were much concerned. And yet, they had a majority in the Council, they were entirely unwilling to come out into the open and bear the burden of Servetus' heresies, and in the end took not a single effective step on his behalf. Even if some of them voted against conviction, at all events none of them had the hardihood to speak against it.³¹⁶

We can recognize that they were not interested in the theological matter of Servetus and in saving him but used him for their political purpose. Although he might have attempted to escape from Geneva as he had done at Vienne, he could not make it because of their betrayal: "At any time before the passing of the sentence, Servetus might have escaped serious punishment by retracting, as Gentile did five years later. But unfortunately misled by hope of support from Calvin's opponents, and wholly overestimating the extent of it, he assumed an attitude increasingly defiant and insulting to Calvin, and thus threw away whatever chance of mercy he might have had" (Wilbur 1972:185). In the end Servetus, as an orphan deserted on the street, was left alone in prison and could not help waiting for the dreadful sentence that related to threefold crime: "Servetus, though tried for heresy and finally condemned and done to death by slow fire for blasphemy against God, was in some measure also the victim of the political situation" (Willis 1877:299; Smyth 1856:104). In point of fact, Calvin had to follow the decisions of the Council and was not allowed to participate in deciding the punishment during the trial but was bound by the request of the Council (Willis 1877:474). It was only John Calvin who bravely appealed to the Council to reduce Servetus' punishment: "And one alone stands forth to plead for a mitigation of the sentence, namely, that another form of death he substituted for the stake. *That one man was John Calvin*" (Wileman, s.a.:104). We can simply say that Calvin was not involved in the

³¹⁶ "The fact is undoubted that the Libertines perceived the advantage they might have derived by playing Servetus off against the Reformer [Calvin]; and Servetus, on the other hand, was aware of the advantage that might accrue to him from strengthening the Libertines against Calvin" (Wylie 1899:323).

trial of Servetus but the Libertines who were involved in it manipulated Calvin in the affair.

5.1.6 Servetus' Arrogance

Servetus realised that he could not convince the Reformers of his views and thus determined to publish them at his own expense and to spread them, but it was in vain. Although he intended to convince Calvin of his own views in Paris, Servetus did not show up at the place where he was supposed to meet Calvin. In the end he thought that he could have won and annoy Calvin's theological system with letters. He continued to send as many as thirty letters even after Calvin stopped answering and eventually got back but two letters through Frelon. He was full of a strong competitive position against Calvin: "He adhered to his opinions with heroic constancy" (Fisher 1906:200). His fastidiousness did not help him make friends and he only wandered from place to place: "The boldness and pertinacity of his opinions created him enemies, and he left the capital to settle at Lyons, but afterwards he retires to Charlieu" (Russell 1814:9). Even Bolsec says that he was too arrogant to harmonise with the faculties of the University of Paris and had to leave Charlieu, too. Throughout the whole process of the trial of Geneva Servetus had no scruple about attacking and insulting Calvin, though Calvin told him that he disregarded what he did against him (*Opera*, 461, Hillar 1997:311):

Afterwards saying that I disregarded all that concerning my person I begged him rather to think and ask God's mercy, whom he vilely blasphemed by wanting to abolish the three Persons that are in his essence and stating that those who recognize in one God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit with the real distinction, are fabricating an infernal dog with three heads. I begged him to ask with all his heart forgiveness of the Son of God whom he had disfigured by his derangement negating that he assumed our body and that he resembled us in his human nature, and doing this he refused to recognize him as our savior. Seeing that I do not accomplish anything by exhortations, I did not want to be wiser than my Master would permit me.

In contrast, the original attitude of Calvin who began to correspond with him and attended this trial was to demonstrate his faults and heresies so that Servetus could repent of them and find the correct way. What Calvin hoped was not to win or destroy him but save him (*Opera*, 460, Hillar 1997:310, & Wileman, s.a.:103).³¹⁷ If Servetus regretted his ideas and devices and admitted them, he would not have been condemned but released. Even when the Council decided on the affair of Servetus they suggested the flexible option that he

³¹⁷ Unlike Bolsec's insult Calvin made clear that his intention was not thirst for Servetus' blood but save him: "Hoc tantum in praesentia testatum volo, me non ita capiliter fuisse infestum, quin licium fuerit vel sola modestia, nisi mentis privatus foret, vitam redimere" (*Opera*, 480).

