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# **A Lutheran Professor Educated at Westminster Theological Seminary Looks for Similarities and Dissimilarities**

**Richard E. Muller**

This article opens with some comments on theological education at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the late 1960s. It then outlines the general Reformed or Calvinistic approach to the topic of the Holy Spirit: The Person of the Holy Spirit; The Work of the Holy Spirit; The Holy Spirit and Scripture; The Holy Spirit and Sanctification; and The Holy Spirit and Soteriology. Each section will consider briefly the similarities and dissimilarities between Reformed theology and Lutheran theology. Finally, the concluding portion of the article will consist of a few comments in response to Dr. Richard A. Muller's fine article, "The Holy Spirit in the Augsburg Confession: a Reformed Definition."<sup>1</sup>

## **Theological Education at Westminster**

Westminster in the 1960s espoused an authentic Calvinistic Reformed theology. It blended the British Puritan tradition with the Five Point Dutch T-U-L-I-P Calvinism and emphasized strongly the Sovereignty of God. In short, what it taught was consistent with how the Reformed have traditionally done theology – from the fixed point of the Sovereignty of God and the decrees of God, including the secret or hidden decrees. In contrast Lutherans do theology by focusing on the Crucified God, or the Cross of Christ and the revealed knowledge of God. This author

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<sup>1</sup>At the Eighteenth Annual Symposium of the Lutheran Confessions in January 1995 I responded to Dr. Richard A. Muller's "The Holy Spirit in the Augsburg Confession: A Reformed Definition." I was chosen for this task because of the similarity of our names (to the best of our knowledge we are not related) and more importantly because I received my basic theological education at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from which I graduated in 1967.

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never felt at ease with, what Luther and his followers refer to as, "the theology of glory."

The practical ramifications of this approach are enormous. Some professors at Westminster taught that one could not tell a group consisting of Christians and non-Christians that Christ died for their sins. One could only tell them that Christ died for their sins *if* they were of the elect. This was an application of the infamous "L" in the Calvinistic T-U-L-I-P—the "limited atonement" theory. Such a theology changes the comfort the Gospel is designed to provide for the sinner into a spiritual problem of considerable magnitude which confronts the sinner. Under the "limited atonement" concept a basic shift takes place in doing theology. The *Deus Revelatus*, the Eternal Word through whom the Father creates and reveals, and which culminates with the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, is exchanged for that of the *Deus Absconditus* or the eternal and, therefore, hidden God of the "secret decrees." According to Deuteronomy 29:29 the "secret decrees" are God's secret possession and one therefore dare not do theology on the basis of them. Theologians ought not work in the area of archetypal theology, or God's knowledge of himself, but must be totally dependent upon ectypal theology, or God's revealed knowledge of himself.

With this distinction in mind between the Revealed God and the Hidden God, or between the Word of God and the Will or Decrees of God, let us now consider specifically the place of the Holy Spirit in the Reformation perspective of Calvinism and of Lutheranism and search for similarities and dissimilarities.

### **The Person of the Holy Spirit**

In considering the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, theologians distinguish between the person of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit. In regard to the person of the Holy Spirit there is more similarity than dissimilarity between confessional Calvinism and confessional Lutheranism. Both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, coming as they do from the sixteenth century, hold to the full and unqualified deity of the Third Person. This similarity is based not only on agreement with the

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testimony of Holy Scripture, but also on the common acceptance of the ancient ecumenical creeds.

While there is admittedly a significant dissimilarity in the Calvinistic and Lutheran understanding and confession of the person of Christ, especially the *genus maiestaticum*, this is not true of the confession of the person of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The only point at issue in a confession of the person of the Holy Spirit is that of his full deity, and here the Calvinists and Lutherans agree.

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, while not technically a confession, functions practically as the foundational document upon which all Reformed Confessions are set and judged. In the *Institutes*, Calvin says the following in regard to the person of the Holy Spirit:

Because he is circumscribed by no limits, he is excepted from the category of creatures; but in transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life, and movement, he is indeed plainly divine.<sup>3</sup>

In short, upon him, as upon the Son, are conferred functions that especially belong to divinity. . . . Paul, therefore, very clearly attributes to the Spirit divine power, and shows that He resides hypostatically in God.<sup>4</sup>

Nor, indeed, does Scripture in speaking of him refrain from the designation, 'God.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, the confession of the person of the Spirit is far less complex and complicated than that of the Christ since only the Christ was incarnate. The whole issue of the mysterious relationship of the two natures to the one person, which received its classical formulation in Chalcedon in 451, does not apply to the Third Person.

