

# Things that matter most

This year has been intense. Probably no one reading would argue with that. Perhaps, with the Christmas / New Year's Eve 2016 season having arrived, the time has come to step back from all the politics and reflect on what matters most in human life. I haven't written a whole lot about my Christian beliefs. This article will be an exception.

Exactly one year ago, I was spinning out an article series on materialism and how inadequate it is on all fronts as a worldview. What is the ultimate grounding of value? It isn't to be found in politics, or economics.

Recently I've been involved in a discussion group based here in Santiago.

We've met once a week, each Wednesday at noon, to have lunch and study Colossians. As time passed, we found ourselves with a larger project: communicating those things that matter most, and how to approach different audiences. While our theologies haven't meshed perfectly at every juncture, we agree on what follows.

The first thing to communicate is that man is a sinner. Do we not, every day, do things we shouldn't do, and think thoughts we shouldn't have? All of us, if we're honest. Human nature is sinful. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Rom. 3:23.\* Humanism, in whatever form, denies this. It implies we can build Utopia here on Earth, or create its conditions. But if Paul was right, we have an explanation why all attempts to do so, whether coming out of the individualistic and capitalistic economic philosophies that began with Adam Smith and Carl Menger or with the collectivist and Marxian ones that came later, have failed or become corrupted.

Sin stands at the root of all personal and institutional

failure, all corruption whether in politics or business, all war and violence, all casual cruelty, and many other sources of grief. The humanist believes we can conquer these ourselves: with better education, more economic growth, better political leadership, or still more advances in science and technique. Recent history suggests otherwise. Our educational institutions are a disaster. Our economy has been hijacked by a tiny, unaccountable power elite. We've just turned our political system over to Donald Trump and the cabinet he is assembling. We have little choice but to pray for the effectiveness of the new administration, but it would be a grave mistake to place too much hope in any one human being or in any team he assembles.

The consequences of sin are worse than earthly ills, however.

"The wages of sin is death ..." begins Rom. 6:23. Death in this context doesn't mean mere physical death of the human body. It means permanent separation from a perfectly holy God whose absolute holiness cannot accommodate the presence of sin.

But what is important here – and what we celebrate during Christmas season (or should) – is that this perfectly holy God made the ultimate provision for us. The above verse continues, " ... but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We cannot save ourselves, but Jesus Christ can save us. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). This might seem a tall order. Unbelievers typically cannot get their brains around it. Christ took the punishment for our sins. Having been both God and man, and therefore the one man to walk the Earth sin free, He went willingly to His death on the Cross with our sins placed on Him – to be resurrected again sinless, the "wages" of our sins paid for.

These were supernatural acts – theological mysteries our

rational intellects were not designed to fathom. Those who place their trust in their intellects alone, therefore, usually turn away. But: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding," warns Proverbs (3:5). Our rational intellects may solve a lot of problems in this world (or not). They will never solve the problem of human sin and our eternal destiny, because they are themselves tainted by sin.

So what must you do to get around this? Your best bet is to become a Christian, if you have not done it already? As did the founders of Western science, early modern philosophy, and philosophical theology, who understood that in the absence of a God who is not just perfectly holy but perfectly "rational" in His creative powers, Western science had no basis, for there was no reason to assume the world is a place of discoverable order and not ultimate chaos. The trajectory of the postmodern academic intellect towards skepticism, nihilism and despair seems to confirm this.

The Psalmist says (19:1) "The heavens declare the glory of God ..." Paul told the Romans (1:20), "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and God head, so that [we] are without excuse" (1:20).

One of the most fascinating things about modern space exploration is the uniqueness of every celestial body our unmanned probes have approached and photographed. I expect this to continue as our technological capacity to peer into the depths of space and into other solar systems increases. Physicist Hugh Ross, moreover, once listed a concatenation of over 20 physical constants and other measurable phenomena of this universe and our Earth and observed that if any of them was only slightly different (sometimes by a billionth of a percentage point!), life on Earth would be impossible!

Are we really supposed to believe with the materialists that

all of this, and all we are, are collective cosmic accidents?

Returning to our personal, Earthly situations, Paul advises, again in Romans, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9-10). And most famously, from John's Gospel (3:16): "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

This alone, not honoring rituals such as going to church on Sundays and taking communion, or doing good deeds, or even devoting one's life to serving others, are sufficient. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

So no, Christians do not have a monopoly on moral behavior. No honest Christian says he never sins; the most he can say is that his sins are forgiven. We are obligated to turn from sin and try to be more Christlike. We may not succeed. No, I take that back. We will not succeed. Christians remain sinners, but their sins have been forgiven, and they can be assured of living eternally with God in the Next Life, where there is no sin.