would be acquitted of the dread execution if he recanted (Shields 1986:379). Besides, before hearing the horrible sentence, Calvin hoped “that sentence of death will at least be passed upon him but I desire that the severity of the punishment may be mitigated” (*Letters*, vol. II, 417 a letter to Farel on August 20, 1553). Farel mentioned about Calvin’s attitude toward him in a reply on September 8, 1553: “In desiring to mitigate the severity of his punishment, you act the part of a friend to a man who is most hostile to you. But I beseech you so to manage the matter that no one whatever may rashly dare to publish new dogmas, and throw all things into confusion with impunity for such a length of time as he has done” (*Letters*, vol. II, 417 a letter to Farel on August 20, 1553). It is an extremely partial opinion that Calvin was branded as a ‘detestable bigot’, or had ‘personal hatred,’ and was an ‘old enemy of Servetus.’ No! Calvin “acted conscientiously, and did nothing but what he thought it his duty to do, fair and impartial minds will pass a different judgement; for, in that case, so far as he erred, his error was one of the head, not of the heart” (Brown 1815:23).

5.1.7 Allegations

In summary on October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus, an accused heretic, blasphemer, and even seditious, was sentenced to death by burning and was executed on the same day, the Council of Geneva, being wholly responsible for the sentence. The Council was threatened with his spreading heresies and blasphemies and was concerned about the peace of Geneva.³¹⁸ Christians in the sixteenth century, unlike the twentieth century, believed that the heresies were more than simply different views against the traditional dogmas, but were deeply related to the “much broader social and political agenda” (McGrath 1990:117). They lived and judged in an age where civil matters were deeply in connection with religious matters. Geneva was concerned about the civil peace of the city related to religion. Moreover, Calvin was not a man of the twentieth century but the sixteenth century in which he lived and acted. This the historian must realize that “Calvin and the men of his time are not to be judged strictly and solely by the advanced standards of our twentieth century, but must to a certain extent be considered in the light of their own sixteenth century” (Boettner 1954:412-3). Cunningham (1989:318-21) says of Calvin’s behaviour during the trial of Servetus based on the sixteenth century as follows:

1. The doctrine of the lawfulness and duty of putting heretics and blasphemers to death, was then almost universally held, by Protestants as well as papists ...
2. Servetus was not only a heretic and a blasphemer, but one about whom there

³¹⁸ Henry (1849:163) clearly concludes that Servetus was condemned for political crimes by the Council. See Smyth (1856:104).

was everything to provoke and nothing to conciliate ... 3. Servetus had been convicted of heresy and blasphemy by a popish tribunal at Vienne, and had been condemned to be burned by a slow fire ...

... 4. Although Calvin, after having, notwithstanding extreme personal provocation, done everything in his power to convince Servetus of his errors, approved of putting him to death as an incorrigible heretic and blasphemer, he exerted his influence, but without success, to prevent his being burned, and to effect that he might be put to death by some less cruel and offensive process; so that to talk, as is often done, of Calvin *burning* Servetus, is simply and literally a falsehood. 5. The Reformers generally, and more especially two of the mildest and most moderate of them all, both in their theological views and in their general character, – Melancthon, representing the Lutherans, and Bullinger, representing the Zwinglians, – gave their full, formal, public approbation to the proceedings which took place in Geneva in the case of Servetus. 6. Archbishop Crammer exerted all his influence with King Edward, and succeeded thereby, though not without great difficulty, in effecting the burning of two heretics—one of them a woman and the other a foreigner—whose offences were in every respect, and tried by any standard whatever, far less aggravated than Servetus.

In the twentieth century it is hard for us to see why heretics, simply because they had different views on traditional doctrines had to be burned at the stake or decapitated, however the sixteenth century citizen lived in a time of judging, condemning and executing heretics. We know that they judged Servetus for crimes and that the charges against him were not only that he was a heretic but he was also a blasphemer and was spreading poisonous heresy into Geneva (Wilbur 1972:179). When considering the contemporary circumstances, it is clear that it was the civil government that took charge of the trial and that Calvin's role was extremely limited and restricted by the Council that dominated the trial. So D'Aubigne concludes about his responsibility of the trial as follows: "As to the burning of Michael Servetus, with which he has been so much reproached, let it be remembered that the Spanish anti-trinitarian was condemned, not by Calvin, but by the Council of Geneva, composed at that time of men by no means subject to the Reformer's influence, and that condemnation was approved of by all the leading reformers previously consulted" (D'Aubigne 1989:280-1).³¹⁹ The Council, excluding Calvin's influence,

