
The Complaint of Nicholas de la Fontaine Against Servetus, 14 August, 1553

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Whitcomb's Note: Among the possible reasons which prevented Calvin from appearing personally against Servetus there was one which must have seemed of itself sufficient. The laws regulating criminal actions in Geneva required that in certain grave cases the complainant himself should be incarcerated pending the trial. Calvin's delicate health and his great and constant usefulness in the administration of the state rendered a prolonged absence from the public life of Geneva impracticable. Nevertheless, Calvin is to be regarded as the author of the prosecution, and in this and in the subsequent burning of Servetus his course met the approval of the most advanced theologians of the time. The idea that diverse religious views might be tolerated in the same political area made little headway in the sixteenth century. The Peace of Augsburg and the Edict of Nantes are evidence of this. In so far, however, as a broader concept was beginning to make its way, its beginnings are not to be sought in the minds of those who were sharpening their prejudice with acrimonious doctrinal disputation: and even when a glimmering of the modern solution appears, as in the public utterances of Chancellor L'Hopital, its expression seems to have evoked no favorable response.

Process of 14 August, 1553, before the Lesser Council of Geneva. Calvin : Opera. Vol. XIII, pp.727-731. French.

Nicholas de la Fontaine [\[1\]](#) asserts that he has instituted proceedings against Michael Servetus and on this account he has allowed himself to be held prisoner in criminal process.

I.[\[2\]](#) In the first place that about twenty-four years ago the defendant commenced to annoy the churches of Germany with his errors and heresies, and was condemned and took to flight in order to escape the punishment prepared for him [\[3\]](#).

II. Item, that on or about this time he printed a wretched book, which has infected many people [\[4\]](#).

III. Item, that since that time he has not ceased by all means in his power to scatter his poison, as much by his construction of biblical text, as by certain annotations which he has made upon Ptolemy.

IV. Item, that since that time he has printed in secrecy another book containing endless blasphemies.[\[5\]](#)

V. Item, that while detained in prison in the city of Vienne, when he saw that they were willing to pardon him on condition of his recanting, he found means to escape from prison .

VI. Said Nicholas demands that said Servetus be examined on all these points.

VII. And since he is able to evade the question by pretending that his blasphemies and heresies are nought else than good doctrine, said Nicholas proposes certain articles on which he demands said heretic be examined.

VIII. To wit, whether he has not written and falsely taught and published that to believe in a single essence of God there are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, is to create four phantoms, which cannot and ought not to be imagined.

IX. Item, that to put such distinctions into the essence of God is to cause God to be divided into three parts, and that this is a three-headed devil, like to Cerberus, whom the ancient poets have called the dog of hell, a monster, and things equally injurious.

X. Item, whether he has not maintained such blasphemies most injuriously, as much as against the ancient doctors, such as St. Ambrose, St. Augustin, Chrysostom, Athanasius and the like as against all those who sought in our times to elevate Christianity, even calling to Melancthon a man without faith, son of the Devil, Belial, and Satan.

XI. Item, whether he does not say that our Lord Jesus Christ is not the Son of God, except in so much as he was conceived of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary.

XII. Item, that those who believe Jesus Christ to have been the word of God the Father, engendered through all eternity, have a scheme of redemption which is fanciful and of the nature of sorcery.

XIII. Item, that Jesus Christ is God, insomuch as God has caused him to be such.

XIV. Item, that the flesh of Jesus Christ came from heaven and from the substance of God.

XV. Item, that divinity was imparted to Jesus Christ only when he was made man, and afterwards spiritually communicated to the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

XVI. Item, that when it is said that Jesus Christ is of the same essence as his Father, it is the same as saying that in this man Jesus Christ there is the same Trinity, power and will as God, and not that the word of God dwells and subsists in his essence.

XVII. Item, whether he does not condemn those who seek in the essence of God His holy spirit, saying that all those who believe in the Trinity are atheists [\[6\]](#).

XVIII. Item, that those who believe in any distinction of property in the essence of God dissipate His nature and reduce it to fragments.

XIX. Item, that the word of God is no other thing than the flesh of Jesus Christ.

XX. Item, that the flesh of Jesus Christ was engendered, out of the substance of God by a word which he calls "seminal."

XXI. That the essence of the flesh and of the soul of Jesus Christ is the divinity of this word and of the breath which God has breathed forth.

