

## Prophecies and Predictions

### *What's Wrong with Setting Dates?*

#### Selected Scripture

In 1994 a man by the name of Harold Camping predicted the rapture would occur. When the rapture failed to materialize, instead of admitting he was nothing less than a false prophet at worst or a misguided and disobedient believer at best, which no one really expected he would do; he instead admitted he'd made some mathematical miscalculations, among other things he hadn't studied the Book of Jeremiah carefully enough.

He simply regrouped and was at it again.

This time around he predicted the date of the rapture for May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011. That was yesterday. I know it didn't happen because my wife is still here.

Hundreds of thousands of people from around the globe bought into his prediction.

His message captured interest and followers from Iceland to India in fact, I saw pictures of billboards his organization rented in other countries.

He said in a recent interview, "On May 21<sup>st</sup> the rapture will occur, and beginning at 6:00 p.m. the world will be plagued by massive earthquakes and other natural disasters that would make Japan's

earthquake in March look like a Sunday school picnic in comparison." He went on to say, "The Bible has given so much information about this, and so many proofs, and so many signs, that we know it is absolutely going to happen without any question at all."<sup>i</sup>

The rapture was supposedly to take place on Saturday the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 2011 precisely, he claims, 7,000 years to the day, after Noah's flood.

In fact, he even predicted that since the waters of the flood stayed on the earth for 5 months after it covered the earth in Noah's day, the rapture would take place and then there would be 5 months of suffering on earth which would eventually kill off all the remaining inhabitants of earth."<sup>ii</sup>

Because of that, his predictions included the rapture on May 21<sup>st</sup> and five months later, the end of the world on October 21<sup>st</sup>.

What makes Harold Camping's predictions all the more troubling is that years ago he began a gospel oriented ministry of radio broadcasting in 1958 when he bought his first radio station.

But over the years, what has emerged is an unaccountable man obsessed with mathematical

formulas and date setting and allegorical interpretations.

In fact, his beliefs have led him to deliver false teachings that are actually more serious than his miscalculation of the rapture.

The reason I'm spending our study today on this subject is not so we can all say, "Hey look, the rapture didn't happen."

I want to deal with the larger subject which is the confusion and devastation brought about by this kind of date setting and why it's not only wrong but harmful to the church worldwide.

I also have a great desire to protect this flock by addressing the subject of false prophecies especially as they relate to setting dates for the coming of Christ.

There are a number of reasons setting dates is wrong, at best, and destructive at worst.

### **1. First, date setting destroys the doctrine of imminency**

In other words, the Biblical teaching of the imminent return of Jesus Christ for His church is destroyed by the setting of dates.

Predicting the date of the rapture literally goes against passage after passage where the Apostles clearly taught and expected Christ to come for the church at any moment.

In fact, they commanded the church to be ready at any moment.

But not ready in the manner of sitting on your hands or climbing a hill and waiting but serving, persevering, and growing.

*Peter wrote, The end of all things is near; therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer . . . he says further down, as each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another. (1 Peter 4:7).*

So the believer is to both look for Christ and live for Christ at the same time.

He's almost here!

*James wrote in chapter 5, "Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord . . . for the coming of the Lord is at hand."*

John wrote, "Little children, it is the last hour." (1 John 2:18).

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "*We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord – we who are alive and remain shall be caught up (the Latin is rapturo – we will be raptured) . . .*

*we who are alive will be raptured up to meet the Lord in the air." (1 Thessalonians 4:15 & 17)*

To the Apostles and the early church, there was nothing that had to happen prior to the rapture of the church.

You need to understand something that will help you immensely, especially in these days. There isn't any quote "signs of the times" left to be fulfilled in order for the rapture to take place.

There are things to be fulfilled in the tribulation, prior to the coming kingdom, but not during this church era.

Now, some of those things that we'll see take place in the tribulation are experienced in a small measure during this church age. Such as apostasy, unbelief, the spirit of antichrist, anti—Semitism, sexual perversion, wars, rumors of wars, natural disasters. They've been taking place in some measure throughout the church age.<sup>iii</sup>

But they will erupt with incredible intensity and devastation during the Tribulation, following the rapture of the church.

