

Calvin, by Bernard Cottret.

Translated by M. Wallace McDonald.

reviewed by [Randall C. Zachman](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Bernard Cottret set out to replace the commonplace, static picture most people have of John Calvin as "a doctrinaire divider, attached to his own ideas to the point of fanaticism" with "a portrait in motion" which pays particular attention to the role of Calvin's faith in shaping his life. Cottret particularly focuses on what he takes to be the central question posed by Calvin's life--how a shy, retiring scholar became a forceful Reformer who left his imprint on subsequent Western culture.

Cottret highlights this question by placing Calvin in continuity with the very different trajectories that emerge from his thought and life: Calvinism, and the philosophies of Descartes and Montaigne. How can the man who had "the same anguish, the same nostalgia, the same melancholy" as Montaigne be in part responsible for "the disenchantment of the world" and advocate for "the predestination of both the elect and the reprobates"?

Cottret attempts to account for this dynamic tension in Calvin's life and legacy by placing him in the horizontal context of French humanism and the vertical context of a direct, unmediated call by God. He shows Calvin's committed participation in the recovery of letters led by French scholars under the patronage of Francis I. "In his culture, in his origins, in his thought, Calvin was a humanist." As a student of Latin, Greek and Hebrew grammar and philology, Calvin would have known that it is very difficult to understand any given text with clarity, and would have doubted our ability to ascertain the truth with certainty. The doubts raised by his humanist training, especially doubts concerning the interpretation of scripture, plagued him all of his life.

Calvin's life as a humanist was decisively altered by his vocation, which Cottret understands to be a "direct intervention of God in the course of history." For Calvin, his calling by God was the same as his election by God. "God chose Calvin, Calvin did not choose God: this is the very formula of election. . . . God chooses in the same

way as he rejects, without reason, by the arbitrary action of his grace." His vocation and election gradually led Calvin to become a theologian writing for those who felt "an intense conviction of being chosen by God," and formed the beginning of his theory of predestination.

The conviction of being called and elected was the source both of Calvin's strength and of his greatest weakness. "Calvin was not wise. Carried away by polemics and his authorial vanity, over the years he gave an increasing emphasis to predestination in his work"--an emphasis that made him the prisoner of his own ideas. "Predestination became the werewolf of Reformed theology, which could not be approached without terror."

Moreover, Calvin's conviction of his calling and election could not calm his doubts about the meaning of scripture and its use in establishing Christian dogmas like the Trinity. "Is the Trinity demonstrable from the sole standpoint of Scripture? Does the principle of sola Scriptura, of decisive recourse to the Bible as the fountainhead of authority, allow one to avoid ambiguity?" This combination of humanist doubt and faith in divine election led Calvin to reject conciliation as an option in dealing with his opponents. "No, by definition the Calvinist enterprise could not envisage the least compromise, which was immediately perceived as a compromise with conscience."

The only response to those who opposed him would be expulsion from Geneva or torture and execution. On the one hand, such "shocking" tactics show that Calvin was no modern, since he fully shared the "fear of sorcery and of heretics" of his age, which "entailed their retinue of hasty, indeed barbarous remedies: imprisonment, torture, the stake." On the other hand, it was precisely Calvin's implacable resistance to all opponents that led to the modern, secular view of the world. "Intransigent towards ecstasies, sarcastic towards Catholics, intractable towards heretics, Calvinism participated unwittingly in the disenchantment of the world."

Cottret increasingly portrays Calvin through the eyes of the harassed Genevans who resisted and opposed him, either by breaking wind and playing skittles during his sermons, or by opposing "fucking predestination." Cottret does not make Calvin's theology any more attractive or sympathetic than Calvin himself. "This is undoubtedly the most perfect summary of Calvin's theology: God speaks, God chooses, God summons," he says. "Calvin's God was an absolute sovereign," choosing and rejecting arbitrarily. This God, "equipped with a square and a

compass," paved the way for the God of the Deists. "Calvin's God was a tidy God" for whom "cleanliness was next to godliness," giving rise to Puritan concerns for purity.

Unfortunately, Cottret's "history of faith" and "portrait in motion" winds up reproducing the very picture of Calvin that he began by denouncing as in "great part unjustified," the portrait "of a doctrinaire divider, attached to his own ideas to the point of fanaticism."