XXII. Item, that if Jesus Christ were the Son of God otherwise than on account of his humanity, because that is engendered out of the substance of God, then he would not be really dead. For if he is dead he is no longer

the Son of God.

XXIII. Item, that when St. John says that the word was in God, it is the same as saying that the man Jesus Christ was there.

XXV. Item, that the substance of Jesus Christ is that which was in the skies, and that this is the same substance whence proceed the angels and our souls.

XXVI. Item, instead of conferring three persons in the essence of God, or three hypostases which have each His property, he says that God is a single entity, containing one hundred thousand essences, so that He is a portion of us, and that we are a portion of His spirit.

XXVII. Item, in consequence whereof not alone the models of all creatures are in God, but also the material forms, so that our souls are of the substantial seed of the word of God.

XXVIII. Item, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God because he has the elements of the substance of the Father, to wit: fire, air and water.

XXIX. Item, that the soul of man is mortal, and that the only thing which is immortal is an elementary breath, which is the substance that Jesus Christ now possesses in heaven and which is also the elementary and divine and incorruptible substance of the Holy Ghost.

XXX. Item, that the Fathers under the Law have never received the spirit of regeneration.

XXXI. Item, that by the sin of Adam the soul of man as well as the body was made mortal.

XXXII. Item, that little children are sinless, and moreover are incapable of redemption until they come of age.

XXXIII. Item, that they do not commit mortal sin up to the age of twenty.

XXXIV. Item, that the baptism of little children is an invention of the Devil, an infernal falsehood tending to the destruction of all Christianity.

XXXV. Item, that the word of God is no longer that which it was before the incarnation of Jesus Christ, because its substance was the clearness of the skies and is now made flesh.

XXXVI. Item, that however much he confesses that the philosophers have erred in saying that the word was God Himself, he says that Jesus Christ, insomuch as he is a man, was always in God and that from Him is the divinity of the world.

XXXVII. Item, that the air is the Spirit of God and that God is called Spirit, because He breathes life in all things by His spirit of air.

XXXVIII. Item, the soul of man insomuch as it possesses many divine properties is full of an infinity of Gods.

XXXIX. Item, that in the person of Msr. Calvin, minister of the word of God in the Church of Geneva, he has defamed with printed book the doctrine which he preached, uttering all the injurious and blasphemous things which it is possible to invent.

XL. And because he knows well that his said book could not be tolerated even among Papists, insomuch as it

destroyed all the foundations of Christianity, therefore he hid himself at the house of William Guerou, at that time proof corrector, as said Guerou has testified.

Said Nicholas demands that the said Servetus should be compelled to respond as to the fact of the articles here presented, without entering into dispute as to whether the doctrine is true or not, because that will appear later on.

In the articles of the Procureur General are to be found several charges not incorporated in the complaint of Nicholas de la Fontaine. Among these are the following:

Item, whether he has married, and if he answers that he has not, he shall be asked why, in consideration of his age, he could refrain so long from marriage.

Item, whether he did not know that his doctrine was pernicious, considering that he favors Jews and Turks, by making excuses for them, and if he has not studied the Koran in order to disprove and controvert the doctrine and religion that the Christian churches hold, together with other profane books, from which people ought to abstain in matters of religion, according to the doctrine of St. Paul.

Item, whether the said book Koran is not a bad book, full of blasphemies.

Footnotes

[1] Nicholas de la Fontaine was a refugee in Geneva and entered the service of Calvin, by whom he was employed as secretary.

[2] There were as originally conceived forty articles, but prior to the presentation the number was reduced to thirty eight, and both sets of numerals, Roman and Arabic, are preserved in the original document.

[3] It is impossible to substantiate this accusation except in so far as it may be justified in the publication of a book: *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, 1531.

[4] *Dialogorum de Trinitate*, 1532.

[5] *Christianismi Restitutio*, 1533.

[6] Servetus in the third interrogatory replies to this that he does not apply the term atheist to those who believe in the Trinity, but "those who disguise it as something which it is not, that is to say, those who make a real distinction in the divine essence, for these in dividing God remove the unity of the divine essence." Calvin insisted that the distinction was a real one.

