



Prologue
Ring Lake Ranch, Wyoming

From this cabin in the Wind River Range of the Rockies I look out onto a landscape of desire. In these recent years of drought everything longs for rain. My wife and I woke up to three inches of late snow a few days ago and mountain bluebells, delighted at the unexpected moisture, have suddenly appeared in a brief riot of color across the meadow.

On Glacier Trail up by the falls yesterday I noticed a patch of green moss growing under the exposed roots of an old fir tree, straining in the shadows for what little sunlight it could find. Rain isn't the only object of desire here. Everything hungers for something. Last night a band of big-horn sheep passed through, heading up Whiskey Basin toward the high country for the lambing season. A year-old male was making advances on some of the ewes. He too failed. In a landscape that pulses with desire, failure is often more common than fulfillment. Yearning is constant.

That's why I've come in late spring to a lonely cabin in the high desert country of western Wyoming. Desire for God, for the wife I love, and for the healing of the earth all converge here. Theological and environmental concerns mesh with my own confused longings in a place of such beauty. This is a good place for reflecting on the arousal and relinquishment of desire, on what seventeenth-century Puritans spoke of as a spirituality of ravishment and the role that "weaned affections" play in achieving its purity. To learn desire one necessarily sits at the feet of those who are thirsty. The satisfied never make good teachers. It isn't the mastery of truth, but a relentless longing for it that qualifies those who become trusted guides for others. Mark it down as a rule: the desert alone possesses the secret knowledge of water.

Only what we deeply long for do we ever really know, says nature writer Craig Childs. Absence sharpens attention to a fine edge. Oddly enough, the desert is the best place to study water. Its landscape is defined by the memory of rain, etched into the land at every turn. Its surface "is carved

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into canyons, arroyos, cañoncitos, ravines, narrows, washes, and chasms. The anatomy of [the] place has no other profession but the moving of water."¹ A remembrance of flow lingers in the shadow of every rock. This is how the desert knows water—achingly, desperately, with a passion bordering on dread. It's the only way we ever know God as well.

I've come to this unforgiving terrain to write about the often-maligned Calvinist spirituality that, for better or worse, has formed my American Presbyterian way of thinking about God and the world. I'm here to ask how my religious roots relate to such a landscape. How does a Reformed spirituality of desire resonate with the energies of this place? What are the resources in a tradition like mine for addressing the ecological concerns that arise from the land?

This book is about beauty and desire, the capacity of the earth to mirror God's splendor, and the importance of forging a bond between human longing and the rest of creation. It recognizes the need for solid religious underpinnings of a viable environmental ethic. My particular way of approaching such concerns is rooted in the heritage of John Calvin, a figure not generally associated with beauty, desire, or the earth. Yet they all come together here in the high-desert terrain of western Wyoming where global warming, as elsewhere, has begun to take its toll.

The Reformed tradition² came across the Atlantic in the early seventeenth century from ports in Britain and the Netherlands to the rocky, wind-swept coast of New England. It had thrived earlier in the harsh landscapes of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and before that in the mountainous enclaves of Zurich and Geneva in Switzerland. Calvinism emerged geographically out of the same fierce terrain once occupied by the ancient Celts in northern Europe. The Celts and Calvinists alike were fascinated with eternal mysteries, the wonders of creation, a rigorous discipline, and the harsh, stubborn realities of life.

Calvinism was, in part, the product of a landscape of desire—hardened by affliction, toughened by geography, yet driven by the earth's wild beauty to a God of matchless splendor. Leon Kellner emphasizes the hard edges of its mystique when he writes that:

Calvinism is the natural theology of the disinherited; it never flourished, therefore, anywhere as it did in the barren hills of Scotland and in the wilds of North

is a perpetual conflict from his very birth. The farmer who has to keep up a constant struggle against untoward phenomena, against the refractory soil, against drought and frost, against caterpillars and a host of other insect plagues . . . is naturally inclined to the belief from the outset that God, who created the world, is a well-meaning but unquestionably a rigorous, cold being who rules the world with some great purpose unknown to the inhabitants of the earth.³

This is a half-truth at best. Kellner missed the deeper realization of the Reformed tradition that God dances in thunderstorm and shadow, luring the world to a breathtaking beauty through the power of unquenched thirst. Calvin knew that desire is the great teacher, and sustained desire the path to holiness.

