

Again the Rapture—May 21, 2011

Here we go again. Harold Camping, the 89 year-old founder of Family Radio, has determined that the Rapture will occur on May 21, 2011. According to the message on his billboards, painted vans and RVs, “the Bible guarantees it.”

We’ve been down this road before with Harold Camping. In 1994, he predicted that the Rapture will occur in September and wrote a book about it, *1994?* Later he admitted that his calculations had been incomplete and that September had only been a *possibility*.

This time he is absolutely sure. 100% guaranteed. No doubt about it.

Who is Harold Camping? Born in Boulder, CO, he grew up in California where he earned a civil engineering degree from UC Berkeley and ran a construction company. In the 1950s he and a few friends bought a local radio station which has grown into Family Radio with over 100 stations in the US. Based in Oakland, CA, It broadcasts in 48 languages in places like South Africa, Russia, and Turkey.

For years he has hosted “Open Forum,” a weekday call-in program in which he answers questions about the Bible. He says he is no prophet, only a careful student of the Bible. As the End draws near, God has allowed him to understand the importance of the numbers embedded in Bible prophecy. He invites all comers to check his figures for themselves.

Doing the Math

The Bible is full of numbers so date setters must decide which of them to use and when to start counting. Camping offers two mathematical proofs for his May 21, 2011 predictions.

The first is based on Noah’s flood, which he believes occurred in 4990 BC (his date for creation is 11,013 BC). Once Noah finished the Ark, God told him, his family, and the animals to go into the Ark and wait seven days for the rain to begin (Genesis 7:4). Camping believes that Noah’s experience points ahead to Jesus’ Second Coming. He converts the seven *days* of waiting to 7,000 *years* since “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Peter 3:8). By adding 7,000 years to 4990 BC, he arrives at 2010, to which he adds another year because there was no Year Zero. (If such a year does not exist, why would he not *subtract* a year from 2010?) What about May 21? According to Genesis 7:11, the flood began “on the 17th day of the second month” (17 Iyar in the Jewish calendar), which converts to May 21 on the Gregorian calendar. (The history of the use of calendars is very complicated, so a simple conversion from one calendar to another is not as easy as Camping thinks.)

The second proof is based on his dating of Christ's crucifixion on April 1, 33 AD, which assumes Jesus' birth a few years later than most scholars do. To that date he adds 722,500 days, a figure he gets by multiplying "holy numbers" together twice (5x10x17x5x10x17). Such a formula, he insists, also leads to May 21, 2011.

What will happen on May 21? According to Camping, Christ will return to rapture (catch up to heaven) all true believers, who comprise only 1-3% of the world's population. Starting at 6 pm at the International Date Line, an earthquake of unprecedented severity will take place and then move west around the world, occurring at 6 pm in each time zone. Millions will die. This is the beginning of Judgment Day. Those who survive the earthquakes will experience additional catastrophes until October 21, when God will completely destroy the heavens and the earth.

Though Camping's views contain elements from other Christian views of prophecy, he puts them together in ways that are unique to him. But he is in a long line of other date-setters with foolproof calculations. America's best known date-setter was William Miller, a Baptist preacher from Vermont who used "millennial arithmetic" (numbers mainly from Daniel and Revelation) to calculate Christ's return on October 22, 1844. After he and the Millerites experienced the "Great Disappointment," he made a few adjustments. Miller finally concluded that while he had been right about *when*, he had been wrong about *where*: events had occurred on schedule in heaven, not on earth. Such an explanation satisfied many but not all of his followers. Loyalists founded the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

More recently Edgar Whisenant, a NASA engineer, calculated that Christ will return September 11-13, 1988. Close to 5 million copies of his booklet *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* were sold or given away; and the Trinity Broadcast Network ran programs on how to prepare for the Rapture. Whisenant was certain too: "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." The non-appearance of Jesus in September did not put a stop to his predictions. He tried again in 1989, 1993, 1994, and 1997. Book sales were few, however.

Other date-setters wisely hedge their bets with "it may be," "it seems that," or "if our figures are correct." In this category are Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Charles Taylor, and a long list of Jehovah's Witnesses who have regularly predicted the End of the World starting in the 1870s. All of them used whatever media were available at the time to get their message out—books, lectures, rallies, newspaper advertising, radio, television, the Internet, and now billboards and painted vans. Every time date-setters get specific, some people listen and get prepared.

Getting Ready for the Rapture

Of course, getting specific raises the stakes considerably. While virtually all Christians believe that Jesus is coming back, only a few have dared to say when. To get a following, one needs to offer "guarantees," not just "the chances are good."

Certainty produces predictable behavior. What would you do if you became absolutely convinced that Christ was going to return on a specific date? Some Millerites in the early 1840s

quit their jobs, left their crops in the fields, paid off their debts, and confessed to unsolved crimes. But mostly they evangelized and spread the message about the “advent near.”

Many of the followers of Camping have also rearranged their lives to get the message out, especially to their own family and friends. Some admit that their beliefs have not been well received. How many followers have taken to the highways and byways to advertise the coming Judgment Day? We see them interviewed on TV, but no one knows how many there are or how they became so committed to their beliefs or what they will do if May 21 comes and goes.

As of now, Camping and his followers say that they have not even considered such a possibility. That’s understandable: How can one claim absolute certainty about May 21 if one is planning a June vacation, investing in long-term municipal bonds, or making future appointments? But one suspects that somehow Camping and the others will be able to carry on if they are still here on May 22.

If history teaches anything, two things are going to happen (and here I’m making some big assumptions): Harold Camping et al will have some explaining to do; and their movement will continue in one form or another. It is counter-intuitive, but many prophetic groups survive and even prosper after a failed prophecy (what scholars also call “prophetic disconfirmation”). By the time the predicted date passes, true believers have often burned their bridges (since 1988 Camping has taught that God no longer worked through churches and that real believers needed to leave them), formed new relationships that provide strong support, and are thoroughly committed to the Teacher. Rather than give all that up, they make necessary adjustments so they can move ahead together. Outsiders are often amazed that followers can so easily overlook their teacher’s mistakes, believe their explanations, and line up to buy their second or revised editions. Mistaken guarantees, it seems, are easily explained away.

In the end, setting dates is dangerous business, especially in light of Jesus’ own words: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Are we to believe that what Jesus really meant was “only the Father *and Harold Camping*”? When it comes to Bible prophecy, staying humble is always the best policy. Making the Bible’s credibility hinge on one’s outrageous interpretation of it is rooted in arrogance and ignorance. As we may find out on May 22, the chances are good that the only one guaranteeing anything was Harold Camping.

Maybe a failed prophecy this time will put an end to Camping’s prophetic mathematics. But don’t count on it.