

Is Date Setting Dangerous?

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This is would have been my last article on prophecy—at least if Harold Camping had been correct with his prediction. Camping, owner of Family Radio Network, makes this claim, “God has led us in these last days to discover Biblical evidence that judgment day for the unbelievers and the rapture of believer will occur on May 21, 2011.” (FRN Pocket Calendar for 2009).

Then there is the prediction, based on the Mayan Calendar, asserting that the world will come to a catastrophic end on December 21, 2012. So, which is it? May 21, 2011 or December 21, 2012. It can't be both; it will probably be neither. As we know by now, May 21 came and went, without the predicted rapture and apocalypse.

Throughout church history hundreds of dates have been set for the return of the Lord and the end of the world. They all have one thing in common. They were **erroneous predictions uttered by false prophets**. Date setting is unbiblical. Below are some reasons why it is dangerous and wrong.

1. It disregards the fact that all previous date-setting attempts were doomed to failure.

If the date setters were correct, we would all enjoy heaven right now. Unfortunately, most date setters do not repent. They just recalculate and recalibrate. When Edgar Whisenant's book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be In 88*, turned out to be a false prophecy, he promptly suggested 89 reasons why the rapture would be in 1989. Harold Camping's publication, *1994?*, failed to come true but in recent months he was certain that the rapture would be on May 21 of this year. “**The Bible guarantees it,**” was his slogan on the web-site poster.

2. It disobeys the injunction from Christ to refrain from unwarranted speculation.

Sir Robert Anderson, chief of Criminal Investigation for Scotland Yard, and great theologian, discerned the problem with date setters 130 years ago. Insisting with Lord Bacon that the interpretation of prophecy requires “wisdom, sobriety, and reverence,” Anderson laments the situation in his time:

“In our day prophetic students gave turned prophets, and with mingled folly and daring have sought to fix the very year of Christ's return to earth,—predictions which possibly our children's children will recall when another century shall have been added to the history of Christendom.. If such vagaries brought discredit only on their authors, it were well. But though broached in direct opposition to Scripture, they have brought reproach on Scripture itself, and have given a stimulus to the jaunty skepticism of the day. We might have hoped that whatever else might be forgotten, the last words which the Lord Jesus spoke on earth would not be thus thrust aside: ‘It is not for you to know the times nor the seasons which the Father has put in his own power’ (Acts 1:7) . . . the result has been that the blessed hope of the Lord's return has been degraded to the level of predictions of astrologers, to the confusion and grief of faithful hearts and the amusement of the world” (*The Coming Prince*, 11th ed., 131-132).

3. *It delves into areas of privileged knowledge that only belongs to God.*

At the Lord's ascension, the disciples asked the Lord concerning the establishment of the kingdom:

“Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his power” (Acts 1:6-7).

Christ's final comments to His disciples in Acts 1:7 was that it is **futile** for them to guess and **forbidden** for them to know the times or seasons. Neither the period of time (*chronos*) nor the moment of time (*kairos*) are knowable by mortals. Certain information about the future is God's secret. The unrevealed, secret things belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29). They are His property.

Christian psychiatrist O. Quentin Hyder has issued a timely warning to believers,

“God has not given us knowledge of the future nor the ability to obtain it. In this dispensation we are limited in knowledge but expected to live by faith. One day we shall know even as we are known. Craving for knowledge of the future is absolutely contrary to God's will for man and therefore any attempt to obtain it is devil inspired and eventually damaging or even destructive to all who pursue it” (*The Christian's Handbook of Psychiatry* [1971], 75-76).

4. *It discounts the fact that even secular predictions are totally inaccurate and impossible.*

Who in the summer of 1989 would have predicted the collapse of the Iron Curtain on November 9 of that year? What prognosticator knew about the ouster of Egyptian President Mubarak a week before it happened in February 2011? Mark Twain's wry comment is much to the point: “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.”

5. *It destroys the concept of imminence, namely, that Christ could return at any moment.*

To insist, as Camping does, that the rapture takes place on May 21, means that the Lord cannot return today. Yet we are to look daily and hourly for His coming. In Titus 2:13 Paul literally says the we are “excitedly expecting continually the joyous prospect” of Christ's glorious appearing.