One learns this quickly at Ring Lake Ranch. Everything here participates in longing; fulfillment is irregular at best. There were no mountain bluebells last year. The late snow never came. In places throughout the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, fir trees are dying because of the drought. Their frustrated desire has reached its peak, yielding to something beyond itself. But insects thrive in the dead wood, and that's good news for the hairy woodpeckers. Loss and gain are ever-changing and hard to measure here. Yet longing endures in a landscape of desire—through death, defeat, and on rare occasions ecstasy. This gives passion its edge, its compelling fortitude.

Reformed Spirituality and The Dilemma of Desire

I hadn't wanted to hear any of this during my time in that remote Wyoming cabin a few years ago. I'd come with an eager anticipation of writing this book, arriving with every expectation of realized delight. But I encountered frustrated desire instead. After churning out the first page or two, I wasn't able to write another word. To my chagrin, I first had to live my way more fully into the truth I was trying to express, passing (with the terrain) through an experience of Puritan "desertion" before being able to write about it.

I'd come there to work out of an intensity of desire—doing what I loved, capturing the lineaments of a Reformed spirituality of longing, speaking for the earth in calling others to its beauty, recovering my theological roots. The place was perfect for such work. My wife had brought along her quilting and I my laptop. We were there to celebrate our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary.

the blue-eyed girl of my youth and I. We built a fire each morning in the wood stove, worked side by side as we sewed and tried to write, and took daily walks along the creek or up the ridge. In the evening, we'd sit on the front porch watching the snow-covered peaks of the Absaroka Range to the north. I should have thought we'd died and gone to heaven.

But I'd brought with me a misplaced passion to *produce*—and I was miserable. There I was in paradise, at an ideal site to work on a book about the ecstatic fulfillment of desire, and I couldn't string two sentences together. It was pathetic. I'm ashamed to admit I hadn't come primarily to celebrate our marriage, to delight in my wife and the wild beauty of the place, to meet God in its terrible and glorious silence. I was there to *write*, to weave words together with magic, to exercise control over the subject of Reformed desire. I received, instead, what the tradition (and the landscape) gives best—an excruciating deconstruction (and transformation) of desire.

After venting my anger with God one night, trudging up the ridge through snow flurries driven by a hard north wind, I came back, half-frozen, to the cabin. There my wife told me a story. She'd been given an image of a father and son walking together through an extraordinarily beautiful wilderness. The father longed for nothing but the son's enjoyment, simply delighting in their time together. The son, however, was so anxious for the father's approval, he could think of nothing but finishing the book he'd been given to write. They were missing each other altogether as a result. The tears in her eyes said it all.

Instead of sitting down to the meal set before me, I'd been trying to write out a perfect menu. Only as I submitted to what the landscape wanted to teach me about longing and the abandonment of desire could I give up my compulsion to write for the sake of the deeper desires before me—the gift of my wife, the surrounding wilderness, and a God of love who refused to be captured by words. For the next three weeks I wrote nothing, giving myself instead to what mattered most. Some of us have to be dragged kicking and screaming into what we truly desire. It was a lesson, I learned, that summarizes much of the mystery of Reformed spirituality. Its path toward holiness involves an awakening of desire, the relinquishing of what initially may have seemed so important, a subsequent longing for God alone, and a

The theological heart of the Reformed tradition can, at its best, be summarized in five vigorous convictions:

1. A response of awe before a grand and powerful God, seen in the majesty of sky and sea, and in the transformed lives of those whose stories are recounted in Scripture.
2. An amazement that this same God is full of grace and love, evoking a response of gratitude, even adoration.
3. A need to probe the intellectual mysteries of faith, while recognizing the metaphorical, accommodating, and limited nature of all theological language.
4. A concern to carry theological reflection to its completion in the transformation of culture and the exercise of justice in society.
5. A view of the church as an organic and interdependent unity of diverse peoples, knit by Word and Sacrament into the body of Christ.⁴



All of these were reinforced for me in the high desert country of the upper plains. A holy longing nourishes each of them.