Whenever a disaster occurs you can certainly say, "these kinds of things are going to be happening in even greater number and intensity in the Tribulation period . . . so these are warning signs of how ferocious the wrath of God will be when He pours it out on the earth and the world certainly needs to be warned of God's coming wrath.

Here's something else that will protect you from false predictions and imbalance prophetically; keep in mind that the terms "last days" is a biblical term for the church era itself. *The writer of Hebrews said, "In the past, God spoke through the prophets . . . but in these last days, He has spoken to us through His Son." (Hebrews 1:1—2)*

Listen, I know this won't sell very many books, but the church has been in the "last days" according to Hebrews 1 since the first century.

There was nothing and has *been nothing* in the way of Christ's return from the first century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Any other view destroys what the apostles clearly taught, and the church has always believed Christ could come at any moment.

The problem with predicting that Christ will rapture the church on May 21<sup>st</sup>, is that you are effectively saying, Christ cannot rapture the church on May 20<sup>th</sup> or May 19<sup>th</sup>. Thus crippling the doctrine of imminency.

And by the way, Harold Camping is only one man in a list of men and women that date back to the early days of the church and their own version of prophetic date-setters.

In fact, in an odd sort of way, the fact that date-setters can be tracked all the way back to the early church reveals that all the way back then, they believed Christ was coming.

In 236 A.D. a church father named Hippolytus said that the scriptures taught that Christ was returning in 500 A.D.

A century later, another church leader amended that date and said Christ was actually coming in 400 A.D.

An early German Lutheran pastor made headlines a couple hundred years later by predicting that Christ would return at 8:00 am on October 19, 1533.

It ended up becoming quite embarrassing because Martin Luther wouldn't go along with him. In spite of that, a large crowd gathered in his German town at the appointed time and sometime after 8:00 a.m. left him standing alone.

In 1902, a group of Protestants waited for Christ to return to their rural Canadian village and take them away. Since the rapture meant they would be leaving their clothing behind, as an act of even deeper commitment and belief in their prediction, they arrived and waited together, completely naked. Out in the cold, Canadian air they waited. The article read, Christ did not return, but there were several cases of frostbite reported.<sup>iv</sup>

You just can't make this stuff up.

All these date-setters from different centuries and different countries have this one thing in common— you know what it is? They're all wrong.

And now the latest by the president of an evangelical network of Christian radio stations or at least it used to be. His radio stations once aired Bible believing programs.

And I want you to know that what troubles me more than his wrong prediction about the rapture is his errant theology that seems to be swept under the rug, theology which I believe deserves a warning and a rebuke as Paul told Timothy . . . ***knowing the time will come when they . . . will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4)***

Thousands of people just followed a myth.

For several years, Harold Camping has claimed that God is finished with the church that the church had been set aside by God in judgment back in 1994.

In fact, Camping said in an interview, true believers need to leave the church and form fellowships around—not surprisingly—his teaching.<sup>v</sup>

Camping began teaching that since the Holy Spirit has left the church and the age of the church is over, that God is now using Family Radio and ministries like it to evangelize the world.

And the message he and his ministry has been preaching for several years is this—Jesus is coming again on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

Frankly, my generation and the generation before me have probably done more to cripple that doctrine than many other generations before us.

Our generation has been obsessed at times, imbalanced at times, mistaken at times, paranoid—if not downright ridiculous at times about signs of the end times.

The primary incentive for much of the hysteria followed the establishing of the state of Israel in 1948 and for decades the books have churned out that effectively say, “The prophetic clock can begin moving again now that that Israel has returned to the land.”

They believe that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 triggered a prophetic countdown; implying, although they wouldn't want to admit it out loud, that Christ could not have returned in 1947 or 1937.

Listen, the re-gathering of Israel in the land is prophetic events that will finally and fully take place during the Tribulation not before the rapture.

I remember as a kid hearing sermons about all the recent developments from evangelists. They didn't set an exact date, but they certainly destroyed the doctrine of imminency.

