

# #749 Manichean America

Colleagues,

Today's offering might best be described as an op-ed piece. It comes to you from Dr. Michael Hoy, pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Decatur, Illinois, former editor of the Crossings newsletter, and steward of Bob Bertram's professional papers. We heard from Mike earlier this year in [ThTheol 729](#).

For this present contribution, readers outside the U.S. will need a bit of background. Mike is addressing an act of civil disobedience that took place this past Sunday in numerous churches around the country. U.S. tax law forbids churches and other entities that enjoy tax-exempt status from "engaging in electoral politics" ([Time Magazine](#)). Over the past five years a small though growing number of pastors, almost all of them from the conservative American evangelical tradition, have been flouting this law in a deliberate and public way, the aim being to provoke government sanctions and the lawsuits that would follow, the end result of which might be a court ruling that would overturn the law—or so it's hoped.

I'm pretty sure that Mike's cultural sympathies and political leanings are at significant odds with those of these pastors. Were he a standard left-of-center ELCA pastor and nothing more, one might dismiss his response to them as a mere venting of the spleen. As it happens, Mike is also a theologian of the kind that the thoughtful dare not dismiss but do well to listen to with care. That's why we're very glad to pass his piece along, knowing that you'll learn from it. Could be that those of you in the U.S. who are sick to death of the current campaign and the flood of cant our land is drowning in will also find it refreshing.

Note as you read, by the way, how Mike is tackling a beast that has gnawed and clawed at the Church since its earliest years. A relentless critter, it keeps trying to subvert Christ's reign by tearing Christ's servants apart over lesser old-age loyalties. Chris Repp pointed to this last week in his analysis of the Donatist controversy. This week Mike lifts high the cross and rams it in the beast's eye.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

P.S. A reminder to all that we welcome submissions to Thursday Theology. Email them to [cabraun98ATaolD0Tcom](mailto:cabraun98ATaolD0Tcom) or [jburceATattD0Tnet](mailto:jburceATattD0Tnet).

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On a Sunday when the common lectionary for many mainline congregations in America offered the story of God's desire for unity over the hard-heartedness of separation and divorce, hundreds of pastors in congregations of more fundamentalist leanings deliberately chose to offer a message of separation and divorce over a message of unity.

Such was the case on October 7, 2012. For it was on this Sunday that 1,477 pastors, under their own idolatrously-named Pulpit Freedom Sunday, abused their office as preachers as well as their pulpits in order to do everything *but* offer a message of freedom. The only freedom we have to preach from the pulpit is what St. Paul called the preaching of the cross: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

The message of these 1,477 was not about Christ crucified. It was about who their congregations should vote for on Election

Day, November 6, 2012; and they were specific and candid and self-righteous in saying that their congregations must vote for one candidate and not another. In other words, they lowered and abased their pulpits in the worst possible form of apostasy—not encouraging the gospel of Jesus the Christ who died for all people so that all might have life, but instead witnessing to a legalistic message that betrays only our own limited and shallow, Pharisaical hardness of heart.

These are politically divided times. One of the more influential secular and objective analyses I have read of late is the work of Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). Haidt is a social psychologist at the University of Virginia. His work explores in great depth the genetic and scientific roots of moral values that have come to inform people and lead them down the path he laments: how it is that “morality binds and blinds” us into selfish and groupish (often hegemonic) behavior. Interestingly, toward the end of his analysis, in a section entitled “Toward More Civil Politics,” he raises the early-church heresy of Manichaeism—the belief that “the visible world is the battleground between the forces of light (absolute goodness) and the forces of darkness (absolute evil). Human beings are the frontline in the battle; we contain both good and evil, and we each must pick one side and fight for it” (309).

I have spoken on the subject of Manichaeism long before I ever encountered Haidt’s book. Initially, for me, the use of the term became particularly apropos for America as a whole when we seemed to learn all the wrong lessons after 9/11. Instead of seeing this tragic episode of our collective life together as an occasion for repentance and greater embrace for the cause of peace, we resorted to an older image of imperialistic strategy to assert our own good as a nation in contrast with the world’s supposed evil—as if evil were something “out there” and not deep

within ourselves.

But now, in this present decade, the turn of this Manichaeism has taken a different and more sinister twist. The groups of good and the evil are *among us* in America, where one's party identification spells which side we are on; and we become increasingly obsessed with supporting only one side in opposition to another. In my estimation, this obsession has found much too much expression, sometimes violently, in the rhetoric of our time.

Haidt's solution for Manichaeism—a call for more open social interaction with those who do not share our own hegemonic, groupish views—is a stretch, though I surely have no objection to that suggested strategy as well. But as a theological ethicist and pastor, and even occasionally a called-upon teacher of preaching (homiletics), I am inclined to offer another, more probing, analysis and solution. What if the real problem is so deep that we cannot solve it, no matter how hard we try? What if the problem is such that all we can do is confess it, as for example in the public confession of the church catholic and universal: “Merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.”

In other words, what if the problem is that we all suffer from a hardness of heart that makes us pretend we are right while others are wrong, when in truth our bitter thirst for rightness over another's wrongness is already a sign that we are broken? For this the only solution is to hear the cry of the crucified

One who shares in our brokenness, in all cries of brokenness—cries that we never lose heart or ears for, cries among *all* people both here and abroad, most especially the “least of these,” cries of a creation so damaged by our own desire for profit, and indeed all cries before the God we have most offended—in order to hear also in his cry a plea for our own very broken souls to find the unity that God so desires for us all.

I do not dismiss the importance of our need and right to vote—something that should never be taken away and from which no one should be discouraged. And I underscore our privilege and duty to make choices that will truly demonstrate the greater good for all people and God’s creation. But there is more at stake in Manichean America than who gets elected to office. Our own spirits need healing from the brokenness of these times—healing which comes from the One who made it his business to elect us all in the unity of his love.

The Reverend Dr. Michael Hoy  
Pastor, First Lutheran Church

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*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to [clessmannATcharterDOTnet](mailto:clessmannATcharterDOTnet).

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