The centrality of desire in this book is rooted in the awareness that a misplaced yearning lies at the heart of the current ecological crisis. Our craving for an endless supply of imagined “goods” drives the engines of a consumer-oriented society. Desire is killing us, along with our planet. It underlies our problems of obesity and impoverishment, the endless thirst for new and improved goods, the disposal of waste, the passion for unlimited economic growth, and the global effects of a free-market economy, each of them paid for at the expense of the poor and the environment. Ecology and spirituality, the fragile balance of the earth's resources and the mistaken hungers of the soul, converge at precisely this point. The result is a desperate need for a new paradigm—for what in the language of the church is called repentance and conversion.

The manufactured desires of a consumer culture turn creation into a cafeteria line of consumable resources. We're trapped in a cultural cage devoted to the relentless consumption of beauty, the continual acquisition (and eventual discarding) of all the things that attract us. The Reformed tradition offers in response, like Carmelite and Buddhist traditions before it, an ironic reminder that the only desire truly able to satisfy is a desire which cannot be filled. Our deepest human longing

is to linger with a mystery we aren't able to fathom.) We stand in awe before the extravagant wonder of an irreducible "other."

The ultimate Other, of course, is God—a reality never fully grasped, provoking a thirst that remains blissfully unfulfilled. Our greatest joy lies in what we can't possess. This is true of all our relationships: from God to each other to the earth itself. Only in wonder do we ever encounter any of them. Every experience of beauty involves the joyous agony of a desire unattained.

The Reformed tradition seeks to nurture this incurable longing of the heart after God. The Puritans, for example, were a people of fervent desire as well as rigorous discipline. It may surprise us how much they used the bold language of the Song of Songs to express their zealous passion. They spoke unashamedly of "lusting after God." Yet the God of beauty they desired was always more than they could grasp. Hence, they wrote perpetually of their struggles with longings unfulfilled, a sense of God's absence provoking an ever deeper yearning. When the flames of God's consuming presence burned low in their lives, they refused to despair, blowing on the embers to keep their desire alive.

One seventeenth-century Puritan divine, Matthew Sylvester, spoke of severe "consternations of spirit" coming to the most spiritual of saints, even David himself, "a man after God's own heart." "Dreadful afflictions and dismal apprehensions," he explained, "are incident to the holiest and best men [and women]." Such experiences toughen the human spirit, provoke the relinquishment of lesser desires, and point to the subtleties of God's deeper ways of loving. They spur "a consequent emboldening of the heart and face toward God, others, and themselves."⁵

Puritans recognized the need for a purgative testing of intense longing. They knew that all desires had to be judged. Being stripped of what ultimately cannot be held is inevitably painful, but not without its benefits. One experiences God in loss even more powerfully than in attainment. Joseph Symonds, in a book typical of Puritan spirituality, cautioned that "Desertions are not the interruption of God's love, but of the acts of his love; his affection is the same, but the expression is varied."⁶ He pointed to the "absences of God" as occasions for encountering a love more subtle and profound. Once they gain this insight, "the faithful usually find their worst days their best days. . . . The capacity of the soul is widened, and enlarged in affliction. . . . He that is most athirst, drinks most."⁷

Hence, loss and gain, a desire left incomplete and a delight finally attained became a never-ending tension in Puritan spiritual life. "Desire," as Symonds defined it, is a wintry discipline, trusting in a faithfulness it cannot see. "Delight" is a summer activity, reveling in God's gracious open-handedness. "By desire . . . love extends it self towards God as absent: by delight she enjoys him as present: desire is love in motion, delight is love in rest." In God's strange habit of rewarding the dearest lovers of God with the subtlest signs of grace, therefore, "He keeps the cistern empty, that we may look to the Clouds above."⁸

The Making of a Calvinist

This book is a story of going home again. Growing up in the South reading Thomas Wolfe, I know that's impossible. One only returns to a home he never really knew. That's as true for me as it was for George Webber, longing for his hometown of Libya Hill in the Piedmont region of Old Catawba (North Carolina).

