

Countryside Bible Church

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Freedom

“Something to Think About” Series by Don Ward



Jesus said,

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” John 8:32

Truth opens the windows and frees us from darkness. By the truth also we can be saved from all that would condemn us (2Thes.2:13).

This is a freedom that cannot be taken away even by demagogues. It is the greatest freedom of all. But this writing will be about another important freedom, our national freedom.

Have you ever asked yourself where the ideas and the philosophy of our freedoms came from? Dr. Marian Hillar, author, professor and research writer did. In fact, his extensive research resulted in another book, THE CASE OF MICHAEL SERVETUS, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

Michael Servetus was as Spanish scholar (1511-1553) accomplished in many disciplines; jurisprudence, mathematics, meteorology, geography, astrology, philosophy, medicine, theology and biblical criticism. He also lived a life of principle and humanity.

Twelve years ago at a Minister’s Conference in Oregon, Illinois I became aware of the possible connection between Michael Servetus and our national freedoms. It was through Pastor Sidney Hatch, a baptist minister for many years who came to a non-trinitarian position through private study and research. In his book, DARE TO DIFFER, 1991 he wrote, “As we look back over the history of Christendom, we cannot help but ask

ourselves if the existence of the United States, with its principle of religious liberty, is at least partly due to a desire to escape traditional European trinitarianism. There appears to be a philosophical or idealistic connection between the Socinians of the sixteenth century, John Locke in the seventeenth century, Thomas Jefferson in the eighteenth century (all strong non-trinitarians- dw), and then the American "Bill of Rights," produced toward the end of the eighteenth century. One influenced the other”.

I now have the book by Dr. Hillar mentioned above in which he makes the same connection. Dr. Hillar has no religious affiliation that I am aware of but writes from a secular point of view. (I have had the privilege of visiting personally with both Bro. Hatch and Dr. Hillar).

In the preface he writes, “When I came to this country from Poland, I was exposed to a new political and social system, a new mentality reflected in everyday ideology, religion, and philosophy. In an attempt to understand my new social milieu, I had to study the history of its development and search for the roots of the ideas that established American democracy. This led me to Michael Servetus as the central figure in history whose martyrdom initiated new trends in religious mentality and religious thought and intellectual investigation.”

In his Introduction, Dr. Hillar writes, “After the rediscovery of humanism in the first half of the fifteenth century, Servetus became one of its most prominent representatives. He remained, however, a deeply religious person with Christ as the central motif of his existence and guide for his personal and professional conduct”.

At that time, however, official Christianity was very authoritarian and did not take well to anyone questioning its creeds. It was likewise coercive and sought to use the State as its strong arm of enforcement and punishment. Consequently, Servetus did not enjoy the same freedom of religious expression that we do today. Yet he did not accept out-of-hand the current dogmas of the official church. He may have been guided by 1 Thessalonians 5:21,

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

Trinitarianism then, as now, was a most insisted upon dogma. This was a tenant of the Catholic Church and one inherited by most protestant churches as well. Servetus could not in his own mind and heart validate the Trinity as biblical. Hillar writes, “His theology was not based on following the established doctrines, but on biblical exegesis. He analyzed critically all previous thought, but conceded final authority only to the bible. He found he could not accept the eternity of Jesus' Sonship. He looked for the foundation of the dogma of the Trinity in harmony with the Bible, and not with Greek philosophical speculation”.

On October 27, 1553 Servetus was burned at the stake at the behest of John Calvin for refusal to confess the Trinity. Dr. Hillar writes, “To be saved from the stake he only had to state, “Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God”. Instead, his last words were: “Jesus Christ, Son of the eternal God.” He was convinced of the correctness of his reading of the scripture, which he revered, and died defending not his life but his doctrines.”

Dr. Hillar then makes the connection that answers his initial inquiry. “His personal sacrifice opened the eyes of thinking people to the madness of the established religious, social, moral, and political principles. Soon after his death, the polemic on the freedom of religious thought was initiated by the treatises of Protestant humanist Sebastian Castellio and culminated later in the mature Socinian tractates demanding separation of church and state and absolute freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The Socinian tradition in turn opened the gates of the Enlightenment with writings of philosopher Pierre Bayle, John Locke, Voltaire, John Stuart Mill and David Hume, leading eventually to the establishment of the principles of American democracy by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson” .

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