

## Charting a Faithful Path Amidst Postmodern Winds

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### What Is God Doing In Our Postmodern Times?

1. We will consider this evening the relationship of the believing community to her postmodern culture. Paul gives us clear direction on the relationship the church has to her culture when he says that we are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. From time to time God uses dramatic changes in history to shake his people out of conformity with the world. The church has lived in the context of the modern worldview that has shaped western culture for centuries. I agree with Lesslie Newbigin when he says that this long association between the church and western modernity has led to a situation where the western church is in an "advanced state of syncretism." In other words, we have been conformed to this world, to the modern worldview that has shaped our culture for so long. To use a marine analogy: the church has been sailing along with the winds of modernity far too peacefully. Today those winds are shifting; new winds are blowing—winds we might call postmodern. We are living in the midst of dramatic changes often described as the movement from a modern to a postmodern world. Two well-known observers of our situation have described it this way. Diogenes Allen of Princeton has said: "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages." Alexander Solzhenitsyn says: "If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance." I believe that God uses these dramatic changes in history to shake his people out of conformity with the world and so this postmodern challenge gives us just such an opportunity.

2. However, when winds shift and cause us to see our conformity with the world, our job is not to push over the tiller and sail before these new winds of change. In other words, we are not simply to exchange modern winds for postmodern winds. We are then "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" that moves our culture (Eph.4:14). No, our task is to look afresh at our chart and compass. Our task is to hear afresh our sailing orders. Our task is to ask how we can use these new winds and new tides to carry out the sailing orders that have been given to us by Christ our captain. Our new situation gives us an opportunity to bring our lives afresh under the searching light of the word of God.

3. If we are to bring our lives afresh under the Word of God, if we are to chart a faithful path amidst postmodern winds, it seems to me that the first task will be to examine and understand these winds. Let me quote Lesslie Newbigin in a speech he gave in 1962. It is the question he poses at the beginning of this quote that ought to guide us in our examination and understanding of postmodernity. It will be the question that I pose in the speech this evening. The reason I give this quote is that at this time the missions faced enormous and revolutionary changes. Newbigin was involved as a world leader in the missionary task of the church. The changes of that time threatened the whole enterprise. Colonialism was rapidly breaking up; these nations were quickly being taken up into the movement toward globalization; it was the "decade of the secular" as unbridled optimism intoxicated Western man. All of this threatened the missionary enterprise as it had been known and practiced for over 150 years. It was this dramatic, changing, and revolutionary time that provided the context for his words. His words are instructive for us as we face dramatic changes today. It is the parallel between the dramatic changes facing Newbigin and the dramatic changes facing us that makes his words so relevant.

The real question is: What is God doing in these tremendous events of our time? How are we to understand them and interpret them to others, so that we and they may play our part in them as co-workers with God? Nostalgia for the past and fear for the future are equally out of place for the Christian. He is required, in the situation in which God places him, to understand the signs of the times in the light of the reality of God's present and coming kingdom, and to give his witness faithfully about the purpose of God for all men.

4. These words are relevant for our times. We see many in North America with nostalgia for the past. Postmodernity with its relativism and pluralism presents a threat; the desire is to hold on to the good ol' days when our country seemed to be more compatible with the Christian faith. There is a genuine fear for where the future might take us. While there may be some legitimacy in this concern I believe Newbigin is correct when he says that this should not be the primary response of the believing community. Our task is to understand and interpret these times through the lens of Scripture so we can play our part as God's covenant partners. The question that must be pressed is "What is God doing in these tremendous events of our time?" This is the vital question. It is only when we ask this question that we can play our role. If we are to ask what God is doing in these events we must seek to understand our times in the light of God's kingdom and faithfully witness concerning the purpose of God for his creation. It is just this that I want to do in this talk. I want to ask: What is God doing in these times? How are we to understand these events of our day in the light of God's kingdom? How can we witness in postmodern times to the purpose of God for his creation? It will only be when we understand what God is doing in these times that we can chart a faithful path amidst postmodern winds.

