

## **“Dear Harold Camping...”**

### **Introduction:**

Unless you've been living under a rock for a few weeks, no doubt you're all aware that the rapture was supposed to take place last Saturday, May 21<sup>st</sup> at 6 PM, rolling through the different time zones. This was according to Harold Camping, the 89 year old President of Family Radio. He and his followers spent months and millions of dollars advertising the coming apocalypse on billboards, radio, flyers and signs on vehicles around the world. Well, today is May 29<sup>th</sup> and we're still here.

He's not the first to make such bold pronouncements. In fact, it's not the first time that he has done so: he predicted previously that the world would end in 1994. I remember that someone predicted the world would end in 1976. A man by the name of Edgar Whisenant predicted the end of the world in 1988. Many predicted that it would end at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So, what are we to make of Mr. Camping and people like him? From what I can tell, those who know him would say that he's a nice man. In fact, someone who interviewed him in 1994 said that about him. It also appears that he sincerely believed what he said. I can't get inside his head, but I don't see any malicious intent.

But regardless of his intent, the predictions that he made had major consequences. A California woman named Lyn Benedetto was one of millions who heard Camping's message, and became concerned that her daughters would suffer terribly in the coming apocalypse. She allegedly tried to kill them with box cutters. She then tried to kill herself, though police arrested Benedetto and all three survived.

Others were not so lucky. An elderly man in Taiwan reportedly killed himself on May 5 ahead of the Rapture by jumping out of a building. He had heard that doomsday was imminent, and had taken recent earthquakes and tsunamis as early warning signs. Reportedly, a 14 year old girl in Russia was so frightened by the prediction that she committed suicide.

Others reactions were maybe not so dramatic, but many people were impacted by Mr. Camping. Some of his followers were spending all their

money in the days leading up to May 21. I had quite a few people, Christian and non asking me for my opinion about his predictions. So what I wanted to do this morning was to see what we could learn from this fiasco. What are the lessons that we can take away from the events, or lack of events, over the past couple of weeks.

### **When you hear something serious, consider the source.**

Who is Harold Camping anyway? Mr. Camping was raised in a Christian Reformed Church and has a Civil Engineering Degree. He started his own construction company after World War 2 and has been quite successful. In 1958 he and some friends purchased a radio station in California and began Family Radio. Since that time he has become the President, General Manager and chief teacher on an expanding network of stations. There is no indication in any of the station's published material that Mr. Camping has any formal theological training.

*At some point the station determined that "God has shifted the final task of world evangelism to individual Christians who are outside of a local congregation. In obedience to these Biblical teachings, Family Radio, which is completely outside of any church institution, and which is supported and administered by individual believers, does teach that today, as we are heading for the end of this world's existence, we should not be a part of a local church."*

[http://www.familyradio.com/english/connect/bio/haroldcamping\\_bio.html](http://www.familyradio.com/english/connect/bio/haroldcamping_bio.html)

### **Why was Harold Camping wrong?**

- **He was wrong because he refused to be accountable.**

Many times over the years I've had people I've never met come into my office and tell me that they have a message from God that I must share with my congregation. The first question that I ask them is "who is your pastor?" Almost without fail they will tell me that they don't attend any particular church because all churches are wrong and will not listen to the message that God has given them. In other words, they are accountable to no-one but God.

The Bible tells us in Proverbs 11:14 that *“Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”*

There is such a thing as the gift of prophecy which is spoken of in Scripture. God will give insight to individuals about events or people that they would not know naturally. I remember an encounter I had about 12 years ago after I'd been pastor here for about a year. As you may have heard, I didn't want to leave my previous church and was very disappointed that things didn't go differently. As we were pulling out of the driveway of the parsonage to move to Stayner, I turned to my wife and said: *“Well, the dream just died.”* Even though I loved this church and we were having success over that first year, I had this nagging feeling that I didn't accomplish what I set out to do in my previous church; that I had failed. I was discouraged.

About that time, I was attending a meeting of pastors in Barrie, listening to a guest speaker by the name of Paul Schoch, an elderly preacher with a good reputation. As he was speaking, I had a thought that I wrote down, unrelated to his topic. I thought it might make a good message title some day. It said simply, *“Get in the jet stream of the Holy Spirit.”* After his talk he asked if he could pray for us. Then he came and stood right in front of me. He began to speak, *“You said, ‘the dream has died,’ but God says to you, ‘I am doing a new thing. Get in the jet stream of the Holy Spirit.’”* I was dumbfounded. I felt that God was speaking directly to me, and it felt right. That experience helped to confirm that God had been leading me the whole time. While I didn't understand why things had happened the way they had, He was still in control. I really needed to hear that.

