

The End of the World According to Harold Camping

by W. Robert Godfrey

If you were to drive the freeways of southern California, you would see from time to time billboards proclaiming the Judgment Day on May 21, 2011 and declaring that the Bible guarantees it. Presumably these billboards may be seen in many other parts of the country as well. Who is responsible for these signs and what do they really mean theologically?

The signs have been placed by Harold Camping and his followers to warn people that the end is at hand. To understand these signs we must know something of the history as well as the theology of Harold Camping. I am in a somewhat distinctive position to write on this subject since I first met Camping in the late 1950s. I learned a great deal from him then, and so I find what follows a very sad story. I pray for him that the Lord will deliver him from the serious errors into which he has fallen.

Christian Reformed

While a high school student in Alameda, California, I began to attend the Alameda Christian Reformed Church. It was there that I was converted through the influence of a number of people in the congregation, including Harold Camping. At that time he was an elder in the congregation and taught the Bible lessons for the high school youth group. He was a conservative, traditional adherent of the Christian Reformed Church and would remain so for many years.

In those days the Christian Reformed Church was a strongly ethnic denomination and the congregation in Alameda was almost entirely Dutch in background. The CRC was also still strictly Reformed, interpreting the Bible in light of the church's confessional standards: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. Camping strongly embraced and taught the doctrine and piety of the CRC in which he had been raised.

The Christian Reformed Church, like all Presbyterian and Reformed churches, also stressed the importance of a carefully and thoroughly educated ministry. The church certainly taught the Reformation doctrine that the Scripture is clear in its teaching of the message of salvation. At the same time it also recognized that the Lord had given his church pastors to open the Word of God and preserve the church in the truth (Ephesians 4:4-14). The faithful preaching of these pastors was a means of grace by which the saints were built up. For this vital calling, ministers were educated to read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, to understand how to read the various genres in the Bible, and how to interpret each part of the Bible in light of the whole. The best handling of the Scriptures required excellent education.

Engineer

Camping was a bright and studious man who had been educated as an engineer. In the 1950s he owned a very successful construction company which built churches as well as other significant buildings. This educational background is critical to understanding Camping. His education was not in the liberal arts or theology. He had not been prepared to read literature or ancient texts. He knew no Greek or Hebrew. He was not formally introduced to the study of theology. His reading of the Bible, as it evolved over the decades, reflected his training in engineering. He reads the Bible like a mathematical or scientific textbook.

Entrepreneur

Camping developed, as a good businessman, his construction company and then sold it. With the money he began to build the Christian radio network called Family Radio. This network was very much his own

property and his skill developed Family Radio into a group of stations spread throughout the country. Family Radio appealed to many Christians through its programming of Christian music, Bible reading, Bible lessons and messages from various pastors and conference speakers. The teaching was basically Reformed and Camping sought to have as many recordings of Reformed speakers as possible.

Camping himself had a regular program of his own called "Open Forum." During this program he invited people to call in with questions about the Bible and theology. He promoted a Reformed approach to the Bible and especially confronted and refuted dispensational, Pentecostal, and Arminian theologies. He had a broad and detailed knowledge of the Bible which he used to very good effect in answering questions. He was at one time a most effective and influential promoter of Reformed theology and won many listeners to the Reformed cause.

Autodidact

After Camping began to work full-time with Family Radio, he spent much time studying the Bible. His knowledge of Bible verses is impressive indeed. But his study of the Bible was undertaken in isolation from other Christians and theologians. He adopted a proud individualism. He did not really learn from Bible scholars. He studied the Bible in isolation from the church and the consensus of the faithful. As a result his understanding of the Bible became more and more idiosyncratic. No one could help, direct, or restrain him. He was really an autodidact, that is, someone who teaches himself. He never really submitted his ideas to be challenged and improved by others. He was truly his only teacher. He has repeatedly said that he would be glad to change his views if he is shown that he is wrong from the Bible. But this humble statement covers a very arrogant attitude, because no one can ever show him that he is wrong. He alone really understands the Bible.