### **Postmodernity Is Incredulity Toward Metanarratives**

5. Jean Francois Lyotard has given the most famous definition of postmodernity. He says, "Simplifying to the extreme I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Now this definition might make you think that postmodernity is simply an academic issue and unrelated to the average person. Yet it points to something that all of know, feel, sense at a deep level. Let me try to explain.

6. The modern worldview has been shaping western culture for centuries. That worldview is characterized by a deep confidence and faith that we can progress toward a better world by science, technology, rational organization of society-including politics, economics, and education. This would bring about a world where people were happy, materially prosperous, free from disease, oppression, ignorance, poverty, suffering, primitiveness-a world of truth, justice, peace, harmony, and prosperity. In other words, science would counter the effects of sin and usher in the kingdom of God. Science is at the heart of this worldview; it has been called the "modern scientific worldview." Science as applied to the non-human creation in technology and to human society in a rational economics, politics, and social order would lead to this utopia of freedom. The modern worldview, then, is a story of progress-progress toward a better world that man himself is progressively improving and perfecting through his own efforts.

7. Modernity has been filled with stories of progress. The two most common in the 20th century have been the liberal, capitalistic, democratic story characteristic of North America and Western Europe and the communist story of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It is these big stories of progress that Lyotard is referring to when he speaks of "metanarratives."

8. Postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives." That is, today there is a breakdown in the confidence in these big stories of progress. Many no longer believe them. Why? Because they have not delivered on their promises. A growing gap between rich and poor, the threat of a nuclear holocaust and escalating militarization, the degradation of the environment that threatens our future, growing economic problems including chronic unemployment, burgeoning social and psychological maladies that afflict many, and bureaucratic bungling, inefficiency, and corruption of our "rational" institutions all contribute to a disillusionment with stories of progress to a better world. We don't believe them anymore.

9. How do we interpret this radical change in the light of God's word? How do we understand what God is doing in the events of our day? The first thing that must be observed is that these modern stories of progress are heretical counterfeits of the Biblical story. What has happened in the modern

west is that the modern worldview took over a Biblical understanding of the movement in history toward a better world—the kingdom of God. Under Augustine this Biblical story—shaped by neo-Platonism—of the movement of history toward the kingdom of God—a world of peace, truth, justice, freedom—was stamped on the consciousness of European people. All other worldviews untouched by the gospel are essentially cyclical and have no conception of history moving toward a goal. It is only when the Bible permeates a culture that hopes of a better world are awakened. The radical secularization of modernity has preserved the Biblical notion of the movement of history toward a goal but placed humanity at the centre in the place of God. It would not be the sovereign work of God by His Spirit and gospel that would move history forward to a world of freedom, truth, peace and justice but by the human activity of science, technology and social planning.

10. And so at the heart of the modern worldview is idolatry. An idol is an aspect of creation in which we place ultimate commitment and trust—our faith. We have trusted science, technology, social planning, economic growth, and political bureaucracy to lead us to the secular kingdom of man. Listen to the language of Philip Handler a former president of the USA National Academy of Science in an essay entitled *In Praise of Science*. In spite of obvious challenges to his faith that he is facing in the latter part of the 20th century he maintains a deep commitment to science.

Our current malaise stems from a few bad experiences—from time-delay in meeting the high hopes and expectations raised in the minds of those who appreciate the great power of science, the force of technology. Those expectations have taken on a new light as science has also revealed the true condition of man on earth...I retain my faith [!] that the science that has revealed the most awesome and profound beauties we have yet beheld is also the principal tool that our civilization has developed to mitigate the condition of man.

