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False Prophets, False Teachers, and Real Trouble: The Case of Harold Camping

Today's church cannot remain faithful if it tolerates false teachers and leaves their teachings uncorrected and unconfuted. Harold Camping is not the first false teacher to present the church with such a test of faithfulness, nor will he be the last.

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Andy Warhol was wrong. Fame doesn't last just fifteen minutes. After all, Harold Camping is still in the news, more than a week after his prophecy that the world would end on May 21 at 6:00 p.m. turned out — as expected — to be false.

Camping's end-of-the-world prophecy and the related publicity circus gained international attention. It was virtually inevitable that his claims would become a matter of global interest, followed by international derision. After all, Camping had claimed to have discovered a secret code within the Bible that allowed him to predict the precise day that Christ would appear and judgment would begin. As he told the press, he was certain that the end of the world was "absolutely going to happen without any question at all."

In anticipation of May 21, Camping and his followers purchased thousands of billboard advertisements and sent the message across America painted on recreational vehicles. Some of his followers emptied their bank accounts and gave away their possessions, expecting no longer to need them.

When May 21 came and went, and the end of the world clearly did not happen, Camping did not apologize or even concede the fact that his prophecy was false. Instead, he said that the May 21 date was actually a "spiritual" judgment day, and that the actual day, signaled by cataclysmic earthquakes, would come on October 21.

The derision and laughter from the secular community was loud and entirely predictable. An atheist group offered to take care of the pets of those who were raptured, but for a fee. Late night comedians have yet to let go of the affair, and Harold Camping is, at least for the moment, a famous man.

Harold Camping is not, however, a trained Bible scholar or a pastor. He holds an undergraduate engineering degree from the University of California, Berkeley. He was for years an elder in the Christian Reformed Church, but the major platform for his teachings emerged when he joined with others to purchase an FM radio station in 1958 — long before FM was a major player in the broadcasting world. All that would change, of course, and Camping's expanding radio ministry, known as Family Radio, grew with the new medium.

May 21 was not his first failed prophecy. In 1992, he started predicting the end of the world in 1994. When that year passed, Camping just declared that he had misunderstood the hidden code within the Bible. Seventeen years later, he is wrong again.

But Mr. Camping is not merely wrong on this rather embarrassing matter. More importantly, he has called for



Christians to leave their churches, claiming to have found in the Bible the announcement that the age of the church has passed. Since the church no longer exists, he has taught, Christians should leave the so-called churches and merely associate for fellowship. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, commanded by the Lord to be practiced until he comes, are no more, Camping has taught.

Along the way, Camping has also denied the biblical doctrine of hell. More recently, he has declared the end of evangelism, telling listeners to his program that his concern now is for "true believers" in preparation for the October 21 arrival of Judgment Day.

Harold Camping has refused all correction and all efforts to persuade him to cease his false teachings. He left a major denomination and cast out on his own. He has received delegations of concerned theologians and major Christian leaders, but he has resisted all efforts and repudiated accountability to the church.

He is the classic example of a false teacher and a false prophet, about which the Bible has so much to say. And yet, some Christians have suggested that his errors should go uncorrected and his false teachings should be tolerated, just because he is an old man.

Mr. Camping will be 90 years old on July 19, but his false teachings are not a factor of old age. He began these teachings long ago. Furthermore, he bears all the signs of a false prophet. He claims to have a secret knowledge revealed only to him by God. He claims to have found a hidden code in the Bible. He rejects what he calls "literalism" and claims the right to a "spiritual" interpretation of the biblical text. He has rejected all correction from the believing church and persists in his false teachings. He has led thousands astray from the truth and has brought reproach upon the Body of Christ. He refuses even to concede that his prophecy was false. He and he alone is right.

The Bible has a great deal to say about false teachers and false prophets. In the Old Testament, prophets whose prophecies turned out to be false were to be put to death. According to the New Testament, they are to be exposed, removed from the church, and no longer even to be greeted by believers.

The Apostle Paul warned Timothy that some with "itching ears" would "accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions." [2 Timothy 4:3] He warned Titus of those who would upset the church and its families by "teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach." [Titus 1:11] Peter's words to the church are especially directed to the rise of false teachers: "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." [2 Peter 2:1]

For this reason, James warned, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." [James 3:1]

Those are sober words, and false teachers are in real trouble. That was true in the first century as the church began, and it is certainly true now. The difference now is the velocity with which false teachings can be disseminated. Today's church cannot remain faithful if it tolerates false teachers and leaves their teachings uncorrected and unchallenged. Harold Camping is not the first false teacher to present the church with such a test of faithfulness, nor will he be the last.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

See also: R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "[The End is Near? The False Teaching of Harold Camping](#)," Monday, May 16, 2011.

For good responses to Harold Camping, see:

James R. White, "[Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping's Call to Flee the Church](#)," *Christian Research Journal*, 2002. PDF version available [here](#).

J. Ligon Duncan and Mark R. Talbot, "[Camping's Folly: A Response to Harold Camping's Erroneous Teaching on the Church](#)," The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 2002.

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