<sup>3</sup>*Institutes*, I.XIII.14, 138. All references are to John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics volumes 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>4</sup>*Institutes*, I.XIII.14, 139.

<sup>5</sup>*Institutes*, I.XIII.15, 139.

The same testimony is found also in the Westminster Larger Catechism.<sup>6</sup>

Question #9. How many persons are there in the Godhead?

Answer — There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.

So also the Westminster Confession, Chapter II.III:

In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. I John 5:7; Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; II Cor. 13:14.

### The Work of the Holy Spirit

While I find no specific difference in the Reformed and Lutheran Confessions regarding the person of the Holy Spirit the same does not hold for the work of the Holy Spirit.

The first thing to note is that in neither the twenty-eight chapters of the Augsburg Confession, nor in the four books or eighty chapters of Calvin's *Institutes*, nor in the thirty-three chapters of the Westminster Confession is there to be found a chapter devoted exclusively to a consideration of the Holy Spirit.

The Augsburg Confession, Article I (God), deals with the Person of the Holy Spirit.

... there are three persons in this one divine essence, equal in power and alike eternal: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>This quotation and the one following may be found in *The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms with the Scripture Proofs at Large Together with the Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967).

<sup>7</sup>*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited and translated by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959): 27, hereafter referred to as Tappert.

The word "person" is to be understood as the Fathers employed the term in this connection, not as a part or property of another but as that which exists of itself.<sup>8</sup>

The Work of the Holy Spirit is factored into the confession in Article II (Original Sin).

Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.<sup>9</sup>

In Article III of the Confession (The Son of God) the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is mentioned.

That he [Jesus] may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him. . .<sup>10</sup>

Again in Article V (The Office of the Ministry) the reference to the Holy Spirit is to soteriology and the means of grace.

Through these [Gospel and sacraments], as through means, he [God] gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.<sup>11</sup>

The same treatment of the Third Person can be seen in the Westminster Confession, Chapter X.II – "Effectual Calling."

This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.<sup>12</sup>

The person of the Holy Spirit is dealt with under the discussion of the Trinity and his work is discussed in reference to the

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<sup>8</sup>Tappert, 28.

<sup>9</sup>Tappert, 29.

<sup>10</sup>Tappert, 30.

<sup>11</sup>Tappert, 31.

<sup>12</sup>"The Westminster Confession of Faith," in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 volumes (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 3:624-625.

application to the sinner of the saving work accomplished and finished by Christ in his death and resurrection. In other words, in considering the work of the Holy Spirit, some essential dissimilarities between Calvinism and Lutheranism may be identified in regard to soteriology understood as the application by the Spirit of the finished work of Christ to the sinner.

In Calvin's *Institutes* there is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit in the heading of only two of the eighty chapters—Book I, Chapter VII and Book III, Chapter I. The title of Book I, Chapter VII is: "Scripture Must Be Confirmed by the Witness of the Spirit. Thus May Its Authority Be Established as Certain; and It Is a Wicked Falsehood that Its Credibility Depends on the Judgment of the Church." Here the Work of the Holy Spirit is seen in conjunction with the phenomenon of Scripture. Note the swipe taken by Calvin at the Roman Church, which saw itself as the one authorized guardian of the true teaching of the Scripture. For Calvin, Rome arrogates to itself a teaching function which belongs properly to the Holy Spirit alone.

The title of Book III, Chapter I, of the *Institutes* is, "The Things Spoken Concerning Christ Profit Us by the Secret Working of the Spirit." Here the work of the Holy Spirit is seen in conjunction with "The Things Spoken Concerning Christ (i.e., the Gospel)." For Calvin two major categories identify the work of the Holy Spirit. First, the work of the Spirit is seen in relation to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. For Calvin the Holy Spirit is the agent by whom the Scriptures are inspired (one may see such classical *sedes* as 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21, and 1 Corinthians 2:10-16), and, therefore, also the agent by whom they are illuminated, opened, taught and placed into man's heart. Second, the work of the Spirit is seen in relation to Christ and his Gospel. For Calvin it is the Holy Spirit who takes the finished work of Christ and applies it, in a regenerating way, into the hearts of specific individuals.

### The Holy Spirit and Scripture

In reference to the work of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration and illumination of Scripture, both a similarity and a difference



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between the Lutheran confession and the theology of John Calvin exists.