I remember hearing one of them preaching that a computer had been built. It was huge, and it was powerful enough to have everybody's address and phone number in it. It had even been nicknamed the Beast. And the preacher scared us all to death with that one.

All that has indeed developed over the years . . . and all of it could be used by the Antichrist to track and persecute Christians, if it hasn't been outdated by something newer by then.

But the truth remains, Jesus Christ could have raptured the church prior to the invention of the

computer . . . I know that's a shocking thing to say, but it's the truth.

There's nothing unbiblical at all with saying, "Look at all the activity in Israel. Look at the growing animosity against the Jew. Look at the posture of the Islamic world against the state of Israel. Look at the jostling of European nations. Look at the desire for a one world currency!

It could all be a prelude to the coming peace maker in the Middle East—the antichrist—and the future battle against Israel during the Tribulation; if the Apostles were looking for Christ back then, we should be standing on our tiptoes.

It's one thing to say, "Look at everything happening—the Lord is nearer than ever." But to say, "Look at everything happening, and it all had to happen before Christ could come and take away His bride." . . . that undercuts the Biblical teaching of imminence."

Christ could come at any moment.

**Date setting destroys the doctrine of imminency.**

## **2. It disobeys the teaching of Christ.**

In *Matthew 24*, the Lord was preaching in His Mount Olivet Discourse and His physical glorious return to establish His kingdom. He said, "***But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.***"

In other words, Jesus as a man, voluntarily restricted his divine prerogative—namely omniscience in this unique case, in order to emphasize that the exact moment of His return was not to be known by humanity but by deity.

Before the risen Christ ascended, in *Acts 1:7*, the disciples asked Him, "Okay, Lord, are you going to set up your kingdom now?" And He responded, "***It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.***"

Christ didn't say that He didn't know which He did at that time, but that the Father owned the right to determine the moment when he would tell His Son just as they did in Jewish weddings of old "Alright Son, go get your bride."

All that to say, Jesus Christ clearly admonished his disciples to steer clear of date-setting and trying to figure out the exact moment of Christ's return.

There's wisdom in that admonition . . . as I'll show you later on today.

But for now, anybody who says, "I've got the date of Christ's return—save the date," then turn the channel! Don't send him any money; don't get on his mailing list.

**Date setting:**

**Destroys the doctrine of imminency;**

**Disobeys the teaching of Christ;**

## **3. It distorts the clarity of scripture**

In other words, since there isn't a date provided in the obvious teaching of scripture for the second coming you have to dig a little deeper and maybe even look at things sideways if you have to.

Harold Camping claimed to have arrived at this date through complex mathematical formulas and basically, an allegorical interpretation of scripture that is, an attempt to find something deeper than the clear meaning of the text.

For instance, he assigned the number 5 to atonement; the number 10 to equal completeness and the number 17 to represent heaven.

Christ hung on the cross on April 1, 33 AD. The time between April 1, 33AD and April 1, 2011 is 1,978 years. If those years are multiplied by the number of days in a solar year, the result is 722,449 days.  $5 \times 10 \times 17$  squared equals 722,500 days.

And the difference is 51 days so, if you add 51 days to April 1<sup>st</sup>, you end up with May 21<sup>st</sup>. Thus, the rapture will take place on May 21<sup>st</sup>.

Now why didn't I see that?

In an interview with the Washington Post, Camping said that he came up with a date of May 21<sup>st</sup> through a mathematical calculation that would crash Google's computers.<sup>vi</sup>

He also claims that May 21<sup>st</sup> is the equivalent date to the date when God shut the door on Noah's ark exactly 7,000 years ago.

So the Bible becomes a coded mystery Book of puzzles with formulas to uncover and mathematical theories that only the brightest of the bright can deconstruct.

The greater danger with date setters like Camping is if you read between the lines and not even between the lines—they imply special knowledge directly from God which is another sign of a modern day false prophet.

On his website, he stated, and I quote, "It was not until a few years ago that the accurate knowledge of the entire timeline of history was revealed to true believers (note that—revealed to

true believers) . . . during these past several years God has been revealing a great many truths, which have been completely hidden in the Bible until this time, when we are so near the end of the world.”<sup>vii</sup>

You can interpret that to mean, “God has revealed to me the secrets and the inside scoop on the end of the world and all who agree with me are the true believers.”

