

End of Age Challenges

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End of Age Challenges

It is an undiluted pleasure for me to be with you, and to be allowed to address you. I'm pleased also to be able to respond to your own suggestion that I deal with *end of age* challenges. Whether I shall deal with them in a way that meets with your approval is, of course, a thing yet to be found out, but I will do my best to make a contribution to this topic that has obviously engaged you.

Let us now read from Peter's second letter:

Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' (2 Pet 3:3-4)

Uniformitarianism

Peter predicted to his contemporaries that there would come scoffers in the last days. Scoffing rudely, and out of their passions saying, 'Where is the sign of his coming? Where is the promise of it? It's all come to nothing. For, ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they did.'

Their view, called *uniformitarianism*—all things have continued as they did, was for some long years advocated by the palaeontologists, particularly by their study of the rocks. It was a principle laid down that the rocks had been formed over the years by a process that has gone on uniformly without break. A professor of palaeontology in Cambridge has concluded, however, that the old theory of uniformitarianism has now been proved wrong and the better explanation of our present world, its rock formation and so forth, is that from time to time there have been very large catastrophes. Therefore, he prefers the term *neocatastrophism*.

The Bible, of course, has been saying it for a long while; holding up the flood of man as a catastrophe brought upon our world in the past, using the elements of nature—the water, to destroy the world. Similarly Peter reminds us that there is coming another intervention of God at the end of time, when he will use fire to destroy the earth and there will be a great white throne of God's judgment.

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the ungodly. (vv. 5-7)

Now come to the words of the Apostle Paul.

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3)

Subjectivism

Notice Paul's prediction to Timothy that he must be prepared, for in the last times difficult times shall come. Why *difficult*? In the first place, not because of cosmic signs and terrors but because of the predominant attitude of people. You will have noticed Paul's detailed description of human behaviour, which he now warns Timothy will increase as the days go by.

It would be tedious if I were to try to expand every one of the adjectives that is used of this uncommonly, or perhaps I ought to say commonly, difficult behaviour. Let me just select two things.

'People will be lovers of self' (v. 2). Let us be quite clear that not all loving of yourself is necessarily a bad thing. We are told it is our responsibility to love our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10:27). If we don't love ourselves at all, then liking our neighbours as we like ourselves wouldn't benefit them very much, would it? We are to love ourselves and thank God daily for our creation and all his benefits that we enjoy. But these people are lovers of themselves in the sense that they are completely *self-centred*. They're not really interested in other people; merely what they can get out of them. That attitude can be ruinous to pleasant relationships with one's family, neighbours and so forth. Endless evils can come from it.

'Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God' (v. 4). Again, allow me to point out that pleasure is not in itself a bad thing. We are reliably told that at God's right hand there are pleasures for evermore (Ps 16:11). It's not, I must admit, a very high form of pleasure, but I love sausages and I hope you do too! Why shouldn't we enjoy our food? There's nothing wrong in pleasure—God has made all things and provides them richly for us to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17).

But these people are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. They don't mind taking from God's hand all he has to give, but they're not interested in God for his own sake. They might be interested in singing a few hymns, if the music pleased them, but not interested in God himself. They may be interested in his word, if for some reason they find the story intriguing, but not interested in the word of God for its own sake because it is God's word. They are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

To put it in slightly more technical terms, this is a regrettable extreme of *subjectivism*. Being concerned with myself, my emotions, my joys, my interests; and not being objective and treating God as the great objective who calls upon me to be interested in him for his own sake and to worship him.

The great theologian T. F. Torrance used to say, 'God is not only the supreme object, he is the supreme subject.' It is he that proposed to make our universe: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). He made us, he is the great subject; when he decides to act he acts, and what he decides about us is final. He is the great subject that speaks in our universe.

For the moment let us leave it there. I shall not spend time going through the detailed descriptions that Paul gives. It would be good advice to read it both in an old translation and in a modern translation, because some of the words that are in our glorious Authorized Version have gone out of date and no longer mean what they appear to say. So it's good to read some modern versions that will put the things in modern terms.