The similarity is in the formal principle or the nature of Holy Scripture. It is the God-breathed or inspired Word of God and therefore authoritative for all Christian faith and practice.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand a dissimilarity becomes apparent in the function of Holy Scripture. Historically both Calvinists and Lutherans would agree with Paul when he tells Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16-17 [NASB]): "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." But how does the Bible carry out this function of equipping the man of God for every good work? It is at this point that the distinction between the second use of the law and the third use must be considered. I suggest that Calvinism conceives of the Bible in terms of its regulating character—the rule for the Christian life. As H. Henry Meeter, a twentieth-century Calvinist, writes:

The Calvinist holds the authority of the Bible to be absolute. . . . The Bible is for him an absolute rule before which he must bow unflinchingly. It dictates to him what he must believe and what he must do. It comes to him with commanding force. Calvin was very insistent on this point. If the Bible had spoken, there was only one thing to do—obey.<sup>14</sup>

For Lutheranism the Bible has primarily a declarative function and only secondarily a regulative function in the Christian life. Therefore, Lutheranism emphasizes the second use of the law, which drives the Christian continually back to Christ and to the Gospel by way of repentance. When the Lutheran turns to the Bible he wants to hear again the declaration that his sins are forgiven. The Bible comes with full divine force because it declares God's forgiveness, not just as a directive to be obeyed.

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<sup>13</sup>See also "Of the Holy Scriptures," chapter one in the Westminster Confession (3:600-606), where this same "high view" of Scripture is confessed.

<sup>14</sup>*The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1956), 45-46.

### The Holy Spirit and Sanctification

The position that the living of the Christian life occupies in a given theological system largely determines the meaning given to the term "sanctification."

One of the differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism on the one hand, and Romanism on the other is that for the former justification as a completed act or verdict logically precedes the Christian life of sanctification. In the latter, however, sanctification and the use the Christian makes of the grace given him determines his eventual justification. Whether justification is antecedent to or consequent to sanctification determines, to a great extent, the very nature of a theological system and the relative place of law and Gospel in that system.<sup>15</sup>

A similar comparison may be made between Lutheranism and Calvinism in reference to the primary use of the law in the life of the Christian. If the primary use of the law is that of regulating the life of the Christian (that is, the third use or the law as a guide) rather than that of driving the Christian continually back to the cross or to his Baptism (that is, the second use or the law as a mirror), a different model emerges. If the Christian life is basically using the law in order to live to the glory of God, a distinct picture of the Christian and Christianity comes into view. If the Christian life requires the use of the law primarily to drive us back to the cross, to our Baptism and to the Gospel, another image of the Christian life and Christianity comes forth. Here I believe Calvinism and Lutheranism develop two distinct and dissimilar pictures of Christianity, the Christian, and the Christian life. The former focuses on the sovereignty of God and his law, while the latter stresses the suffering of God and his Gospel.

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<sup>15</sup>Even in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1994), the first official catechism for the entire Roman church published since Tridentine Catechism of 1566, the following definition appears (482): "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man."

### The Holy Spirit and Soteriology

Finally, and most importantly, I believe there are significant dissimilarities between the Calvinists and the Lutherans in their understanding of the relationship between the work of Christ and the application of that work through the ministry of the Holy Spirit—that which we call soteriology or the application of the benefits of Christ's work (in distinction from the person and work of Christ) to an individual.

To work out the details of this distinction is beyond the scope of this article. Attention must, however, be given to an interesting, and somewhat programmatic, statement of Calvin in Chapter One of Book III of the *Institutes*. Book III bears the title: "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow." Chapter One of Book III is entitled: "The Things Spoken Concerning Christ Profit Us by the Secret Working of The Spirit." And, the first paragraph, from which I quote, is headed: "The Holy Spirit as the bond that unites us to Christ." The quotation reads as follows:

I have said, all that [Christ] possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.<sup>16</sup>

It seems to me that this statement offers a different understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in applying to the sinner the benefits of the finished work of Christ. These dissimilarities follow. First, there is a difference between how the Calvinist and the Lutheran understand the relationship between justification and union with Christ. Is there a sense in which justification, as the finished work of Christ, is prior to union with Christ, or is union with Christ, as the work of the Holy Spirit, always an antecedent necessity for justification to exist? Is

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<sup>16</sup>*Institutes*, III.I.1,537.

justification also a universal accomplishment prior to and distinct from the application of its benefits? The momentous question raised here is whether the finished work of Christ stands complete on its own merits or whether it requires the appropriation of its benefits by faith in an individual in order to stand complete. Does man's conversion depend upon Christ's atonement or does Christ's atonement depend for its reality upon man's conversion?

