

**“A PROFILE IN COURAGE: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A UNITARIAN
MARTYR”**

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Call to Gather: from David O. Rankin

Freedom is the ground of all vital activity. Faith without freedom is dogma. Love without freedom is an illusion. Justice without freedom is oppression. In every instance, freedom is the factor that sustains and completes the other goal. It is the oxygen of the human spirit, the indispensable element for growth and wholeness.¹

Michael Servetus may have made the single most significant contribution to the development of our liberal faith. Last year a wonderful book about Servetus by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone was published. I am indebted to that book, *Out of the Flames*², for much that is in today's sermon.

In the fall of 1511, Miguel Serveto Conesa alias Reves was born in the northeastern corner of Spain, not far from the French border. Later in life he Latinized his name, becoming Michael Servetus. A brilliant boy, he could read in Spanish, French, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew by the age of thirteen. A few years later he added Arabic to his repertoire.

Taking advantage of the newly established printing industry, Servetus published his first book at the age of twenty. The book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*, was a huge success, gaining instant fame—mostly notoriety if truth be told—for its author throughout much of Europe.

By this young age, Servetus had become an ardent and radical Reformer. He concluded that the problem with the Church wasn't just its increasingly corrupt practices—the sale of indulgences that so irritated Luther, for example—but some of the doctrines at the heart of the church. Most central to Servetus' sharp critique was the doctrine of the Trinity. Servetus concluded that that this doctrine did not properly belong in Christianity—that it was an unfortunate contrivance of the early Church that had no basis in the teachings of Jesus. Biblical scholarship of his time was beginning to support Servetus' viewpoint: for example, a translation by the great scholar Erasmus that was published when Servetus was five years old deleted the line in First John that had been the central biblical pillar of the Trinity: “For there are three that bear witness in Heaven, the Father, The Word, and the Holy Spirit: And these three are One.”³ Erasmus, with the newfound luxury of working with original Greek manuscripts, noted that this verse simply wasn't in those manuscripts. It was a later addition to prop up the Trinity.

Though he didn't use the word to describe himself, Servetus was a Unitarian. Rather than believing in the Trinity, he believed that an undivided God is the one and only source of all divinity. Jesus was a man who was not inherently divine, but was made holy by God. But that's not all: God could also make holy you and me—just as God made Jesus holy. The divine impulse in Jesus is in all people. Writes Servetus:

I say, therefore, that God himself is our spirit dwelling in us and this is the Holy Spirit within us. In this we testify that there is in our spirit a certain working latent energy, a certain heavenly sense, a latent divinity and it bloweth where it listeth and I hear its voice and I know not whence it comes nor whither it goes. So is everyone that is born of the spirit of God.⁴

For Servetus, then, the way to God wasn't through a divine figure named Jesus; the way to God was through cultivating a direct relationship with God. This was Jesus' point. And where is God? Within each one of us. This radical idea took away the Church as the middleman, connecting people to God. And therefore it took away the church's principal source of power—and corruption: that it was the gateway to God.

A big reason the book sold so well was that it was plainly heretical. Heresy has always sold well. And it wasn't just his ideas that were heretical, but the way he expressed himself in words was incredibly inflammatory. Servetus had the character flaw common to many exceptionally smart people: not only to see but also to name those who disagreed with him as idiotic and even crazy.

Unfortunately for Servetus, he lived in a time when being a heretic was not at all conducive to living a long and prosperous life. Fortunately he wasn't living in his native Spain when the book was published. He was in Basel, a hotbed of the Reformation, where he studied law and dabbled in theology. Spain, which had been a relatively tolerant place even in Servetus' childhood, had been commandeered by the Inquisition. The Inquisitors secretly condemned Servetus to death in absentia.

But even Basel was no longer safe for the notorious heretic Michael Servetus. Nowhere in Europe was safe. So Servetus assumed a phony identity: Michel de Villeneuve, and enrolled as a math student at the University of Paris. Even as he excelled in his math studies, he continued to dabble in theology. A relatively tolerant place in those years, Paris was a magnet for many of the radical Reformers. In private conversations with some of them, Servetus revealed his true identity.

One of those radical students to whom Servetus revealed his identity was John Calvin, the man whose life became forevermore entwined with Servetus. Bright, strong-willed and incredibly argumentative, Calvin and Servetus took an intense dislike to each other.

Calvin challenged Servetus to the equivalent of an intellectual duel: he challenged him to a secret debate. Much to Calvin's chagrin, Servetus didn't show up for the debate.

Not long after the debate failed to materialize, Paris became much less tolerant of the Reformers. Most of the Reformers, including Calvin and the incognito Servetus, fled. Servetus fled to Lyon, where he took a job editing a landmark publication of Ptolemy's *Geography*. This brought fame yet again to Servetus, though this time it came to his pseudo identity: Michel de Villeneuve. He behaved as a good citizen and good Catholic, and even ate dinner on occasion with the head of the French Inquisition.