Mine is a tale of a boy raised in a fundamentalist, Calvinist tradition in the swamp-filled pinelands of central Florida, chafing under its harsh image of an angry God. Yet that's where desire was first planted in him—a longing for something as alluringly beautiful as it was awesome and demanding. Growing up, he marveled at underwater snakes and white cranes in the lake behind his house, even as the lusty, heartfelt singing of "Amazing Grace" stirred him in Sunday night services. This desire for (and fear of) a God grander than anything he could imagine led to his becoming a Presbyterian minister himself. He later found in Karl Barth a softer, more appealing version of the Calvinism he had reacted to in the past.⁹

But Barth, despite his gloriously theocentric theology, didn't prove entirely satisfying either. The Swiss Reformed theologian's God was so "Wholly Other," it was hard to imagine such a deity delighting in water moccasins and great blue herons.¹⁰ The boy needed a God wild enough to tromp through water hyacinths, searching for crayfish, laughing at dragonflies. After finishing doctoral work at Princeton, he began teaching theology at a Catholic, Jesuit University in Saint Louis. Through the years there he warmed to the rich sacramentality of the Roman Catholic tradition, delighting in its ability to affirm everything earthly. He reacted

to Barth's dismissal of the Catholic effort to join nature and God (through an analogy of being) as an "invention of Antichrist."¹¹ Swamp water continued to flow in his veins, as he sought on Ozark trails what he had once found in marshlands of cypress and palmettos. He thought at times of converting to Mother Church, but something still drew him to his roots in the Calvinist tradition.

The longing led, at last, to the writing of this book—trying to recover the passionate, nature-loving spirituality he had dimly sensed, but never realized, in his distant past. A re-reading of John Calvin, seventeenth-century Puritans, and Jonathan Edwards awakened within him a half-forgotten desire for a God able to exult in wilderness. The possibility of grounding an ardent commitment to environmental ethics in a re-reading of the Reformed theology of his youth was intriguing. He found himself returning to a home he'd never really known, delighting in it for the first time. The pages that follow are a result of that work.

This book is not an autobiographical project, despite the self-disclosing narratives that frame it. It contains no "confessions of a lapsed Calvinist snatched from the jaws of Rome."

Nor does it try to articulate a full-fledged environmental ethic in the Reformed tradition. Its concern is rather to provide a historical and theological foundation for doing so. It hopes to stir in the reader a desire for God's glory, glimpsed so vividly in creation that one's work for ecological justice becomes a natural extension of praise. Reformed spirituality necessarily begins with a stunning vision of God's grandeur. That's where my own journey began.

What I experienced as a child growing up in the South wasn't a full-blown Calvinism, so much as an amalgam of fundamentalist thought and fragments of Reformed theology. Such is often the case in the American experience. The Baptist churches I attended were more Calvinist than Arminian in their sympathies, more drawn to Calvin's God of sovereign power than to Methodist notions of free will. People knew in the depths of their souls the awful, enduring impact of original sin. Theirs was a Calvinism shaped by Southern revivalism and a separatist mentality, fearful of involvement with the world. In many ways, Calvin would hardly have recognized it.

Yet they held the doctrine of human depravity in high esteem. I remember stories told of a traveling evangelist whose object lesson for children scared the hell out of everyone. He pulled a rotten egg from under the pulpit, telling the children gathered around him that he had left it out of his refrigerator for two weeks and that it represented each of them as rotten sinners. It smelled something awful. He then reached under the pulpit for a hammer which, he said, represented God's holiness and almighty power. Such a God could have nothing to do with sin, of course, and was naturally inclined to smash rotten eggs to smithereens. But just as the hammer was raised over his head to come down with all its force on the hapless egg, the minister reached under the pulpit yet again to retrieve a tin can. This he quickly placed over the egg as the hammer fell and the can absorbed its vicious blow. The tin can, the minister explained to the children, was Jesus, who accepted God's anger on their behalf. I suspected, even then, that being chosen and "saved" by such a God offered precious little comfort.

Only later would I learn that even Calvin had refused to define the human person exclusively in terms of sin.¹² The human soul is turned back on itself, twisted by selfishness; nonetheless, God's image remains apparent. Creation, therefore, needs to be revitalized, not destroyed. The first thing to be said about us is not our monstrous distortion of God's image, but our reflection of its glory. Sin may be an "infection" of our being, but not the "essence" of who we are.¹³ This is a liberating truth that it took me years to appreciate as fully Reformed.