One of their signs said, “Noah knew.” With the implication, “we can too.”

Well, go back to Genesis which I did and read the account again. Noah knew that judgment was coming and that’s about all.

For 120 years he preached and built. It wasn’t until the end of the 120 years when he was commanded to enter the ark that he knew and even then he waited for another week before the rain fell and the underground springs erupted.

I wonder what 120 years could possibly mean maybe that needed to be added on . . .

#### **Date setting:**

**Destroys the doctrine of imminency;**

**Disobeys the clear teaching of Christ;**

**Distorts the clarity of scripture;**

#### **4. It distracts the focus of the church**

The focus of these people was no longer the gospel, but a warning that May 21<sup>st</sup> would be the day they would no longer have another opportunity to be saved. There’s been so much damage done here.

For the last several years Camping spent more and more time explaining to listeners why they should leave their churches, abandon the oversight of elders, to even stop observing the ordinances of baptism and communion.

He claimed that since the church was no longer empowered by God, that the ordinances of baptism and communion were now relics of the past.

Which right there should have alerted the believer, right? *1 Corinthians 11:26* clearly commends the believing church to observe the ordinance of communion until Christ comes again.

So anybody who says you need to stop the ordinance of communion prior to the return of Christ should have been immediately tuned out and turned off. The radio dial should have turned to another channel.

Unfortunately it wasn’t. In some parts of the country pastors reported that as this date came

closer that as many as 8, 9, and 10 families were leaving their churches.

Our mission is not to deliver to people the date of the rapture. If we knew when it was, we would no doubt do that and miss every other element of the gospel.

Why bother with anything if Christ is coming on Saturday. Why mow the lawn on Friday; why study for a Bible class next Monday; why take time out to care for your neighbor’s needs on Thursday; why support missionaries or plant churches. None of it matters, which is another reason God in His wisdom doesn’t let us know!

We are not to sit and wait for the rapture, but to serve Christ and expect the rapture.

One New York man spent his entire \$140,000 life savings advertising this prediction. Another New York resident spent the same. They poured their money into this effort.

In the last 5 years, the followers of Harold Camping gave him 70 million dollars to fund the broadcasts and billboards, bumper stickers, park benches, tracts, truck caravans, radio and internet broadcasts and on and on and on.<sup>viii</sup>

What a colossal waste and much of it, I’m sure from genuine, gullible, kind, compassionate, misguided believers who bought into this false prophet’s special knowledge from God.

Which leads me to the 5<sup>th</sup> tragedy that comes from setting dates:

#### **5. It discourages the misguided believer**

Several of Camping’s followers were interviewed on National Public Radio and one woman said that knowing the date of the end of the world changed her future plans. She had planned to go to medical school until she began tuning in to Family Radio. A year ago they decided to spend the remaining year—get that—year with their infant daughter.

In other words, forget the gospel, forget the church we’ll spend the last year closeted up as a family. Now what?

Another follower said, “Why are we going to work for more money? It’s unnecessary.”

Many of these people got rid of their belongings and quit their jobs.

One couple said, “We budgeted everything so that on May 21<sup>st</sup>, we wouldn’t have anything left.”<sup>ix</sup>

What do they do now? I'll tell you what they need to do—go and repair the relationships they've broken with those they said were not “true believers” and watch as those “not true believers” help them out . . . I hope they do.

The Associated Press reported that in Vietnam right now there are thousands of followers of Camping's prediction from among the Hmong ethnic minority that have gathered near the border of Laos earlier this month. They've been camped out, waiting for May 21<sup>st</sup> to come.

Their lives have been so difficult already and now what?!

They have to go home and pick up the pieces and somehow try to believe that even though everything they heard was made-up, that the word of God is still true and the God of the word is still going to come back one day.

**Date setting:**

**Destroys the doctrine of imminency;**

**Disobeys the clear teaching of Christ;**

**Distorts the clarity of scripture;**

**Distracts the focus of the church**

**Discourages the misguided believer**

**6. Perhaps equally damaging, it delights the world of unbelievers**

It literally fuels their fire of their skepticism. It reinforces their unbelief.