In Paul's two letters to Timothy he counters this modern tendency by appealing to the truth, as distinct from human subjectivism—God's objective truth. Let me cite you the passages concerned.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

My dear fellow believer, in this changing world with its lowering standards it is vastly important to lay hold of God's unvarying, established, objective truth, by which we can gauge all other things. False teachers will attack God's great revealed objective truth.

. . . who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. (v. 18)

. . . correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. (v. 25)

. . . always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. (3:7–8)

... and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (4:4)

Postmodernism

Because that is the great issue at stake I want to call your attention to a certain development in modern education, particularly in the departments of English, both in universities and in the higher schools. In this last thirty or forty years there has risen a so-called philosophy called *postmodernism*. As a philosophy it is not well thought of in philosophical circles, but in English and other literary departments it is very well thought of and two or three generations of students have been taught postmodernism.

You say, 'What is the relevance of that and why do we need to know it?'

Well, there are two sides to postmodernism:

1. It states that there is no absolute truth

Your sons and daughters may be taught in their English classes, or in a university where they are studying English and some other languages as well, that there is no absolute truth. It works out like this at a practical level. If they are studying a particular book of literature the teacher will give his or her interpretation of it, then the teacher will say, 'That is my truth—that's what I think it means and I hold it as so. But, of course, you may disagree. You may hold that I'm one hundred per cent wrong, but you mustn't say I'm wrong. This is my truth. You have your truth, and I won't say that you're wrong. Even if you are contradicting me I will admit that that's your truth. You see, there is no absolute truth: it's what is true for you and what is true for me. You mustn't say I'm wrong and I won't say you're wrong. We must be tolerant of each other.'

You can see what the effect of that could be on the students. It's as plain as a pikestaff! Some will accept it, and say: 'You shouldn't try to say what the Bible says: that's only Paul's truth.' Or, 'That's your truth; it isn't my truth. You mustn't say I'm wrong, even if you disagree, because there is no absolute truth.'

'In the last days, difficult times shall come.'

The Logos

One of the scholars at the root of this movement was a French scholar, Derrida.¹ In his many writings on the topic he gives us the reason why there is no absolute truth. Says he, 'there is no *logos*'. If you remember the first verse of John's gospel, you will realise that when it says, 'In the beginning was the Word', the Greek for that is *Logos*. In the beginning was the Logos—the very nature, fullness and perfect expression of God. 'All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made' (v. 3). There is an eternal Logos. So your sons' or daughters' study of Shakespeare or Sophocles eventually impinges on this. Is there in this universe a divine Logos by which all truth is to be measured?

¹ Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

The statement, 'there is no *absolute* truth', is in itself nonsense, isn't it? Let's pause and think about that. This is a night for conundrums! 'There is no absolute truth', say the postmodernists. But wait a minute; that very statement sounds to be uncommonly like an absolute truth! And if there's no absolute truth why should I believe what they say when they pronounce an absolute truth? It is sheer nonsense. One is reminded of what the apostle says, 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools' (Rom 1:22).

What is our resource, my brothers and sisters? Because we love our younger generation, we must get God's truth into them. Ringing in my ears these last fifty years has been the advice of people who know better than I do. 'David, keep it simple,' they say. Well, I wish I had their skill in making complicated things simple! But they don't say that to the physics teacher, do they? Nor to the chemistry teacher, nor to the teacher that does mathematics. Why should we keep our young people at the level of spiritual infants when God has given us a whole inspired Scripture? We need to study it earnestly. It's part of the battle and in these modern days it is very much in the front line.

2. It states that all moral values are determined by society

In other words, there are no absolute moral values. According to postmodernism the moral values that you possibly live by are formed by the society in which you happen to live. If you think I am indulging too much in theory, let me tell you a case.

Four or five years ago a dear friend of mine, who is a Wycliffe translator, and responsible for large areas of Africa, was concerned about a younger man and brought him to see me. Before my friend was with Wycliffe he was a missionary in the south of France, and this young man came out to join the team as a believer. When he came to my home, the young man told me what I've just repeated to you: 'There are no absolute moral values. All values are determined and set by our society.'