11. Walsh and Middleton use an evocative image to portray this idolatry. They use the idol of Daniel 2—an idol with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and legs of iron. They compare the belly and legs of iron to scientism—an idolatrous faith in science. They speak of the chest and arms of silver as technicism—our idolatrous faith in technology. Finally, the head of gold is economism—our idolatrous faith in economic growth as the goal of human life. Together they form the idol of Western culture. But these idols have not delivered on their promises. These idols have not delivered prosperity—poverty is growing. They have not delivered freedom—we are more controlled by media, education, big business, and government than any other time in history. They have not delivered truth—we face a proliferating pluralism that betrays a lack of agreement on truth. It has not delivered justice and peace—oppression, war, and violence abound. And we could go on. The point is that these idols have not delivered the goods. And people are abandoning these idols. The Bible is ruthless in its castigation of idols and their inability to deliver.

Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak (Hab.2:18). Their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands but they cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them (Ps.115:4-7). [Rather impotent and hopeless bunch!]

12. Perhaps another way of putting the same thing in New Testament terms, that is in light of the coming of the kingdom, is to see that modernity is based on false messiahs. The hope of the Scriptures is that the kingdom will be ushered in by the Messiah—one anointed by God to accomplish this work. Jesus announces that He is the Messiah. He calls people to follow him and to be heralds of this good news. This announcement of the gospel awakens an interest in a future world where all the effects of sin will be overcome. It proclaims Jesus Christ as the One who will accomplish this work. However, modernity has placed its faith in false messiahs—science and technology—to usher in the kingdom of man. It is instructive to note that in many third world countries, it is the children of Christians or those who have received their education in missionary schools that quickly embrace either Marxism or capitalism as the way to improve their country. They are filled with a future vision of the kingdom of God from Scripture. Ultimate issues are raised; who or what will bring in this world of truth, justice, peace, and freedom? When the gospel does not bring this about in their timing they seek more expedient ways to usher in this world. They turn to false messiahs. And so in non-western

cultures the gospel raises ultimate issues. Who or what can be trusted to usher in a world in which sin and its effects have been eliminated?

13. And this is what we should expect if we are interpreting things from the standpoint of Scripture. In Mark 13 Jesus gives us a glimpse of some of the dynamics of world history that will come about as a result of His Messianic mission. He predicts that the preaching of the gospel will give rise to numerous false messiahs that will offer the kingdom of God without death and resurrection. But Scripture leads us to expect the failure of false messiahs the same way we are led to expect the impotence of idols. These false messiahs are unable to usher in the kingdom. The only way our sinful world can be healed is by the death of God's judgement on sin and the resurrection to new life.

14. What is God doing in the momentous events of our time? We might answer in a word 'judgment.' We need to interpret our times in terms of the collapse of idols and failure of false messiahs as a result of God's judgement. Science, technology, economic and political systems, education are all good parts of the creation but cannot rise to the place of creator or messiah. Instead of ushering in the secular kingdom of God, they have shaped a world of oppression that postmodern interpreters have rightly excoriated and denounced. Western man has misplaced his faith and "you shall suffer the penalty...and bear the consequences of your sinful idolatry" (Ezek.23:49). Jeremiah proclaims:

O Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress, to you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, "Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good. Do men make their own gods? Yes but they are not gods! Therefore I will teach them-this time I will teach them my power and might. Then they will know that my name is the Lord (16:19-21).

### **Postmodernity Displays a Non-Rational Anthropology**

15. Let me press my analysis of postmodernity further by examining a second theme of postmodernity-postmodernity's non-rational anthropology. All cultural stories or worldviews are rooted in a certain understanding of the human person. What understanding of the human being undergirds the modern story? The modern story is deeply rooted in the human person as autonomous and rational.

16. The word autonomous comes from two words meaning self (auto) law (nomos). This means that human beings are their own source of meaning and authority. They define what happiness is; what it means to be human; the meaning and purpose of life. There is a rejection here of the divine and ecclesiastical authority of the medieval period. It is no longer the church or the Biblical story that defines human life. People no longer acknowledge the authority of the church or Bible. Human beings are at the centre of the world displacing God as the maker of history. This autonomous humanism has been eloquently articulated by Pico della Mirandola in the 15th century (1486) in his Oration on the Dignity of Man. In this text God is speaking to man.