In 1 Corinthians 12:27, 28 the Bible tells us that God gave us gifts to help us; pastors, teachers, gifts of discernment, healing, teaching, all kinds of things. But it says that He placed them within the church. Each is to use their gift to help build up the whole church, which is called *“The Body of Christ.”* Part of the problem with Mr. Camping is that he removed himself from all of those parts of the body that could have served to keep him from making those errors.

If I had made the kind of claims that Mr. Camping did, I, first of all, would have some of you challenge me at the door to defend my position from Scripture, and that's a good thing. Secondly, Pastor Merv or Pastor Carl or John or George or my wife would have challenged me. Thirdly, the church board would have taken me to task, and, if that didn't work, my denominational leaders would have stepped in to force me to defend my position Biblically or acknowledge my error.

This is a good reason to belong to a good church.

- **He was wrong because he didn't properly interpret Scripture.**

When the Apostle Paul was writing to a young pastor, named Timothy, who he had mentored, he said this: *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."* (2 Timothy 2:15) There's a right way and a wrong way to interpret Scripture.

Camping and his followers went to great lengths to say that the Bible "guaranteed" that the end of the world would come on May 21<sup>st</sup>. How did he arrive at his conclusions? He takes a number of Scriptures; rips them out of their context and makes them say what he wants them to say. (Daniel 8:14; 2 Peter 3:8; and Revelation 9:5) He also ignores other Scriptures that make it very clear that what he's saying cannot be true.

In Matthew 24:36 Jesus says this: *"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* In verse 44 He said, *"So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."* It doesn't sound like it's an event that can be announced on billboards, does it?

When we're studying the Bible we have to understand that God is not trying to confuse us. There are a lot of people who have spent a large part of their lives looking for the hidden messages in the Bible. Their time would be better spent living up to the clear principles and teachings laid out in Scripture.

I was very pleased to see that there weren't a lot of people at CCC who put any stock in what Camping was saying, largely because, I hope, you know

enough Scripture to see that he was wrong. One of the principles of Biblical interpretation is that God does not contradict Himself. So if we find verses in one part of the Bible which seem to contradict others in another part of the Bible, we need to question our interpretation and be sure we're looking at it in the right context. This is particularly important in the area of Biblical prophecy. As Paul said in Romans 3:4, "*Let God be true, and every human being a liar.*" What he's saying is this: if you can rely on anything, it is the Word of God. People make mistakes, sometimes people may lie. But God is true.

There are parts of the Bible which speak of things which are still to come. For example, there are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament about Jesus, written hundreds of years before He was born. Jesus fulfilled all of them. Yet, Jesus' own disciples didn't understand them until after His death; until after they had been fulfilled. The writers of the Bible were sometimes relating visions which God had given them, which they themselves didn't understand. They were writing them as they experienced them.

For anyone to say, as Harold Camping did, that the Bible guarantees that a prophetic event will occur in a particular way in certainty, is basically to claim that they are speaking inerrantly for God. They understand better than everyone else does. The problem is that Harold Camping is human, he is not God. Harold Camping has also been wrong many times before. So...

- **Harold Camping was wrong because he presumed he was infallible.**

When people make bold claims they invite scrutiny; they put themselves under the microscope. What also happens, though, is that people like Camping, who has said that he will not be under any church authority, give non-believers a great excuse to dismiss Christianity as a whole. For that, Mr. Camping will have to carry some heavy responsibility.

I remember when Y2K was rolling around, and books were being written and a number of people, inside the church and out, were predicting the end of civilization as we know it. There was one woman in this area who was saying that God had told her that major events would occur on that date, and she had a number of people who believed her. I heard one of them say that "*If it didn't happen, then God isn't God.*" That's the kind of crazy statement that paints people into corners and makes God look bad.

God never said that. Someone thought that God said that. There is a big difference. If you honestly feel like God is trying to say something through you, than at least be humble enough to say, “I have a sense that this is what God is saying.” That leaves room for you to be mistaken – and you may be. It’s too bad Harold Camping didn’t do that.

## **General Principles Learned**

### **Don’t try to make the Bible say more than it does.**

I have many volumes of books on my shelves called commentaries. They are written by different people about the same subject. On some issues, like prophecies about the end of the world for example, there are different views on the same verses. That’s okay. They recognize that, as 1 Corinthians 13 tells us, “*Now we see through a glass darkly...*”

### **Major on the majors.**

I’m often asked to preach a series on the end times. I hesitate to do that because much of it is speculative; and often it leads to more questions than answers. But there are some things that we know for sure.

**Jesus promised that He would return – and He doesn’t lie.** (John 14:3)

**No-one but God knows the day or the hour that Jesus will return.**  
(Matthew 24:36, 44)

**Jesus said that we ought to live our lives in such a way that, no matter when He comes, we’ll be ready.** (Luke 12)

**When Jesus comes for His people, it will be a good day – if you’re ready.**

*“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. <sup>15</sup> According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup>*

*Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)*

**Bottom line.** Study your Bible.