Literalist and Allegorist

Camping's reading of the Bible led him to a curiously self-contradictory method which is at some times excessively literal and at other times wildly allegorical. As an engineer he has had a particular interest in the numbers in the Bible. It is this interest that has led him to reach conclusions about the date of the end of the world. His first date was 1994 and he wrote a book showing the method by which he reached this date and to show how certain it was. Since then he has come to certain conclusions about several other dates, some of which he made public and some of which he did not. His repeated failures in calculating the end of the world have not led to repentance on his part or any basic revision of his method of interpreting the Bible.

Camping's literalism shows itself in his taking Bible verses out of context and reading into them a meaning that their authors and God never intended. For example, he quotes Amos 3:7, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." He claims that this verse proves that God shows in the Bible the exact date of Christ's return. But in context it is clear that Amos is writing of God's revelation of his judgment against faithless Israel through his prophets. Amos is writing of God's revealing a specific message to his prophets. Camping turns this into a statement that God reveals all his secrets, including the secret of the day of the end of the world, in the Bible. Yet it must be obvious to everyone that there are many of God's secrets that are not revealed in the Bible. Camping has seriously abused this text.

Consider further his use of 2 Peter 3:8, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Camping insists that this is true in the most literal way so that the seven days of Genesis 7:4 must be "exactly" seven thousand years. Peter's point is to show that God is not slow in keeping his promises. Peter is not teaching that every place in the Bible where we find reference to a day, it actually means one thousand years. Notice also that Peter does not say that one day is one thousand years exactly. Camping has added exactly. Also Genesis 7:4 speaks of rain falling 40 days. Does this mean that judgment will last 40,000 years?

Jesus may of course return on May 21, 2011. Since we do not and cannot know when he is returning, May 21 is a possibility. But if Jesus does come then, Harold Camping will not have calculated it correctly. "Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come....Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh" (Mt. 24:42, 25:13). Apparently these verses are not to be understood literally. Camping's allegorical interpretation of these verses makes them mean the opposite of what they say.

While often taking a literalistic approach to numbers, he also takes a very allegorical approach to many texts. This approach seems to have developed gradually, driven in part by his eagerness to refute Pentecostals. Although my memory of Camping in the 1950s is that he used the Revised Standard Version, in later years he became a passionate advocate for the King James Version. Absolute confidence in the KJV probably reflects the need for a Bible version which is so reliable that he can conveniently do without a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. Accepting the KJV requires an acceptance of the long ending of Mark's Gospel where we read Jesus saying, "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mk. 16:17-18).

To avoid the obvious ways in which Pentecostals could use Mark 16, Camping developed an interpretive method in which the apparently literal becomes allegorical or symbolic. He appealed to Jesus' statement about teaching in parables:

"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them" (Mt. 13:34).

"And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all thing to his disciples" (Mk. 4:33-34).

While Jesus clearly is speaking about limited situations and people where he spoke in parables, Camping turned Jesus' statement into a universal principle. By turning everything literal into symbols, Camping can make the Bible say almost anything. For example, if Jesus always speaks in parables and said that he would be in the grave three days, does that mean that he would actually be in the grave three thousand years? But Camping's allegorical method allows him to conclude that Mark 16 does not say that the disciples can handle literal snakes; rather it says that they can oppose Satan, that old serpent.

Guru

Camping's knowledge of Bible verses and confidence led many to follow him as their only leader and teacher. He had become their guru. It is interesting how often people seek someone to follow unquestioningly. This reality has been called the Fuehrerprinzip or the leader principle. Whether a false prophet or a political leader or an intellectual authority, many people want someone whom they can follow simply and blindly. For some listeners to Family Radio, Camping became their leader or guru.

Sadly instead of promoting confidence in the authority of the Bible, Camping has inculcated confidence in himself. One of his followers recently said that if Jesus does not return on May 21, it will show that the Bible is wrong!