Despite the harshness of my religious upbringing, however, there was a primitive, archetypal energy about it that fascinated me. (Associating God with danger and violence wasn't necessarily appalling to an eleven-year-old boy with a new Daisy pump-action BB gun.) I spent much of my time with other kids roaming through wilderness, trapping raccoons and shooting squirrels with the neighbor's .410 shotgun. Ostensibly we were protecting his orange grove from predators, but we pretty much shot at anything that moved. I cringe now in thinking of it, but at the time a love of wilderness, a readiness to take life, and a God of awesome power were inextricably intertwined in my inchoate Calvinist imagination. My need, ever since, has been to know how to retain a God of feral and untamed beauty while affirming a moral universe where all of life is sacred.



Every childhood requires the nurturing of desire. My Calvinist, fundamentalist past, despite its faults, was able to do that for me. In a setting of rural poverty, where education was not especially prized, I fell in love with a God I'd first learned to fear. In the Reformed tradition, knowing oneself to be chosen (and loved) by a God of infinite power means having nothing else to fear. (Being chosen, adopted out of abject poverty as a son or daughter of the King, gives one an extraordinary sense of self, a freedom to move through the world with fearless abandon.) In my upbringing, Calvinist images of royalty were oddly juxtaposed with notions of undeserving insignificance.¹⁴ To be chosen and loved was everything.

This was a God, then, preeminently able to evoke desire. At the age of ten, I began to write my first book in response to such wonder. On the wide-lined pages of a spiral school binder, I told the story of Christ's death and resurrection, amazed at a selfless love that included me. I marveled at the God whom Isaiah had met in speechless awe, his lips touched by fire as he responded to the divine call. Through images of hot coals, crowns of thorns, nails driven into flesh, and angels crying "Holy, Holy, Holy," I knew myself for the first time as unaccountably loved. Not by a mother whose nervous breakdowns mirrored a history of abuse. Nor by a father whose suicide would provide his only escape from torment. But by a God of glory who encompassed wildness and loss, yet loved indiscriminately. It was the same God I had met in stunning Florida sunsets and the crashing surf of the Atlantic coast.

I knew myself chosen and loved by a God who roared through the pages of the King James Bible, danced in passing hurricanes, and sang in the blue eyes of the girl with light brown hair in the church youth group (the woman I later married). Such a God was never "safe," but always good, as Lucy learned from Mr. Beaver in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.¹⁵ (This was a God of wild beauty, very different from the God of savage predictability I occasionally encountered at church.)

In the hybrid Calvinism that I experienced growing up, the sense of chosenness I've described was generally anchored in the famous five points of Calvinist doctrine. Five-point Calvinism (also known as Tulip Calvinism) was not preached from the pulpit or articulated very clearly by church

pastors, but it underlay much of the spirituality of my youth. Drawn from the Dutch Reformed tradition, this theological acronym emphasized:

- The Total Depravity of sinners
- God's Unconditional Election of those chosen to be saved
- The Limited Atonement accomplished by Christ's death on the cross (applying only to the elect)
- God's Irresistible Grace (inevitably drawing the chosen to repentance)
- The Perseverance of the Saints (guaranteeing the salvation of the elect).¹⁶

It was a sober theology, to say the least, and one not inclined to value creation. Though it suggested an extraordinary sense of self for those who knew themselves chosen by a God of immeasurable glory, it took a narrow view of most everything else.

What bothered me about such an exclusivist theology was the accompanying doctrine of double predestination that served to explain the enormous numbers of those who were *not* chosen. This tenet declared that even before the fall of humanity in Adam and Eve, God had foreseen what would happen and decreed the fate of each individual—predestining the few (the elect) to blessedness and justly consigning all the rest (the reprobate) to hell. It was a logic I found inexorable but terrifying, contradicting the God I had discovered in the wonders of nature and Scripture alike.¹⁷

My spiritual journey, ever since, has been an effort to recover God's wild and winsome splendor, making demands on my life, rollicking in fresh falling rain, fiercely affirming the whole of creation as unaccountably good, and stirring desire at every turn. Yearning for such a God requires a willingness to abandon previous conceptions of a rigid deity, a willingness to be surprised by grace. As I discovered when I began to write this book, a letting go (a release of control) is, at some point, what every true longing entails. God is always more than we wish for and certainly more than we can understand. Desire has to submit to discernment, even as glib explanations of God's eternal decrees must yield to the mystery of God's unfathomable love.