The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you. I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in the world. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honourably the moulder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer.

17. What distinguished man in his dignity and equipped him to define his own purpose, to be his own authority, and to shape history his way, was primarily his rationality. The human ability to reason distinguished man from nature. We will not dig into the historical roots of this anthropology; however, what would be clearly seen is the powerful culturally formative influence of the Hellenistic culture, especially Plato and Aristotle. So the view of man lying at the base of the modern worldview is the human person as free to determine his own course and purpose and equipped with reason to do so.

18. When some aspect of human functioning is absolutized and raised above all others, it leads to a depreciation of the other aspects of human functioning. The Bible views human beings as primarily religious creatures; that is, created as God's image human beings are made first of all to live the

whole of their bodily and creational lives in response to and in covenant partnership with God. There are many aspects to human functioning. We are bodily creatures, emotional creatures, rational creatures, linguistic creatures, social creatures, imaginative and creative creatures, ethical creatures, faith creatures, and so on. When one aspect is idolized all the others aspects of human life are depreciated.

19. Indeed that is what has happened in modernity. With the exaltation of reason the body, feelings, imagination, and more have been suppressed and depreciated. However, because God's creation is a cosmos—a harmonious inter-related unity—and because God will not let his creation go, when something is suppressed it forces its way back. Al Wolters compares it to a spring; when you try to push down a tightly coiled spring, you can only do it for so long. Finally, it will recoil and spring back.

20. The postmodern situation is characterized by a non-rational anthropology. That is, the non-rational aspects and functions of human beings have come to central stage in our time. The primary postmodern analysts that have detailed this is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They see the dethroning of reason and the rise of feeling and desire as the key to understanding the postmodern condition. According to Deleuze and Guattari, intuition functions as the source of knowledge, an intuition shaped by feelings, desires, and passion. The ominous implications of this view of humanity has been observed by the Wheaton scholar Roger Lundin when he commented that "there is no goal for the actions of the self save the fulfillment of its desires."

21. I think we signs of the correctness of this insight all around us. The body that was diminished and depreciated during modernity has now become the object of veneration in a growing body cult seen in the rise of health clubs as well as in the explosion of pornography. Emotions that were minimized have become the primary authority for the average person. "I feel that" settles it for most people. The primacy of emotions can also be seen in our new styles of worship geared primarily for an emotional experience and in the proliferation comedy and horror flicks which titillate our emotions of happiness or terror. Walk through your local video store and note the number of times you find 'desire' and 'passion' in the title. Freud, Jung and the whole discipline of psychology has undermined rationality by demonstrating that we are all driven by subconscious drives. While the imagination and creative/aesthetic function of humanity was undermined in modernity it has a new lease on life in our postmodern times. What is most unexpected is the stress put on the imagination by philosophers of science. The scientific method is not simply an exercise of methodological reason. The imagination plays a central role in the determination of theories. The doctrinaire secularism of modernity denied any kind of reality that could not be explained by cause and effect relationships. However, the religious, spiritual, mystical—call it what you will—aspect of human beings has come back with a vengeance. Psychics, eastern religions, native spirituality, occult, age old religions and cults are evidence of this new interest.

22. We could continue multiplying examples. The point is that God has made human beings as richly diverse creatures with a variety of functions and abilities. When these are not unified in service and knowledge of God, one of those functions must be absolutized to give direction to human life. In the case of modernity it was human rationality. This resulted in a society based on science, technology, and rational organization of society. However, no function of man can bear this weight. Other aspects suppressed and diminished rise up in rebellion and demand to be noticed. Today we see new, often idolatrous, appreciation of the body, emotions, desire, passions, subconscious, imagination, intuition, creativity, and religious aspects of human beings. However, as Calvin has pointed out, the heart of man is a fabricator of idols. Postmodern humanity is not about to turn to the living God in Christ. Another aspect or other aspects of human functioning will replace reason as the central idol or idols. It seems where we have driven out the demon of rationalism there are seven other demons ready to take its place. I wonder if the final condition is worse than the first (Matthew 12:43-45).