Schismatic

For many years Camping taught an adult Sunday School class at the Alameda Christian Reformed Church. This class attracted a number of listeners from Family Radio who did not become integrated into the life of the church. They looked to Camping to tell them what to accept and not to accept in the teaching and

preaching of the pastor. The elders of the church finally decided that this situation needed to be remedied and stated that in the coming year Camping would not teach an adult Sunday School class. This decision led to Camping and his followers leaving the Alameda CRC and forming their own Reformed Bible Church.

The formation of this new congregation may not have been schismatic in itself. Initially they sought a new denomination with which to affiliate and sought a pastor. Camping did not believe that he should be the pastor.

The new congregation never found a pastor or a new denomination, however. Camping had begun a study group on the Heidelberg Catechism and he proceeded to improve or revise the catechism. Once again his arrogant individualism asserted itself. Not surprisingly no Reformed denomination would accept Camping and his congregation on the basis of his revised catechism. At this point he had become schismatic.

Heresy on the Church

Camping's calculations and allegorical readings eventually led him to a truly heretical conclusion: that the age of the church was over and that all Christians were required to separate themselves from all churches. I had rather admired him over the years for not making himself a minister without proper education. I had never dreamed that he would instead abolish the pastoral office and the church.

The end of the church age, according to Camping, paralleled the exile of Israel for its faithlessness in the Old Testament. Camping concluded that the organized church had become faithless and that individual Christians must leave the church and fellowship informally with other true believers. He seems to have come to this position somewhere around 2001, and supported it with various allegorical appeals to Scripture. Once again he rejected the clear teaching of the Bible for his own strange approach.

We must remember that God clearly warned Israel at the beginning of her history that she would be faithless and be exiled from the land of promise (Deuteronomy 28-30). By contrast the New Testament contains no such warning to the church as a whole. While Jesus warns specific congregations that they may be rejected as false churches (Revelation 2-3), he nowhere teaches that the church as a whole may fail. In fact, he teaches quite the opposite. Jesus said to Peter, "And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18, 19). Notice that in this passage Jesus is not thinking of the church only in terms of faith, but also in terms of office in his reference to Peter and the keys of the kingdom. Reformed theology certainly does distinguish the visible church as the whole covenant community from the invisible church of the elect. But throughout the New Testament the believing church is linked to its offices. For example, we read that "the church of the living God" is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15) in the same context as Paul's instructions about the elders and deacons of the church (I Timothy 3:1-4). Similarly we read Paul's commission to Timothy as an officebearer in the institutional church to preach and fulfill his ministry in the light of the false teaching that attacks Christian truth (I Tim. 4:2-5). Timothy is given this commission for the church in preparation for Christ's "appearing," that is, his second coming (I Tim. 4:1). This apostolic commission certainly implies that the work of the ministry remains crucial to the church until Christ comes again.

The vital necessity of the institutional church as God's way of gathering and nurturing his people could be demonstrated in many ways. One final example must suffice here. Christ gave the great commission for the spreading of his truth and included in it the charge to baptize (Matthew 28:19, 20). This charge to baptize is related to Jesus' promise to be with his people to the end of the age. How can the charge to baptize be fulfilled without the institutional church?

Camping's false teaching on the church puts him in opposition to the Belgic Confession which as an elder in the CRC he once subscribed and promised to uphold and defend. On the church the Belgic Confession is clear, strong, and biblical: "We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them" (Article 28).

Heresy on Salvation

Harold Camping has not only deserted the church, he seems also to have deserted Christ and his Gospel. In his online book *The End of the Church...and After*, he began to reject a number of teachings on salvation common in Reformed churches. Consider this strange amalgam of biblical truths and errors all of which Camping rejects as errors so serious that Christ has ended the church age because of them: "Such conclusions that there can be divorce for fornication, baptismal regeneration, our faith is an instrument that God uses to bring us to salvation, a future millennium, women can pastor a church, universal atonement, our acceptance of Christ as a requirement for salvation, are typical of many doctrines solemnly adopted by churches." In this statement are indications of serious confusion on the doctrine of salvation.