6. *It displays a certain arrogance of the date setter by suggesting a novel interpretation hidden from everyone else.*

Date setters claim to have special insights either through hidden codes, direct revelation, special interpretation or exercises in numerology. Whisenant referred to his predecessors as “the wrong date setters of the past (*88 Reasons*, 52). Of course, he promptly joined their ranks. Camping observes that previous speculators were wrong because” they did not base their conclusion upon a careful analysis of everything the Bible had to say about the return of Christ. (*We Are Almost There*, 18) As for himself, Camping says, “**We indeed can be certain that the rapture will occur on May 21, 2011 and the final day of the history of the world is October 21, 2011**” (Ibid. 63, emphasis in the original). When May 21 came and

went without the predicted rapture of saints and commencement of the judgment of sinners, all that Camping could mutter, once again demonstrably a false prophet, “I am flabbergasted.”

7. *It distorts genuine interpretation and holds all legitimate teachers of prophecy up to ridicule.*

In a number of states Harold Camping’s sensational warnings appeared on thousands of billboards: **Judgment Day--May 21,2011—The Bible Guarantees It.** Not unexpectedly, reports in the news media are ridiculing these precipitous predictions. Now that nothing happened on May 21, unbelievers and skeptics gleefully are pointing out how wrong these fundamentalists are in their predictions. The news media worldwide is having a field day, lumping together all who claim to believe the Bible as fundamentalists and thus besmearing a perfectly good theological movement. Camping’s claim that the Bible guarantees his view implies to skeptics and scoffers that the Bible cannot be trusted in other areas of end times teaching and doctrinal truth.

Typical for the world press coverage of Camping’s false prophecy is the column in the conservative German Newspaper, *Die Welt*, (Monday, May 23, 2011, p. 27), reproduced and translated below:

“In the USA hundreds of fundamentalists waited futilely for the end of the world. According to predictions by the 89-year-old radio preacher Harold Camping, the apocalypse was to begin worldwide this Saturday with heavy earthquakes, while some few of the elect were to ascend to heaven. The big bang did not happen. Unbelievers reacted with cutting ridicule.

According to Camping’s prophecy, the earth was to begin quaking on Saturday everywhere at 6 p.m. local time—however, from no parts of the globe were there reports of any special occurrences. As for the rest of the human population, which, according to the disconcerting message had no place in heaven, they would have to continue suffering for another five months until the final end of the world on October 21.”

Unfortunately, doctrinal error seldom stands by itself. Harold Camping’s horrible and heretical hermeneutics lead him to insist that the church age ended in 1988, when Satan entered into the local church. According to him, that there is no millennial rule of Christ. Even if the rapture were to occur this year, the end of the world, in biblical perspective, could not be for another seven years of tribulation followed by 1000 years of the reign of Christ. Camping further asserts that the wicked will be annihilated rather than suffer everlasting punishment in hell. After the non-event of May 21, 2011, Camping insists that while the rapture did not occur, divine judgment has begun, precluding any salvation of sinners.

8. *It disseminates its error with missionary zeal and thus influences others to be heretical.*

It is difficult to conceive what the life of Camping’s followers and employees will be like, now that their faith in their leader has been shattered. The rapture which they anticipated on May 21 did not happen! What do they tell their relatives and friends? What of their witness to their loved ones and acquaintances? What of their credibility and usefulness in any future ministry?

9. *It discourages young or immature believers.*

One can only imagine the sad disappointment of young Christians by a spiritual leader in whom they had confidence. They looked up to their spiritual mentor and subscribed to his sensationalism and speculation. Now they must question everything they were taught by this false prophet. Sadly, they will be the laughing stock of their unsaved relatives and acquaintances. The emotional and spiritual scars left by this devastating experience will not soon disappear.

10. *It diverts resources from legitimate Christian enterprises.*

The millions of booklets distributed free by Edgar Whisenant, giving 88 reasons why he believed the rapture would be in 1988, involved tragic misuse of the Lord's money. The millions of dollars spent by Camping and his followers on 2000 billboards warning of the rapture and ensuing judgments on May 21, 2011, might well have been spent on missionary enterprises, sound local churches and biblical educational institutions. Deluded disciples of Camping spent all their life savings to spread an egregious error.

Conclusion:

Rather than engaging in speculation and sensationalism, the believer is characterized by

- a. **Eager anticipation** (Tit. 2:13, "excitedly expecting . . .")
- b. **Energized activity** (Lk. 19:10, "occupy till I come")
- c. **Extraordinary alertness** (2. Thess. 2:13, "Let no man deceive you. . .")

May this be our concern until the trumpet sounds and summons us into the presence of the Savior. And that may be this very day!