CHAPTER SEVEN

CALVIN’S CONCEPT OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND CHALLENGE

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After he had attended a conference on the theme ‘Theologies of the Cross,’ Steve Holems reported that all the participants were both united and certain on what they didn’t believe in, namely, the traditional Reformed and Evangelical idea of penal substitution.¹ It cannot be denied that John Calvin holds a full-fledged view of penal substitution in which Christ is punished on the cross in our place.² “For by dying in this manner he was not only covered with ignominy in the sight of God, but was also accursed in the sight of God [coram Deo maledictio].”³ The idea that Christ is punished in our place can be subtly distinguished from the idea that Christ takes up our punishment. The former stresses the direct reality of the punishment whereas the latter focuses more on a substitutionary aspect of Christ’s death as the redemption from punishment that lies upon humanity in general. The indirect aspect of penal substitution can be seen in patristic and medieval theologians.⁴ In comparison with the indirect aspect found

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³ Calvin, Commentary on Phil. 2:8, CO 52, 27.
⁴ In Athanasius, death had been laid down by God because of the transgression (Incarnation of the Word 6.2, NPNF2 4.39), Christ came down because of our transgression (4.2, NPNF2 4.38), and Christ took up the curse laid upon us (25.2, NPNF2 4.49). Augustine, after softening the meaning of God’s wrath into ‘indignation [indignatio]’ in Psalm 88:7, directly relates it to the death of the Cross (On the Psalms 88.6, NPNF 8.426). Yet, his stress falls on the indirect aspect by viewing the anger of God as the calm fixing of righteous punishment [justi supplicii] and understanding Christ’s work as that of Mediator in whom believers are absolved from the guilt of all their sins [soluto reatu omnium peccatorum] and might be delivered from perpetual condemnation [liberarentur damnatione perpetua] (On the Gospel of St. John 124.5, NPNF 7.449–450). Paul van Buren finds the idea of compensation rather than substitution in Thomas Aquinas. Paul van Buren, Christ in our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 53, n5. It is, however, to be noted that Aquinas embraces the seed of penal substitution: “He who knew nothing of sin, he was made to be sin for us, that is because of the punishment of
in those theologians as a seed of penal substitutionary ideas, clearly both indirect and direct aspects of penal substitution are manifested in Calvin.\(^5\) Moreover, this substitutionary punishment, which Christ bears, is viewed by Calvin as appeasement of God’s wrath.\(^6\) This idea of penal substitution creates three serious problems: for humanity, for the nature of the very notion, and for God. It thus is to be considered that (1) human morality can be seriously harmed by the fact that the idea of punishment propa-