Camping's teaching reaches the status of heresy in his recent appeal to the world, "Judgment Day," an eight page statement online. The saddest and most distressing element of Camping's latest theological statement is that it is Christless. He does not write about Christ's return, but about judgment day. In his eight pages of warning and call for repentance he writes only this of Christ: "Because God is so great and glorious He calls Himself by many different names. Each name tells us something about the glorious character and nature of God. Thus in the Bible we find such names as God, Jehovah, Christ, Jesus, Lord, Allah, Holy Spirit, Savior, etc. Names such as Jehovah, Jesus, Savior, and Christ particularly point to God as the only means by which forgiveness from all of our sins and eternal life can be obtained by God's merciful and glorious actions." Notice that Camping says nothing of the Trinity, writing as if Christ and the Holy Spirit are not distinct persons of the Trinity, but just different names for God. If Camping means this, then he is not a Trinitarian, but has adopted the ancient heresy of modalism. Notice also that there is no mention of the cross and Christ's saving work for sinners. Forgiveness is nowhere linked to the work of the incarnate Christ. For Camping the mercy of God comes simply to the repentant. He never mentions faith in Christ. He also makes clear that those who cry for mercy might be saved. He offers no assurance of salvation: "Nevertheless, the Bible assures us that many of the people who do beg God for His mercy will not be destroyed." Notice that not all, but only many who repent will be saved.

Camping's presentation of God's mercy is from beginning to end unbiblical and unchristian. He has no Trinity, no cross, no faith alone in Jesus alone, and no assurance. His vision of God and mercy is more Muslim than Christian. If Camping still believes in the Trinity, in Jesus and his cross, and in justification by faith alone, then his recent teaching shows that he is a failure as a teacher of the Gospel and his call to repentance lacks enough content for sinners to find salvation in Jesus.

Since Camping's misuse of 2 Peter 3:8 is so crucial to his dating scheme, we should look carefully at the message of Peter in his second letter to see what he actually teaches about salvation, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. First, we see that Peter clearly distinguishes God the Father from God the Son as distinct persons of the Godhead (see 2 Peter 1:1, 2, 17). Second, Peter stresses the importance of knowing the truth of Jesus, not just God in general (see 2 Peter 1:8, 16; 2:20; 3:18). Peter makes clear the centrality of the cross in referring to those who "bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them" (2 Peter 2:1). This statement of Peter is parallel to what he teaches in his first epistle: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received

by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18). Third, Peter stresses that the eternal kingdom is not just the kingdom of God in general, but specifically "the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:11). Finally, Peter points to the foundational function of faith in Jesus to the life of the Christian (see 2 Peter 1:1, 5).

Peter stresses the very distinctives of Christianity that are missing from Camping's warning and teaching in "Judgment Day." Camping's failure to teach Christianity faithfully and fully and his misrepresentation of the Bible means that he is one of the false teachers against whom Peter warns Christians (2 Peter 2:1). Peter warned us against "they that are unlearned and unstable" who "wrest" Paul's words "as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

When we read 2 Peter, we see that it is not part of a mystery book or puzzle. Peter writes clearly about the Gospel of Jesus and the danger of false teachers. Peter's concerns in his second letter are to promote confidence in God's Word, even though Jesus seems to some to be slow in returning, to encourage faith in Jesus the Savior, and to call Christians to holy living. Any one reading him carefully can see how utterly different is Peter's teaching from Camping's.

We can end our reflection on Camping's teaching by remembering Jesus' presentation of the Gospel in John 6 and Peter's response to it. That Gospel offended many as Jesus taught on his work, on grace and on faith. Jesus then asked his disciples: "Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:67-69). Let us pray that Harold Camping and his followers will come to embrace the Gospel as Peter did.

For further reading:

James R. White, *Dangerous Airwaves, Harold Camping Refuted and Christ's Church Defended*, Amityville, New York (Calvary Press), 2002.

J. Ligon Duncan and Mark R. Talbot, *Should We Leave Our Churches? A Biblical Response to Harold Camping*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey (P & R Publishing), 2004.

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