A year later, he felt comfortable enough to return to the University of Paris, where he enrolled in medical school. He excelled in his new field, just as he had in his earlier intellectual endeavors. In fact, he figured out how blood circulates through the human body—nearly a hundred years before William Harvey gave birth to modern medicine by making the same discovery.

Servetus left medical school after three years and became a very beloved and successful country doctor in the south of France. Once again, Servetus used the Michel de Villeneuve identity and pretended to be a good Catholic. Meanwhile, the convenient rumor spread through Europe that Servetus had died long ago in prison. But then...

But then Servetus accepted the call to edit a recent Italian translation of the Bible, and his passion for theology was rekindled. He started work on a new theological work that would be a kind of sequel to *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

Around this time, a publisher friend reconnected Servetus with John Calvin, who by this time had established a theocratic autocracy in the city of Geneva. They exchanged dozens of letters over a two year period. The letters firing back and forth quickly became bitter. Servetus really got Calvin's goat when he returned a copy of Calvin's beloved *Institutes* with venomous notes scrawled in the margins of every single page. "Not a page of this book," Calvin told a friend, "is not befouled with vomit."⁵

Calvin also confided to a few friends that it was time for Servetus to meet his end. To this end, Calvin sent a letter to the head of the French Inquisition unveiling Michel de Villeneuve's true identity. The official, de Villeneuve's old dining partner, couldn't believe the charge. And besides, he hated Calvin. So he ignored Calvin's revelation.

Five years later, Servetus managed to convince a publisher to produce his new book, a nearly 800 page book called *The Restoration of Christianity*. The book included the texts of the thirty vitriolic letters Servetus sent to Calvin. Servetus expressed again his anti-Trinitarian ideas, and also attacked another doctrine sacred to Calvin: the doctrine of original sin. Servetus completely rejected this doctrine, and with it the practice of infant baptism. Why baptize an infant if he or she is not inherently sinful? The book also contained a little-noted section detailing in writing Servetus's revolutionary understanding of the blood circulation system. He beat Harvey by seventy-five years, and beat the discoverer of capillaries by 200 years. Unfortunately, the book did not get a chance to jolt the medical world into the modern age.

A copy of the book quickly made its way to Calvin. Though the author of the book was not identified either as Servetus or de Villeneuve, Calvin of course knew. He ripped out the

pages of letters from Servetus to him and sent them to the French authorities. After one more such effort, he finally succeeded: Servetus was arrested and jailed.

Servetus managed a daring escape from jail and decided to flee France once and for all. He was tried and condemned in absentia and burned in effigy. Servetus decided to go to Naples, a relatively free city-state in Italy. But for reasons that remain a mystery, he decided to travel to Naples, which lay to the south, by way of Geneva, to the north. And then he decided to attend services at the church in Geneva where Calvin preached. Not surprisingly, Servetus was recognized. Calvin had him arrested for heresy and flung in a lice-infested jail cell.

Calvin personally oversaw much of the prosecution. The centerpiece of the trial was a lengthy exchange between Servetus and Calvin going over all of the important points of their longstanding theological disagreement. The debate that Calvin so desired twenty years earlier finally took place. It had all of the fireworks and personal attacks of the letters they had exchanged five years earlier. Calvin, though, had all the power now. He lobbied heavily to sway the city council that would decide Servetus' fate. Calvin successfully maneuvered so that the council members had no choice but to condemn Servetus because they feared being labeled "soft" on heresy. The verdict came in: Servetus was guilty of heresy and was condemned to be tied to a stake and burned to ashes.

Exactly 450 years ago Monday, Servetus was marched outside of the city walls to a nearby hill. Just about everyone of note in Geneva marched out to witness the execution—except John Calvin. One of Calvin's lieutenants walked next to Servetus and whispered that if he confessed his errors his life would be saved. He refused. He was tied to the stake with rope and chain. The executioner placed a crown of sulphur, leaves and straw on his head and the green wood at his feet was ignited. Yes, *green* wood. Servetus didn't quickly go up in flames. No, they used green wood so that the death would be long and tortuous. It took Servetus a half hour to die. Near the end, he said, "Oh Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!" His biographers note that these last words were true to his beliefs: if he had at last repented and admitted the truth of the Trinity, he would have said, "Oh Jesus, Eternal Son of God..."⁶

It was not just Servetus in the fire that day 450 years ago. Attached to him was what the authorities hoped was the last copy of *The Restoration of Christianity*. The atrocity that day was not just an execution; it was also a book burning. Had that been the last copy, the conflagration might have been the end of Servetus' heresy and fame. But the printing press made it hard to completely erase the existence of a book and its revolutionary ideas.

As it turns out, three copies survived the execution/book burning. One copy belonged to the prosecutor and had his notes for the trial in the margin. The great philosopher Leibniz discovered this copy in the library of a German noble in 1706.