Second, there is a difference in the degree of coordination entertained between special revelation and natural revelation. The Reformed seem to be more at home with philosophy and the things of God provided through nature, such as law and reason. On the other hand the Lutheran emphasis on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel sets natural and special revelation farther apart. While neither tradition can be charged with the Barthian denial of natural revelation nor with a Thomistic flirtation with natural revelation, the Reformed seem to accommodate their theology more to the demands of the laws of reason and logic than do Lutherans. Lutherans are more comfortable with paradox.

Third, probably because of the strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God in Reformed theology, there seems to be a temptation for Reformed theology to factor in the secret, hidden, and eternal divine decrees in working out its theological system. Here Lutheran theology, taking its cue from Luther, seems more inclined to live with the definite line of distinction, found in a text such as Deuteronomy 29:29, between the hidden things and those things which are revealed. This may account in part for the Reformed inclination to accept the data of empirical reality as an indicator pointing us to God's "hidden will." For instance, because we see that not all accept the Gospel it must, therefore, be God's secret will that he never intended all to do so. Hence the "limited atonement" doctrine.

Fourth, there is a difference in the Lutheran emphasis on justification and the second use of the law over against the Reformed emphasis on sanctification and the third use of the law. Such a difference in emphasis seems to lead Lutherans to relate the work of the Spirit more intimately to the work and Word of

the Son and results in a greater appreciation of the objective means of grace in Word and Sacraments. The Reformed emphasis, which stresses the renewal of sinful life-patterns, is more inclined toward the possibility of an immediate operation of the Spirit, especially in soteriology. Connected with this point is the whole discussion of whether the third use of the law applies to the Christian *per se*, or only to the Christian in so far as his life is still affected by the pre-redemptive sinful nature inherited from Adam.

Fifth, the following question may summarize the basic dissimilarity between Calvinism and Lutheranism in the matter of the Spirit's application of the work of Christ to the individual sinner. Do we need the Spirit's saving presence that we may apprehend the work of Christ or do we need the work of Christ that we may receive the Spirit's presence? Does the work of the Third Person depend upon the finished work of the Second Person or does the work of the Second Person depend upon the work of the Third Person? What is the relationship between the finished work of Christ and the benefits of that work? This is a major dividing point between Lutheran and Reformed theology.

Finally, we note also the correlation between Calvin's reference to reason and observation: "we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel." The empirical observation referred to here has a direct influence on Calvin's doctrine of the atonement. Lutherans, while undoubtedly capable of making a similar observation, hesitate to delimit the extent of the atonement thereby. For Lutherans it is exactly at this point that a strong *sola scriptura* doctrine, even apart from our exposure to empirical reality, needs to be maintained.

#### Comments on Richard A. Muller's Article

In examining Dr. Muller's article a word of commendation is due first of all. This article is not only a well-balanced presentation and rings true to basic Calvinistic theology, but it also gives ample evidence of the author's intimate acquaintance with both Lutheran and Reformed confessional writings and the theological systems those writings inspired. Dr. Muller's candor

and his familiarity with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theology are welcomed by this author, and he also appreciates the honesty in Dr. Muller's statement: "The confessional differences remain; we can be clear about what they are and what they are not—and let us recognize that we are unlikely to settle them before the Second Coming."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, significant differences remain. Dr. Muller quotes Martin Bucer's position on the Lord's Supper from the Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530 as indicating that Christ gives us "His true body and true blood to be truly eaten and drunk for the food and drink of souls."<sup>18</sup> The problem with this statement, as with the Wittengberg Concord of 1536, is that it fails to identify what causes or brings about this true presence. Is the true presence effected by the Word of Christ apart from faith in the participant or by the faith of the believing participant in the Word of Christ? This is a significant difference.

In reference to the theological issue of the Holy Spirit Dr. Muller takes the popular position that Martin Bucer and John Calvin have moved away from the more extreme position of Ulrich Zwingli and, therefore, moved toward Confessional Lutheranism.<sup>19</sup> Lutherans tend not to be too optimistic of the results of such movement. The 1577 Formula of Concord labels both the Zwinglian and the Calvinist positions as "sacramentarian," with the former receiving the adjective "crass" and the latter "subtle."<sup>20</sup> The implication seems to be that the gap between Zwingli's "the Holy Spirit needs no vehicle" and Calvin's stress on the sovereignty of God is not really as great as it may appear at first sight. We also note that the subtle form is understood to be the much more dangerous form for Lutheranism.