Since being a helper to missionaries in the south of France he had attended a university, let it be nameless, and read political science and various other philosophies. They convinced him at this university that there is no divine origin of moral values. All values are set by society and different societies have different values. As long as you live according to the values of your society, all is well.

I said to him, 'What about cannibalism?'

And he said, 'Yes, it's okay if they like it.'

What absurdity! I'm able to tell you that after some years the young man grew up and came back to the Lord.

But this is not an imaginary danger. It sounds good on the surface. You must be tolerant; you mustn't push your view as though it were the only truth. Your view is probably determined by your particular culture or the group you live with or converse with, and other people have different values. We have to learn to be tolerant. A lot of people claim that religion has been the cause of many wars and so forth, so we must be tolerant. It's certainly true that Christians should never fight, either to defend or to propagate the truth, for our Lord forbade it. But this business of *tolerance*, what does it mean?

You'll remember that there was a dictator called Pol Pot. Among many other curious things about him, he didn't like intellectuals and anybody who wore glasses was potentially an intellectual. So he eliminated them: he killed them.

You say, 'That was intolerant'.

Indeed it was! But you've just told me that I mustn't say he's wrong and he mustn't say I'm wrong. So, do I have to tolerate his intolerance?

'Claiming to be wise, they became fools.'

What resources do Christians have?

It's nonsense, of course, but these views are expressed in the highest of universities in the United Kingdom and in many colleges where teachers are trained. What are our resources?

'The time of my departure has come,' Paul tells Timothy. 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' He was about to be 'poured out' in martyrdom (see 2 Tim 4:6-8). What resources did Timothy have?

Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (v. 2)

'Preach the word, Timothy; preach it when you've got a good opportunity—in season; preach it when you haven't got any opportunity—when it's out of season. Preach it! Get people to learn it.'

Why the need for haste?

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (vv. 3-4)

The time will come when they won't endure sound teaching. They won't come and listen to it; they will want things that are more frivolous and entertaining and turn away their ears from the truth. That calls upon us to examine how we go about teaching. Let each do it according to his ability. But if we would compete with this modern world and save our young people we need to take them beyond the fairy stories to the realities of God's word and get it into them by all means. I have seen too many professed Christians come up to university, take part in the Christian Union, and upon leaving turn to atheism. Because we love our young people and all the people of God, let us seek God's help in our modern world to get God's word into their hearts and minds, so that it becomes formative.

I'm not against music, I love music. I understand there will be specialized choirs up in heaven, such as you have never heard! What would you think of the physics teacher who interrupted his lecture on physics with a little jazz just to keep the students' attention?

You say, 'Well, physics is a boring thing and I would need the jazz in order to continue.'

Objective truth

We need to take God's word seriously. It is God's word and we need to stress this matter of *objectivity*: the objective truth. So, Paul refers to the second coming of Christ.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word. (4:1-2)

It is not just theory, is it? *The Lord is coming*. Not merely to take his church home to glory, though, thank God, that is his intention; he's coming as the judge. He shall appear and shall judge the living and the dead. This is the objective fact. He's coming, and we need by his grace to be ready for his coming.

Then Paul calls our attention once more:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (vv. 7-8)

And now I worry, in case I've made this thing about the truth appear to be something hard and legalistic. But, as we close, let's think about what is the truth? 'I am the truth,' says Christ (John 14:6).

Do you want to know the truth about a daisy? You can tell me how many petals it has, how it propagates itself, and about its root system and its leaf system, and all the other things, and how to make a daisy crown. But there wouldn't be daisies without Christ. He invented the daisy; he is the truth about the universe.

What is truth and who is the true King?

You'll remember when Christ was brought before Pilate, Pilate had two private interviews with him (John 18:28-40).

At the first interview he asked our blessed Lord, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

Christ said, 'Is that your own idea, or did somebody else put it into your head?'