A second copy was discovered in the University of Edinburgh library in 1878. The letters of Servetus to Calvin at the beginning of the book were ripped out and replaced with the original letters. Incredibly, this copy belonged to John Calvin. Though he tried to stamp out Servetus and his ideas, he chose not to burn his own copy of the book.

A third copy surfaced much earlier. A Hungarian count fleeing the religious persecution of his homeland recognized the book in a London bookstore in 1665. He bought the book and gave it to his home church—the Unitarian church in Transylvania’s capital of Kolosvar. At a critical moment in its history a hundred years later, the church gave the now valuable book to a local dignitary as a bribe or a thank you for protecting the church. Servetus’ biographers write that it would “not be an overstatement” to say that Servetus’ book may well have saved the flagship church of Unitarianism in Transylvania.⁷

Servetus had a tremendous influence on Transylvania in another powerful way, too. Less than fifteen years after his death Giorgio Biandrata, an Italian physician living in Geneva, embraced Servetus’ Unitarian ideas. Eventually he fled persecution there and ended up being a court physician for the Hungarian royal family. He became the physician of John Sigismund when he became the king of Transylvania. Influenced by Biandrata, the king converted to Unitarianism and passed the famous edict of religious freedom in 1568. Around that time, Biandrata tried to republish some of Servetus’ writings. The king’s successor unfortunately rolled back much of the religious freedom. In a failed effort to appease the new king, Biandrata had the leading Unitarian cleric, Francis David, arrested and prosecuted for heresy. David died imprisoned in the Deva citadel, within view of our Fellowship’s partner church’s new building.

What is Michael Servetus’ legacy for us today? First of all, he stands as a beacon of the freedom of conscience that is so central to Unitarian Universalism. I don’t believe he went willingly to his death 450 years ago to uphold his anti-Trinitarian views. I think he went to his death upholding the principle of religious freedom. The freedom to hold religious beliefs without fear of death or persecution: this is the fervent dream for which Servetus died. Servetus inspires us to maintain this dream not just for us, but for all people on this planet. And he inspires us to hold our principles courageously.

I am also struck that Servetus was true to himself. As the phony Dr. Villeneuve, he was incredibly successful and prosperous. But the price was too high: he couldn’t be true to his own principles or calling. In publishing the second book and becoming once again Michael Servetus, heretic, he risked everything to be true to himself. His story poses a powerful question to all of us: with so much less at risk, why do we so often sacrifice our principles and ignore our true calling in life?

There is one aspect of Servetus’ legacy that I don’t believe he’d want us to have. It is hatred of John Calvin, of Calvinists, and in recent times even of Christians in general. Servetus’ story has for too long been fuel for Unitarians’ bigotry. And it has fueled a persecution complex that has long outlived the facts as well as its usefulness. When we use the horrendous crime against Servetus as a whipping boy against Calvinists and Christians today, we forget that Servetus saw himself as a Christian. We forget that our Calvinist neighbors weren’t there 450 years ago lighting the match.

We would be better served to see ourselves in the story not just as Servetus, but also as Calvin. We, too, are capable of being consumed by jealousy and hatred. And we should see ourselves, too, as Giorgio Biandrata, thinking he was doing the right thing but instead orchestrating another travesty: the martyrdom of Francis David.

There is a powerful place this story ends for me, or rather two places. The first is Deva, Transylvania, the home of our partner church. The Reformed Church in Deva has done much to help the Unitarian church in Deva get started: it has made available its sanctuary for services; and it has offered the incredible hospitality of its beautiful guest house to pilgrims from our Fellowship, including me. No other group has done more in Deva to help the Unitarian Church. And the Reformed Church traces itself back to John Calvin.

The other place this story ends for me is right here in the Fox Cities. Over the past year, we have raised \$30,000 to help our Deva partners get a building of their own. That's a lot of money, but it wasn't enough.

Then a coworker of Fellowship member Perry Bush saw the article in the *Post-Crescent* about the Deva church project and noticed Perry was in the picture. He told Perry about a potential grant available through the Bergstrom Foundation of the First Presbyterian Church of Neenah. With his encouragement, our Partner Church Committee applied for the grant. Much to our delight, the Foundation awarded \$10,000 to the project. In my mind, this generous gift put us over the top and made possible the purchase of the beautiful building in Deva. Perry and four others from our Fellowship will travel to Deva in a few weeks to help dedicate the new building.

The Presbyterians are a Reformed tradition, too. They trace themselves back to... John Calvin. So the heirs of John Calvin are helping the heirs of Michael Servetus both in Deva and in the Fox Cities to make the dream of a Unitarian Church in Deva come true. In that act of incredible generosity lies redemption. In some miraculous way, 450 years later the tragic death of Michael Servetus is redeemed.

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[1](#) David O. Rankin, *Dancing in the Empty Spaces* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001), p. 4.

[2](#) Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

[3](#) 1 Jn. 5:7.

[4](#) Goldstone, pp. 68-69.

[5](#) *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[6](#) *Ibid.*, p. 197.

[7](#) *Ibid.*, p. 274.