Desire for God can be a dangerous thing in the hands of an unrestrained ego, exercised by those who glibly identify themselves as divinely "chosen." It led Puritans in seventeenth-century Massachusetts to wreak

their will on the surrounding wilderness, eradicating native peoples (the Wampanoags and Pequots) like eleven-year-olds with a new gun.¹⁸ Authentic desire for God must pass through the same fire that purged Isaiah's lips, bringing reckless action to a halt and closing one's mouth in awe before a God of beauty and power who declares all things loved. It means challenging every shadow tendency toward self-delusion, exclusivism, and violence. Only as the soul is empty enough can true desire safely fill it.

Disclosures and Acknowledgements

Being honest about the bias that an author brings to his work is a small but important debt owed the reader. Hence, I acknowledge more specifically two influences that govern my approach to this work. I am a church historian, formed by the Reformed tradition (the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.), who has taught for thirty years on a Roman Catholic, Jesuit, faculty. I've been deeply molded by the Great Tradition, testing my thinking as a Reformed Christian against the wider stream of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, and other faith traditions as well. Ignatian spirituality has been an important tool to this end, continually offering connections and corrections to my own confessional approach to the spiritual life.

The second influence on my thought has been a lifelong fascination with wilderness and the natural world. My teaching and writing have focused primarily on connections between spirituality and geography or place. I've regularly used camping and canoeing trips to introduce students to the "book of creation," alongside other texts in the history of spirituality. Most of my spiritual retreats have been solo backpacking trips into wilderness areas of the Ozarks. Seeking ethical grounds in the Reformed tradition for valuing the earth emerges as a natural expression of this passion.

My goal in this book is to lift up a hidden, but retrievable tradition in Reformed piety, advancing an earthy and impassioned spirituality that few might initially recognize as Calvinist. The quest for a tradition I can affirm as my own has drawn me to hundreds of Puritan sermons and countless volumes of Calvin and Edwards, generously referenced here.

This thoroughness is necessary if the book is to substantiate its claim for a new and revitalized reading of Reformed spirituality, rich in ecological sensitivity. It interacts with current scholarship on the history of the tradition, though I try to keep that as brief and undemanding as possible. Taking the tradition seriously requires a careful attentiveness to its development, the criticisms it has drawn, and the challenges it offers. Reformed piety insists on intellectual credibility.

Despite its scholarly treatment of the material, however, the book undertakes a lively engagement with the passion, delight in beauty, sexual innuendo, love of the natural world, and ecological activism that dances through the history of the tradition. Each of these is part of a mix that has ravished the Reformed mind and heart at times in the past, and increasingly my own in the present. The chapters that follow share a historical, theological, ethical, and even liturgical agenda. They attempt to articulate a spirituality of desire in the history of the Reformed tradition, asking how major figures from John Calvin to Jonathan Edwards have emphasized the beauty of the world as a way of contemplating the beauty of God. Chapter 1 introduces the irony of Reformed spirituality—its celebration of the earth's beauty juxtaposed with its own tragic exercise of misplaced desire. It lifts up the neglected significance of nature and desire in a tradition that more often emphasizes divine transcendence and power. Chapter 2 looks at Calvin's metaphor of the world as a theater of God's glory, disclosing a remarkably sensitive theology of nature in a theologian usually associated with transcendence alone.

Chapters 3 and 4 attend to the spirituality of seventeenth-century English and American Puritans, showing how the natural world functioned simultaneously as a "School of Desire" and "School of Affliction." It pointed the faithful to God while purifying them of lesser longings. Puritanism throughout this book becomes a primary test case for measuring the extent to which Reformed spiritual values have been put into practice. Jonathan Edwards is the subject of chapter 5. It probes his understanding of a new spiritual sense that allows believers a richer sensibility to the surrounding world. Finally, chapter 6 asks how an environmentally-sensitive way of perceiving the earth might flow from this highly aesthetic, affective, and deeply Trinitarian spirituality. It elicits some of the ethical implications of a Reformed spirituality of desire.