

# **Law/Gospel and the Life of the Mind**



**Co-missioners,**

Last November we introduced you to [a new contributor, Dr. George Heider](#), adding the hope that we'd hear from him again soon. We do so today, in a piece that comes with a special introduction by Bruce Modahl. Bruce, a member of our current editorial team, is the one to thank for having brought Dr. Heider to our attention in the first place.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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## **Introduction**

*In today's essay, the Rev. Dr. George Heider attests to the effects of God's law and promise on his calling as a theologian. It is through this same law and promise that Heider describes himself as one who seeks to build bridges between Lutherans, among Christians, and among all people divided from one another.*

*Heider was most recently on the theology faculty at Valparaiso University. Prior to that he was the president of Concordia University, Chicago. It is in the latter capacity that I came to count him as a friend. Heider became president of the university not long before my arrival as pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. Grace sits on the northeast corner of the Concordia campus. The congregation bought that corner from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in the 1920's. Grace left the LCMS in 1978.*

*By the time of our respective arrivals at Concordia and Grace, the drawbridges between the two were mostly raised. Each side credited the other with doing most of the digging and maintenance work on the moat separating us. Still, some people*

*from both sides threw down narrow planks to cross from one side to the other. Heider, through persistent yet gentle leadership, began lowering those drawbridges one by one.*

*The same law/gospel distinction guiding his work as a college president is what affects his work as a theologian. I venture to say all of us have had disputes with others over some piece of scripture or theology in which neither side gave an inch. Heider says, "The law constantly reminds me that I can never, ever perfectly grasp or articulate anything this side of heaven." He follows that up by saying, "On the other hand, the gospel frees me (and us) from the need to be perfect or even right."*

*Any one of us who perceives being wrong or less than perfect as a mortal threat will find comfort in the way Heider addresses God's law and promise to himself, and by extension, to all of us.*

–Bruce Modahl

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## **Law/Gospel and the Life of the Mind**

by George C. Heider

Recently I completed a dictionary article on the same subject on which I had written my Ph.D. dissertation almost forty years ago—sort of an academic version of the "circle of life," I suppose. Without belaboring the particulars (it was on the Old Testament god of child sacrifice, Moloch, if you really want to know), the experience opened my eyes to something that I had not clearly articulated to myself before: two score years have left me less sure of my own position on the subject and more sympathetic to the arguments of my opponents. Whether that is a function of aging wearing me down or the accumulation of some measure of wisdom is worth a moment's reflection, I think.



Enluminures of Augustine's City of God by Master François (c. 1475) found on [Wikipedia](#)

It is here—on what seems on the surface to be an utterly secular issue—that the law/gospel distinction may provide help. The law constantly reminds me that I can never, ever perfectly grasp or articulate anything this side of heaven. It is for that reason that, throughout my career as an academic administrator and teacher/scholar, I have argued for both academic freedom and diversity of viewpoints. We benefit both from the ability to hazard ideas and from the insights that others who are differently situated from ourselves bring to matters from their own angles, even (or perhaps especially) if they argue with us. The fact is that all of us are smarter than any of us. But even all of us do not ever get it quite right.

On the other hand, the gospel frees me (and us) from the need to be perfect or even right—in my studies as much as anywhere else in my life. So, I can test out ideas without fear of judgment (at least from God). My errors in scholarship can be laid at the

foot of the cross as surely as my moral failings.

So, what accounts for my lessened certainty in the positions that I took nearly forty years ago and for my greater sympathy with the arguments of others? Part of it is a certain amount of learned humility, I suspect. I have come to see the wisdom of the advice of Oliver Cromwell (of all people): "I beseech you by the bowels of Christ to bethink yourselves that you might be wrong." In my experience, theologians, myself very much included, are in particular need of such self-reflection. It is something of the academic equivalent of our Lord's remarks on beams and motes in our eyes and those of others.

But wherein lies the value of the law/gospel distinction in this instance? The law both demands and drives us to progress on what I have termed (inspired by James Fowler and others) the stages of spiritual maturity. At Stage One we are utterly certain of our own correctness and of others' errors. Tragically, some never progress beyond this perspective. Stage Two is the polar opposite: utter relativism, as in, I have my views; you've got yours; who's to know? This, too, may be a stopping point for some at the opposite end of the scale from Stage One. But it is, I believe, intellectual cowardice.



St. Jerome in his study by Albrecht Dürer, copper engraving, 1514.

Found on [Wikipedia](#)

It is Stage Three to which I find the law pressing me. I call it *confessional pluralism*, by which I mean this: at any given time, I have my views and reasons for them, but I engage in dialog with others on the terms that I am open to persuasion to the contrary, just as my dialog partners are with me.

It is the gospel that makes *confessional pluralism* possible,

because the ultimate stakes are not being right, but furthering our pursuit of what Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr. once called “the simplicity on the far side of complexity.” In the case of my recent article, I maintained the same basic position that I took “back in the day,” and I have my reasons for it. However, I felt compelled to conclude the historical review of the scholarship on the topic since then with summaries of the work of two scholars who oppose me (by name, no less).

None of the foregoing is meant to endorse anything but the most rigorous scholarship, employing our highest and best skills over a lifetime. We owe that to God as part of “worship the Lord your God with all your mind.” Rather, it is one of those “at the end of the day” realities. If one is called to a life of the mind as a life’s vocation, you have to know going in—and even more going out—that your calling is the *pursuit* of truth, not the possession of it. The latter lies solely in the being of the one who is Truth. In theology we do our best in conversation with centuries of those who have preceded us, with our contemporaries, and, implicitly, with all who will follow. Still, at long and final last, our sole desired outcome lies outside and beyond ourselves and our intellectual strivings, either individually or collectively. It is to join a host that stands before God, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
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