Pilate said, 'I'm not a Jew. It's your own people that have delivered you to me.'

They were saying that Jesus was claiming to be king, and Pilate, with all his politics, was interested to know exactly what this man was.

Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.' (18:36)

Watch what the Greek says: 'My disciples would have been fighting,' that is, in the garden of Gethsemane, 'that I might not be delivered over to the Jews.'

Peter tried to fight and our Lord told him to put up his sword into his sheath at once, and healed the wound that Peter had inflicted. The Roman soldiers, whom Pilate had sent at the request of the high priests, came to arrest the Lord Jesus. They witnessed what was going on and would have told Pilate what happened. Christ forbade the use of the sword,

stopped his disciples from fighting and voluntarily delivered himself up to the arresting party. Pilate would have known that what Christ was now saying to him was true.

‘You are a king?’

‘You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.’

‘What is truth?’ said Pilate.

Pilate felt he knew enough about truth to be in charge of politics, so he went out and tried to release Christ. But when the Jews shouted all the more, he said, ‘You take him and crucify him’ (19:6).

‘No,’ they said, ‘we have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.’

Pilate was an old pagan and pagans had the view that from time to time ‘men’ appeared on earth that were somehow more than men, sort of demi gods, and you have to be careful how you treat them. So Pilate brought in Christ a second time, to interview him in private.

‘Where are you from?’ he asked.

But Jesus gave him no answer.

Pilate got angry. ‘You’d better start talking. Don’t you realise I’ve got authority to crucify you and authority to release you? You’d better start talking, young man. Where are you from?’ It was Pilate, wanting to know if Christ was a Son of God, in some sense. What world did he come from?

Our Lord simply said, ‘You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin’ (v. 11).

Why didn’t our Lord do some miracle and show that puzzled man something of his divine nature? Because that would have shrivelled Pilate like a cinder on the ground. ‘I’ve come to bear witness to the truth,’ Christ has said. Is it true that God came down and stood in front of a man, six foot of clay, and let the man decide what he would do with God incarnate? Is that true?

I think I hear you reply, ‘It’s not only true, it’s the truth on which I base my whole hope for eternity. This is the true expression of God; that he would give his Son so that we might not perish.’

God loves us and we were created to love him. This is the truth. Oh, for the miserable success of Satan, the critic of God that manages to put people’s backs up against the truth of God incarnate that is in Christ.

But he’s coming again, isn’t he?

Solomon is crowned king

King David was old, and one of his many sons, Adonijah, felt that the time was right to seize the throne (1 Kgs 1). Before the king died, and while he was in this incompetent state, he would seize the throne and no one should be able to dispute it. So he had a word with some priests, the commander in chief of the army and a lot of friends, persuaded them to support him, and he staged a virtual coronation. He invited all his friends to come and they joined the party. It was great fun and games and Adonijah was everything.

But Bathsheba and her loyal advisors heard about this and they went in to David. There he was in his bed.

‘Your majesty, is it your wish that Adonijah should be king when you pass on?’

‘What did you say?’ he said. ‘Adonijah?’

‘Adonijah is already claiming the throne,’ said Nathan the prophet.

With that, King David sat bolt upright in bed. ‘Adonijah? Never! I’ve said that Solomon should be my successor, Bathsheba’s son. Let me tell you what to do.’

And there on his death bed King David told them how Solomon should be made king. They brought out the king’s mule and put Solomon on it. The orchestra and everybody of any importance followed Solomon down to Gihon, crying, ‘Long live King Solomon.’ They blew the trumpets and David staged the coronation of Solomon. Down in the valley Adonijah and his party suddenly heard the sound of the trumpet and a messenger brought the news that David had made Solomon king.

There is coming a day when God shall stage the ‘appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Tim 6:14). The heavens shall glow with splendour—God will hang out all the ‘bunting’ he has to celebrate the manifestation of the Lord Jesus. Like Paul, we love his appearing and long for it (4:8). God grant us that we shall be faithful, so that when he comes he shall find us on the right side, supporting the claims of God and Christ and of his holy Word.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.