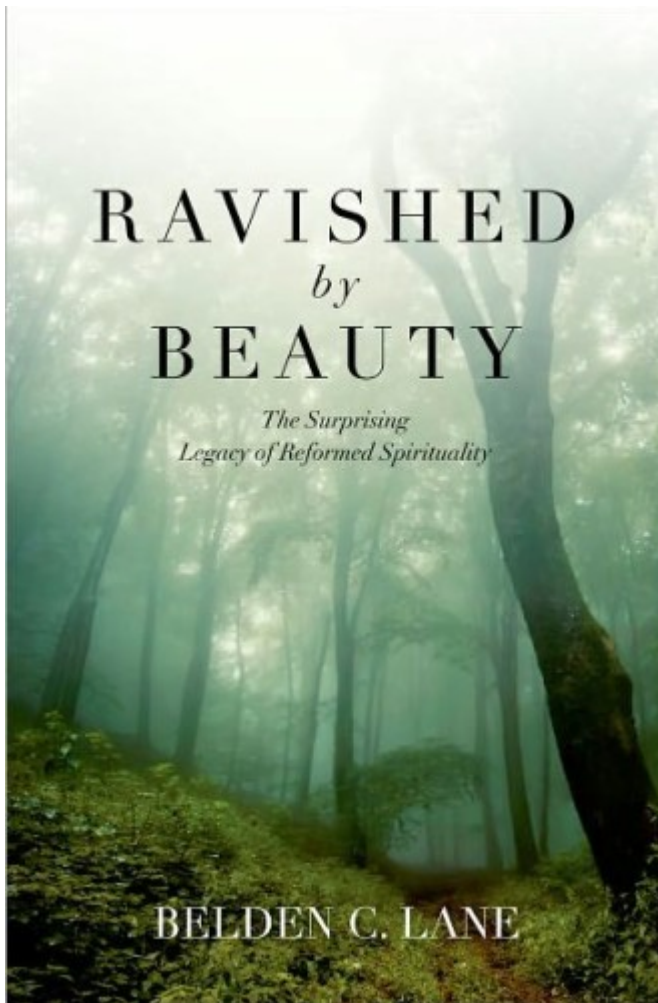


# Ravished by Beauty, by Belden C. Lane

reviewed by [E. Glenn Hinson](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## Ravished by Beauty

By Belden C. Lane

Oxford University Press

In this splendid book Belden Lane has made a double contribution—to the reordering of our perspectives on creation and to our understanding of the Reformed tradition as a contributor to this reordering. A nature lover, hiker and camper as well as a first-rate scholar, he combines a passion for sensitive stewardship of creation with profound insight into the nature perspectives of Reformed spirituality and into the interconnections between Reformed spirituality and the broader stream of world spirituality as they both relate to creation.

Readers not well acquainted with Calvin or the Reformed tradition may register even more surprise than Lane himself confesses about his discovery, for a quite different slice of doctrine—double predestination and God's absolute sovereignty—has dominated popular thinking about Calvin's theology. To interpret Reformed spirituality from that angle overlooks another side of Calvin's central teaching, one much closer to what we find in the writings of the great contemplatives of earlier centuries, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure and others who posited an intimacy between God and creation.

Persons who have had Dort Calvinism's five points drilled into them will experience some shock when they read Lane's account of Calvin's nature-embracing theology. Professor of theological studies, American religion and history of spirituality at St. Louis University, Lane points out that Calvin viewed the world as a theater of God's glory and connected the awesome mystery of the cosmos with the mystery of God's inner life as the Trinity.

God's purpose in redemption is, as Irenaeus posited, the recapitulation of all things, which will redound to God's glory. God's continual creation keeps the universe from falling apart, and every creature in the universe joins in constant praise. In a bold phrasing, Lane says of Calvin, "The Genevan Reformer's sense of God's intimate relation to the natural world was so intense—he perceived God's radiant glory to pervade the world so completely—that his thought bordered at times on pantheism." God's purpose in clothing nature with beauty was to awaken desire and bring all creation back to God's self in ravishing delight. Calvin knew the danger of misplaced desire, but he also saw human desire as a mirror of God's desire for relationship. We are all creatures of desire, the desire to praise the Creator. We humans can learn from "the school of the beasts." Our praise not only stirs desire for God but generates the life it celebrates. Worship has great power!

In the 17th century the Puritans walked in the path charted by Calvin, linking nature and desire. By the time they assembled at Westminster in 1646, Lane asserts, desire had become "the heart and blood of Puritan spirituality." The Puritans knew that desire could lead them astray, so they took steps to guard against excesses. They also looked to nature in its wildness to purge them.

Jonathan Edwards, key interpreter of the Great Awakening of the 18th century, seems to epitomize Lane's central concepts and imagery. Lane characterizes Edwards as "a naturalist as well as a theologian." The New England pastor considered the natural world to be alive with the presence of God: it communicates God's trinitarian glory and thus prompts human hearts to long more deeply for God. In Edwards's theology, the Trinity is more a beauty to be enjoyed than a power to be feared. The world of nature replicates the beauty of the holy Trinity. It is an effluence of God's own abundant life into the world. No other theme in Edwards's work surpasses his conviction that the whole creation aims at this conscious celebration of God's beauty.

Like the Puritans before him, Edwards considered nature a second "book," alongside scripture, that teaches people to know God. In the revivifying work of salvation, believers receive a new sense of the sensory environment, and their challenge is to bring the world to a consciousness of its beauty in God. In contrast to deistic thinkers of his own era who denied God's involvement in the world, Edwards thought that science revealed a God of intimate relationships hidden within the structure of the universe.

What are the implications of God's being intimately involved in the ebb and flow of desire in the whole creation, in both its loveliness and its wildness? What does this mean for how we relate to God's world and how we must change? Can Reformed spirituality, vital in shaping attitudes toward nature from the Reformation to the Great Awakening, exert a significant impact in an age dominated by post-Enlightenment rationalism—even an impact on the faithful who are influenced by this tradition?

As I have meditated on this brilliant study, I have been reading Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, whose "objectivism" represents the polar opposite of *Ravished by Beauty*. Rand's atheist heroes, absorbed with themselves and indifferent to the world around them, could not make any sense of a world that God is continually creating to evoke desire for the Divine and in which nature as well

as humans yearns passionately to be restored to oneness with the Creator. They would feel more comfortable with the deistic disavowal of divine involvement in the natural order.

Some Christians of Calvinist background will find it hard to accept what Lane has disclosed about Reformed spirituality and nature. They go to the opposite extreme to repudiate modern science's portrayal of a pulsating universe in which every particle connects in some way with the whole—insisting that it is not possible to believe both the Bible and science.

Lane has drawn on the wisdom of Reformed spirituality to frame an ecological ethic that speaks to the human condition. Attentiveness to God through the books of both nature and scripture offers the greatest likelihood that we will awaken to our intimate interconnection with the whole creation. It quickens us to question a failed stewardship that leads to climate change, endemic pollution and the destruction of mountains. If "all the world's alive with God," and the whole creation lifts its voice to praise God, it's time for us to finally join the mighty chorus.