In his carefully worded and documented section on "The Spirit and the Means of Grace: Confessional Differences," Dr. Muller

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<sup>17</sup>Page 54. References in this section are to Richard A. Muller's article printed in this number of the *CTQ*.

<sup>18</sup>Page 55.

<sup>19</sup>See especially pages 55-58, 67-68.

<sup>20</sup>Tappert, 482.

quotes from the Augsburg Confession, Article V: "through Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel." He understands these words to "militate against an *ex opere operato* understanding of preaching, much in the way that Roman Catholicism understands the sacraments."<sup>21</sup> Such considerations lead to the further problem of *cur alii, alii non* ("Why some and not others?") and to the attendant matter of assurance.<sup>22</sup> When Lutheranism deals with such a concatenation of theological articles, it comes to a different evaluation and identification of the sacraments than the Reformed. For Lutherans the sacraments are identified with the Gospel or the Word of God in the sense, for example, of the Word being joined to water. Reformed theology tends to separate the Spirit from the Word in the Zwinglian sense. It also separates the Word from the sacraments, as Dr. Muller indicates when he writes: "Rather the (Reformed) confessions and catechisms tend to indicate that the Word is the primary necessary means of grace, while the sacraments are subordinate to the Word and are to be understood as means, certainly, but as means that 'confirm' or 'seal' the grace given in and through the Word."<sup>23</sup> For Lutherans the sacraments do more than "confirm" or "seal." They convey the Word since they are the Word.

Again, Dr. Muller refers to the "Reformed emphasis on the traditional definition of a sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible grace. . . ." <sup>24</sup> Yet Luther in the Lutheran Confessions defines a sacrament in reference to the Word by quoting Augustine's definition of a sacrament as the Word joined to an earthly element.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout Dr. Muller's article one senses that the Reformed shy away from the Lutheran identification of Word and Sacrament for fear that such identification could lead to the *ex opere operato* teaching of Rome. In reference to the necessity of

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<sup>21</sup>Page 63.

<sup>22</sup>Page 64.

<sup>23</sup>Page 65.

<sup>24</sup>Page 67.

<sup>25</sup>Tappert, pages 310.1, 438.18, 448.10

Baptism he notes: "The absence of the word 'necessary' from the Reformed confessions stands as an implied critique of just this one aspect of the Lutheran teaching — not to allow any sacraments to be omitted, but only to find the Lutheran statement less than quite clear enough in its rejection of the *ex opere operato*."<sup>26</sup> Lutheranism avoids a view of Baptism that puts the sacramental emphasis on the *act* performed. Rather it emphasizes the Word, which is applied in the sacrament. Dr. Muller himself refers to Baptism as "the churchly act of Baptism."<sup>27</sup> Lutherans would understand such a phrase not as a churchly act apart from the Word of God but a churchly act applying the Word of God.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, the basic issue separating the Reformed and Lutherans in reference to the Holy Spirit is, as Dr. Muller indicates in his article, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. Toward the conclusion of his article Dr. Muller notes that "the grace of God, given through the appointed means of Word and Sacrament, continues to operate in the life of the believer when and where those means are not immediately offered."<sup>29</sup> Here, certainly, the Reformed do argue the operation of the Spirit in distinction from the presentation of means." Lutheran theology does not, of course, limit the operation of the Holy Spirit to the sphere of salvation, but also confesses the creative and providential work of the Spirit. Yet in reference to the saving work of God, the Holy Spirit always works through the Word of the Gospel. To the extent that the Word is identified with Jesus — either his person or his work — the denial of the Spirit always working through the Word would infringe upon the orthodox understanding that the *opera divina ad extra* are always indivisible. Where the Reformed fear an *ex opere operato* defection Lutherans fear a tendency toward mysticism when the Holy Spirit's saving operations are separated from the Word of God.

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<sup>26</sup>Page 70.

<sup>27</sup>Page 61.

<sup>28</sup>Again he refers to the celebration of the sacrament, insofar as it is something that we do (on page 64). He also quotes Zwingli, though not approvingly, as saying that Baptism does not convey grace but the Church certifies that grace has been given to him to whom it is administered (pages 65-66).

<sup>29</sup>Page 76.