23. And so we ask again: "What is God doing in these tremendous events of our times?" For those with eyes to see, that is eyes equipped with the spectacles of Scripture, God is announcing in the events of our time that autonomous man cannot achieve his own salvation. Human reason does not have the capacity to bring about redemption or bring the abundant life. Human beings are made to live in communion and covenant partnership with God. Human beings are religious creatures who will always serve. If they do not serve God and follow Christ they will serve another. Faith and obedience ultimately define humanity not rational activity. Indeed all rational activity will be shaped by some faith.

## Postmodern Knowledge Is Social Construction

23. I turn now to a third and final element of postmodernity-the notion of knowledge as social construction. The modern worldview took form as stories of progress. Those stories of progress were built on a confident humanism that invested man with the authority to shape history and a rationalism that equipped man with the ability to accomplish his goals. The primary way that autonomous man could build a better world was by science. Science played a central role in the modern worldview-so central that many speak of the "modern scientific worldview." The scientific method was the means by which human rationality could realize its goals. The scientific method would give human beings an objective understanding of the world that could then be applied to the non-human world in technology and to human society in a rational organization of society. Science would be the instrument of controlling the non-human creation and shaping human society.

24. The confidence that man put in science can be perhaps captured best in the couplet of Alexander Pope during the Enlightenment-a time when modernity fully matured. He says: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night. God said, 'Let Newton be' and all was light." Newton, of course, was the one that fashioned the scientific method. It is that scientific method that is the light of the world. It is that scientific method that gives us the truth that is needed to build the kingdom of man.

25. Science gives us knowledge that is objective. Our minds can mirror the world faithfully. The knowing subject can gain a neutral and dispassionate standpoint outside the relativities of culture, history, or language from which s/he can represent the world as it really is. This neutrality comes from the proper use of the scientific method. One can rise above all historical contingency by the use of the method. This objective and neutral knowledge gives modern man what he needs to shape the world with technology and social planning.

26. In postmodern thought this neutrality and objectivity is seen as an illusion. Reason is not a neutral instrument that can represent the world truly without any subjective context. Advances in anthropology, sociology, history, and linguistics have underscored the relativity of human knowledge. Knowledge is a social construction. Our rationality is shaped by many social factors (tradition, community, language, culture, history, faith) and personal factors (feelings, imagination, subconscious, gender, class, race). There is no universal truth for anybody according to the postmodernist. There are many postmodern authors who have been dealing with this theme from a variety of angles-Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida-but perhaps the name that should be mentioned here is Thomas Kuhn. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn attacked the central shrine of the modern worldview-the objectivity of science. He argued that scientific work is not neutral, dispassionate, and objective but is shaped by prevailing worldviews or paradigms. As the intellectual historian Richard Tarnas notes: "The prevalence of the Kuhnian concept of 'paradigms' in current discourse is highly characteristic of postmodern thought, reflecting a critical awareness of the mind's fundamentally interpretive nature" (Tarnas, p.397).

27. A stark example of this shift can be seen by looking at the famous political philosopher J. Rawls. In 1971 he wrote a book entitled "A Theory of Justice." There he sought to establish a universal claim for justice. He attempted to develop a theory of justice that could be established on a rational basis. This rational basis would make the theory universal-standing above all cultural particularity. The power of the postmodern critique can be seen in that nine years later (in *Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory*, 1980) he said that his theory could only be rationally defensible within this particular culture. It was a product of the reasoning of the west. Whether it was applicable to other situations must be left to other cultures to decide. Justice is not universal and objective; it is social construction.

28. The joke of the three umpires that has become popular is a good illustration of the postmodern condition. They are having a beer after the game and the first says, "There are balls and strikes and I call them what they are." (This is the modern realist.) The second says, "There are balls and strikes and I call 'em as I see 'em." The third says, "There ain't nothing until I call them." The second umpire recognizes an objective reality but recognizes that his subjective perspective shapes that reality. The third umpire believes that reality is what he constitutes it. The fact that the debate today centres around the last two is indicative of the postmodern shift.

