The present volume of essays provides a remedy for a condition—which though widespread among thoughtful Protestants interested in Christian theology in the Reformed tradition—goes largely unacknowledged, and because unacknowledged, unresolved. This condition sometimes shows itself in those who suppose that any detectable divergence from the views of John Calvin in subsequent centuries is a sign of definite decline. Alternately, the condition appears among those who suppose that Reformed theology eventually suffered a hardening of the arteries in the two hundred years after Calvin. On either understanding, only hewing close to Calvin would have staved off trouble. Both viewpoints are widespread, with especially the first being popular among evangelicals in the Reformed tradition; some can recall the impact made by the volume of 1981, R.T. Kendall’s *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, which stirred up that pot. Kendall blamed the Puritans for departing from Calvin in one particular respect, the Christian’s assurance of standing in grace.

But I have said that this book of essays is a remedy for a condition. And
that condition is the under-developed appreciation that the Reformed theology – which had its beginnings in the careers and writings of Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), Martin Bucer (1491-1551) and John Calvin (1509-1564) – was steadily thereafter an international and regional movement which had many major representatives and took on many distinctive hues. Of course, not all of these hues were deemed legitimate; Arminianism and Amyraldianism were developments of a subversive type. The volume under review traces such regional and chronological developments in Reformed theology from Calvin’s time into the second half of the eighteenth century.

Central to its purpose is the clarifying of the important difference between the terms “scholasticism” and “orthodoxy”. The first has come to have a negative connotation while the second has a generally positive association. The authors of our volume are at pains to impress on us that while “orthodoxy” entitled the formal elaboration of Reformation theology in textbooks and creedal statements in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (a good and necessary elaboration), “scholasticism” refers not to the content of orthodox theology but to the form of argument used in stating and defending orthodox belief. After Calvin, Reformed theology increasingly employed terminology and categories (but not convictions) borrowed from Aristotle both because of their utility in making a clear argument and because theological opponents (such as the Jesuits) were themselves employing Aristotle in their polemics. The era of orthodox elaboration may be said to have lasted about a century after 1560 and to have encompassed the Reformed creeds and confessions of the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the use of scholastic method in elaborating orthodoxy endured into the eighteenth century. After that time, new theological methods stressing the right interpretation of ancient texts and the weighing of historical evidence (approaches popular in the Enlightenment) began to prevail among the Reformed.

Now, such distinctions will at first seem dry and pointless to many readers of this review. But what this volume offers us is a virtual “roadmap” indicating the course taken by Reformed theology in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, France and Britain well into the heyday of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Why do we need such a roadmap?

Because, if we prefer (and many do) to read Calvin’s writings above those of all other human authors, we need to have a sense of what happened when Calvin departed from the scene in 1564. In short, whatever primary role he may have filled while among the living was rapidly ceded to other writers such as Bullinger, Beza and Perkins who outlived him. Or, if we prefer to read the Puritan writers of the age of the Westminster Assembly (1643-49) or their Nonconformist successors in the Restoration period (post-1660), we need to be able to “place” such writers in the flow of developing Reformed theology, considered as an international current. The still-revered John Owen (1616-1683) can in this way be viewed as the intellectual contemporary of his Geneva counterpart Francis Turretin (1623-1687) – whose writings played such an important role in Reformed theology in both Britain and North America well into the nineteenth century. The still-consulted commentator Matthew Henry (1662-1714) stood at approximately the same stage of Reformed theology as did Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), the moderating – but still orthodox – successor of Turretin of Geneva.

In recent times, there have not been such aids available to the one who wanted to grasp the flow of the history of Reformed theology. Some may have consulted the 1965 volume of J. W. Beardslee, Reformed Dogmatics (which provided excerpts from major Reformed theologians in the age after Calvin); yet it provided no adequate account of the “flow” of things. Others will have seen the nineteenth-century volume of Herman Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics Set Out from the Sources (E.T. 1950); this provided illustrations of the ways in which formulations of different Reformed doctrines were enhanced over time. But neither of these volumes provided an account, a roadmap to explain the change of terrain from the death of Calvin to 1750 – and this has been a very great need.

To accomplish a useful interpretation covering two hundred years in brief compass is a very tall order, and so it is not surprising that this volume has its thin patches. All of the contributors to the volume are Dutch academics interested in the history of Reformed theology; they certainly understand the unfolding of this story in their own country and its immediately neighboring territories. But one cannot say this regarding their attempts at description of the history of Reformed theology in England (John Gill is the only eighteenth-century figure mentioned, excluding such writers as John Edwards, Thomas Ridgley – and especially Phillip Doddridge). And eighteenth-century Scotland hardly fares better, for in addition to Thomas Boston and the Erskine brothers (Ralph and Ebenezer), attention might have been given to John Brown and John Erskine. The University of St. Andrews is twice mislocated in Edinburgh. As for America, there are no more than passing references made to Jonathan Edwards and his successors.

But having noted this shortcoming, I also state the wish that this volume had been available decades ago. It would have saved many from the too-narrowly focused understanding of Calvin or the Puritans so prevalent today, which is more or less the equivalent of being interested in one tree yet not the forest in which it stands. Thank you, Willem Van Asselt and contributors for a fine foundational volume which ought to be digested by all Presbyterian and Reformed theological students and ministers concerned for maintaining a thoughtful Reformed theology today!

Reviewed by Dr. Kenneth J. Stewart, professor of Theological Studies at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America and the author Ten Myths About Calvinism (IVP, 2011)