The Apostle Peter wrote that because of false teachers, the truth will be maligned (2 Peter 2:2) literally “injured” or “blasphemed.”<sup>x</sup>

Some of the saddest news reports I came across were reactions of unbelievers to this prediction.

In Tacoma, Washington, atheists have organized an after the rapture party. In fact, in several states throughout the country parties have been planned to celebrate the fact that the earthquakes didn't happen and the end of the world didn't occur.

The Tacoma revelers are calling their party, “Countdown to Backpedaling”. They are convinced that Family Radio will be wrong and they'll have to come up with a way to change their story when judgment day doesn't come.

Here's what Central North Carolina Atheists and Humanists had to say today “Though the absurdity of this claim is obvious of the majority of the world, it's a great opportunity to highlight

these bizarre beliefs . . . and raise awareness of the need for reason.”<sup>xi</sup>

Some atheist groups decided to cash in on this prediction. They started a pet care industry for pets left behind by people who are raptured.

The Washington Post reported that for \$135 dollars and \$20 dollars for each additional pet, Eternal Earth-Bound Pets USA or After the Rapture Pet Care will come and pick up your pet within 24 hours after the rapture. Guaranteed!

The contract is in effect for 10 years. There are 44 contractors now in 26 states.

One company has already signed more than \$35,000 in contracts. The world can only laugh their way to the bank . . . what fools these people are.

Which leads me to the last problem I'll raise with date setting:

**7. It dilutes the warning of coming judgment**

When dates are set and then passed by, we have only emboldened the unbeliever.

We have only reinforced the atheist and the skeptic. We have only heightened their mockery over the foolishness of so-called believers who believe such foolish things as being whisked into the air as if abducted by aliens, and then on top of that a coming judgment on the majority of the world's population who didn't buy into Jesus.

They are saying today with even greater conviction than they said yesterday as Peter correctly predicted, “Mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, *“Where is the promise of His coming?”* (2 Peter 3:4)

Jesus isn't coming back! C'mon . . . you believe that stuff?

Well what about all that stuff about the Bible saying Jesus would come back on May 21<sup>st</sup>. That didn't happen and every other date presented by you people—get a life!

What's this about some promise?!

When I went back to this text, in light of these predictions, I couldn't help but think that perhaps those who claim to speak for Christ have done nothing more than reinforce the foundation upon which the unbeliever stands to mock the promise of His coming. We've added wood to the fire.

And all the while, the real tragedy is yet eternal for we do not know the day or the hour, but we do

know that just as Chris fulfilled prophetic scripture in His first coming, He will fulfill all scriptures related to His second coming.

**And in the meantime, here's what we're to do:**

- **keep on living for Christ**

*Be patient . . . establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near (James 5:9)*

- **keep looking for Christ**

*When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” (1 John 3:2—3)*

Keep on living for Christ and keep on looking for Christ.

Theodore Epp, a Bible teacher from a generation ago who founded Back to the Bible had a much more biblical perspective than Harold Camping who has now misled hundreds of thousands of his followers.

Theodore Epp put it this way we ought to live as if Christ were crucified yesterday; He arose from the dead today . . . and tomorrow He's coming back.

Not bad advice . . . like John the Apostle whose final words were, “Come on, Lord Jesus . . . if not today at last tomorrow!”

We ought to live as if Christ were crucified yesterday, He arose from the dead today . . . and He's coming back tomorrow.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 05/22/2011 by Pastor Stephen Davey

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i Nymag.com/daily/intel/2011/05, p. 1

ii NPR.org/2011/05/07/136053462

iii John MacArthur, The Second Coming (Crossway Book, 1999), p. 58

iv ravenswoodbaptist.com/articals/dangerofdatesetting

v World Magazine, May 21, 2011, p. 13

vi Christianity.com

vii Ibid

viii IBTimes, May 20, 2011

ix Npr.org/2011

x Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 774

xi bbc.co.uk/news/world—us—canada—13468131