³¹⁹ Lingle (1900:13-4) concludes on the case of Servetus, "1. That all this occurred in the sixteenth century, when the world was just emerging from the dark ages, and not in the light of the twentieth century. 2. That Servetus had been tried, condemned, and sentenced to be burned by the Roman Catholic Church, at Vienne, before he ever came to Geneva. This shows the spirit of the age, and seals the lips of every Roman Catholic. 3. That Servetus deliberately came to Geneva of his own accord, after his escape from Vienne, when he knew the law of Geneva and the attitude of Calvin. Why did he come? It was for a life and death struggle. 4. That in 1553 heresy was a crime punished with death throughout Europe. 5. That the charge against Servetus was not only heresy, but blasphemy. In fact, the emphasis was laid upon the latter. According to the Mosaic law blasphemy was a capital offence. See Leviticus 24:16. John Calvin believed in the Old Testament with all his heart. 6. That John Calvin did not make the law under which Servetus died. It was on the statue books long before he came to Geneva. 7. That the Council which tried and condemned Servetus was anti-Calvin. The Libertines had a large majority. At that very moment John Calvin was in constant danger of being banished

consistently proceeded with the trial in compliance with the contemporary laws. The definitive sentence by the Council “*was just, according to law*. In returning it, the judges believed they were fulfilling a duty; so that it was not from them, it is not from Calvin, it is from their age that we must demand an account of that lamentable error” (Rilliet 1846:208). We can hear Wileman’s (Wileman, s.a.:104-5) answers to three suggestions about Calvin’s role at the beginning of this thesis as follows:

1. That Servetus was guilty of blasphemy, of a kind and degree which is still punishable here in England by imprisonment.
2. That his sentence was in accordance with the spirit of the age.
3. That he had been sentenced to the same punishment by the Inquisition at Vienne.
4. That the sentence was pronounced by the Councils of Geneva, Calvin having no power either to condemn or to save him.
5. That Calvin and others visited the unhappy man in his last hours, treated him with much kindness, and did all they could to have the sentence mitigated.

Some writers may assess a kind of corporate guilt for the deed including Calvin as partially guilty because of his role as witness, but this is hardly fair since Calvin could attend the trial and debate with him only by the permission of the Council. Even the method of debating was not chosen by him but the Council. Any one who is aided by the contemporary factual sources cannot help but conclude that Calvin is not to be defamed by a number of partial allegations and that Servetus was guilty enough to deserve the condemnation he received. We would conclude that Calvin was by no means involved in the trial–condemnation, execution, and sentencing Servetus—that all the prejudiced allegations against Calvin have been full of false assumptions and partial knowledge.³²⁰ The warped opinion on Calvin and misunderstanding him are apt to produce such unfavourable views and serious charges (Cunningham 1989:332). There were no proofs that Calvin influenced Servetus’ sentence and had personal hatred. One last thing that we should know is that the main reason why many opponents of Calvin blamed him for much

from Geneva, and actually preached his farewell sermon. 8. That the case was submitted to the other Swiss cantons and churches, and that they were all in favour of convicting Servetus and getting rid of the pest, as one of them put it. The judgement of these other cantons had great weight with the Council of Geneva. 9. That the final verdict was approved by all the reformers even by the gentle Melanchthon ... 10. That Calvin made every endeavor to have the sentence changed from fire to the sword. He was not able to move the Council. This shows how little real power he had in Geneva at this time. 11. That the whole history of the Christians world would have been changed if Servetus had won in the struggle instead of Calvin. 12. That John Calvin was mortal. ‘The faults of Calvin were the faults of his age. His virtues of all ages’ ...”

³²⁰ “If, aided by all the necessary documents, they could transport themselves to the period when the event took place, and examine those who were eye-witnesses of the proceedings, they would in all probability free Calvin from the charge against him, and pronounce him not guilty. Servetus, on the other hand, they would declare guilty, but with extenuating circumstances.”

of the trial of Servetus was “to bring calvinism into discredit by aiming a blow at the reputation of Calvin”(Brown 1815:21).³²¹

³²¹; Foxe (1926:186) also observes: “It has long been the delight of both infidels and some professed Christians, when they wish to bring odium upon the opinions of Calvin, to refer to his agency in the death of Michael Servetus. This action is used on all occasions by those who have been unable to overthrow his opinions, as a conclusive argument against his whole system. ‘Calvin burnt Servetus!--Calvin burnt Servetus!’ is a good proof with a certain class of reasoners, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not true-that divine sovereignty is Antiscriptural,--and Christianity a cheat.”