29. Since there are so many subjective factors that shape our knowledge, there is not one truth about the world, about politics, about economics. We are left with a bewildering pluralism, a cacophony of voices all proclaiming their desires with no umpire to adjudicate. The certainty of scientific knowledge characteristic of modernity has given way to a profound uncertainty that despairs of any universal truth.

30. An interesting thesis has been put forth by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* that is instructive in this regard. MacIntyre give us a history of ethics in the modern period. Modernity took over norms and standards from the Christian worldview of the medieval period. Our cultural commitment to freedom, justice, righteousness, compassion and so on come from the Biblical story. However, in the modern period autonomous rational man sought a rational and scientific foundation for justice, truth, freedom, and so forth. Our ethical relativism and debilitating pluralism signifies the failure of modern man to undergird ethics by human scientific rationality. The whole modern period can be seen as providing negative proof for the fact that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and that the scientific method cannot replace Christ as the light of the world.

31. And so we conclude this section again with the question: What is God doing in the events of our time? Our deep cultural crisis comes from a misplaced faith. Too much was expected of methodological rationality or scientific reason. Science, indeed, has been a tremendous gift of God. Our world is a better world because of science. So our tongues should not vilify what our lives embody. The problem is not science but scientism. We have assigned a redemptive role to science especially by assuming that science has the ability to determine norms for politics, society, economics, education, and so on. Pope proclaimed that the scientific method was the light of the world. Jesus has proclaimed that He is the light of the world. What do we see God doing in the events of our time? Announcing that science has failed as the light of the world. Science as a human creaturely endeavour needs a more ultimate light; philosophy and history of science has shown this. What will that more ultimate light be? Scripture has proclaimed that it is Jesus. Postmodern humanity must either embrace that light, reject that light and find another, or reject that light and despair of ever finding one. Our times have brought ultimate issues to the fore. It must be the believer who sees this in the light of the gospel and gives witness faithfully about the purpose of God for all men.

### **The Conclusion of the Matter: I am the LORD**

32. The modern worldview is characterized by stories of progress toward a better world. These stories take over the Biblical view of history and rewrite it in humanist discourse. Progress is dependent on free and rational man who builds a world of freedom, justice, and truth with science and technology. However, the wheels have come off this confidence. Postmodern humanity no longer believes this story. Every part of that worldview is under attack today including the rational anthropology and the view of objective scientific truth that undergird this confidence. Disillusionment is the order of the day. Listen to the words of the famous psychologist Carl Jung: I believe I am not exaggerating when I say that modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty. . . I realize only too well that I am losing my faith in the possibility of a rational organization of the world, the old dream of the millennium, in which peace and harmony should rule, has grown pale.

33. When we ask what God is doing in the momentous events of our time, the answer we give is the answer of Isaiah: "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Is.42:8). Or put in the words of Paul in Romans 1: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this God gave them over..." (v.24-26).

34. However, lest we become triumphalist or self-righteous in our joy at the fall of idols and the failure of false messiahs I end by adding two things. First, the Christian church has been deeply compromised by the idols of modernity. The postmodern shift ought to lead the Christian church to new reflection and a deep repentance. We are called to give faithful witness about the purpose of God for the world and all men. That witness is the witness of one beggar telling other beggars where bread is to be found. It is as humble beggars who have too often chased the crumbs of modernity that we must give witness to Christ as the bread of the world. Second, faithful living in a postmodern world will involve a sympathetic entering in to the pain and confusion of our contemporaries. Hopeful and joyful

living by a Christian community who believes that God is sovereign in history will bear eloquent witness to a disillusioned and confused world. However, it is not a joy or hope that rises us above our cultural condition but a joyful confidence in the Lord of history in the midst of dismay and bewilderment. May God grant us that joy and hope that comes from faith in Christ and discernment in the light of His Word.

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