No other faith provides this assurance. With Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., at their best, one is never sure one has done enough, or has followed the "paths" sufficiently. This is because all other faiths offer whatever rewards they offer contingent on actions taken by us. Christianity alone sees this as futile. Christianity says, there is nothing you can do about your sinfulness except confess it to Jesus, ask Him to save you, and then sincerely and prayerfully turn from it. Perhaps this is why Christianity is so unpopular. It is humbling in its unsparing account of human nature. But its plan of salvation is simplicity itself, defying all intellectualizing.

This surely applies to our political thinking as we begin a New Year – a year likely to be as troubled and unrestful as this one was, possibly more so.

I and others have argued passionately that a power elite – or superelite – has come to dominate world affairs from behind the scenes, typically operating through global finance but hardly limited to that. Superelite dominance did not begin yesterday. There is a sense in which this kind of outcome is virtually inevitable in a world that is developing economically and advancing technologically while remaining in sin: both because a minority of persons are fascinated with power and pursue it to the exclusion of all else (money having become a fast track to power in the West), and because the majority has unwittingly given them power, trading freedom for security and avoidance of toil. “Make us your slaves, but feed us,” Fyodor Dostoevsky’s cynical Ivan Karamazov mocks the masses in the classic “Grand Inquisitor” section in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

The idea of a consolidation of secular power is perfectly compatible with Biblical Christianity: “Finally, my brethren,” writes Paul, again to the Ephesians, “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places....” (6:10-12f.).

Paul was writing in the first century A.D. He could have been writing to us in the twenty-first. His words would be just as true. Check this out. (Warning before clicking that link: disturbing images! Under no circumstances should children view it!)

Is that a Satanic ritual, or was someone with an incredible amount of money to burn, an amount sufficient to fund a

performance like that, just incredibly bored that day?

We would be remiss to place our full confidence in any one human leader, or any one political party, or any one agenda. As an expat I've become acquainted with folks who urge a complete withdrawal from the "bread and circuses" of politicking, participating in elections by voting, etc. Their idea of liberation is to form small groups and even autonomous colonies "off the grid," as it were. I am sympathetic to such notions, which, if by some chance the Trump administration is sabotaged, may be inevitable. But if such groups are not organized along Christian principles, they, too, will fail and leave their supporters even more disillusioned and bitter.

One of the things non-Christians cannot wrap their brains around is the presence of evil in the world in the form of seemingly unrecompensed suffering? Why does God permit such things? Why do evil men often soar to the top in this world? That it made sense to ask such questions was evident to the earliest Christian philosophers. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 A.D.) wrote about it. "Where then is evil?" he pondered. "What is its origin? How did it steal into the world?... Where then does evil come from, if God made all things and, because he is good, made them good too?" His answer comes down to original sin and rebellion against God, which tainted creation itself (Gen. 3:17-19). The larger answer is that God "sees the big picture." We do not, and cannot.

It might be useful to remember that nowhere does Scripture promise Christians a life free of suffering, especially for their beliefs. If anything, Scripture promises it! "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake," says Jesus. He continues, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12). Remember, too, whatever we suffer is trivial and minuscule compared to what Jesus Christ suffered, both prior to and during his crucifixion – easily

one of the most brutal, prolonged, and torturous forms of execution sinful, sadistic humans have ever devised!

So our task, hard though it may sometimes be, is get things into perspective and “keep our eyes on the prize,” as it were. We were not put here to fashion a Utopia on Earth. I keep hearing about some group called Dominionists. I think it is mostly critics and haters of Christianity using that term; I cannot find much evidence of such a group or ideology called that which has much influence over our secularized body politic.

There are people in what used to be called the New Right who fell into this kind of trap, however. And others advocate something just as misguided, the so-called prosperity gospel (“Jesus wants you to be rich!”). The Jesus of history instructed us, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24).

Be all this as it may, it should be clear: Christians need to be very, very cautious in their political thinking, and not fall into thinking they have what it takes to build a Utopia, be it a Utopia of politics or a Utopia of money. We cannot build such a thing by our own efforts, any more than we can save ourselves by our own efforts.

What does Scripture say instead?

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not

ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a City for them.” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Doesn't sound to me like a command to build a Dominion (or some such thing).

The truth: in this world, Christians are bound to be outsiders! And this is a good thing!

But “as it is written: ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God as prepared for those who love Him” (I Cor. 2:9).

And: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

To my faithful readers: Merry Christmas! And Happy New Year!

\*All Biblical quotations are from the New King James Version (1982).

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