



Harold Camping

Author: Charles Sarno

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Introduction

Harold E. Camping (1921–2013) was a Christian radio personality, best known for predicting the end of the world in 1994 and again in 2011. While Camping was not the first person to mistakenly prophesy Judgment Day, he was exceptional in several respects. Unlike many apocalyptic prophets, he was not really given to flights of fancy in his manner or demeanour. This was, in part, the result of his Christian Reformed upbringing—a strict Calvinist group that made him emotionally reserved and distrustful of feelings and more frenzied speculations. For most of his life he followed an orthodox Christian line on matters of faith, only in later years arriving at new spiritual insights. Nor was there hint of any scandalous financial or sexual motivations behind his activities. He was modest in terms of personal style and generally disclaimed any authoritarian desires, even while in the course of making his more grandiose claims, and thus was an uncommon type for a charismatic leader. (The term ‘charismatic’ is used here in a sociological and not theological sense.) Finally, Camping had a large and influential medium by which to get his message out. As the president and general manager of Family Stations Inc., colloquially known as Family Radio (FR), he controlled a network of about sixty-five stations, including a powerful international shortwave facility, possessing radio assets estimated to be worth at least \$250 million dollars at the time of his prediction (Tuter 2012a). Consequently, Camping controlled an uncommon media platform and was in a prime position to broadcast his message of Judgment Day globally, which he did mainly through his well-known international Bible call-in programme, the *Open Forum*

Beginnings

Harold Egbert Camping was born in the vicinity of Boulder, Colorado, on 19 July 1921. He was the second of five boys born to Roelfe ‘Ralph’ Jacobus Camping and Trjntje ‘Trina’ Hettes Hetteema, Dutch immigrants who came separately to the United States in the early twentieth century. According to Camping, his mother was a godly woman who instilled the tenets of the Christian faith in her children early on. In Camping’s memory, his father appeared as a more remote and less immediately religious figure. Camping claimed to have had an intense interest in the Bible even as a very young boy, and for as long as he could remember he had been raised in the church, adhering to the Christian Reformed tradition (Meyers 2011; Olsson and Sternegard 2011).

During his time growing up, he appears to have been a somewhat serious but intellectually precocious boy. In addition to possessing a keen memory, he excelled at maths and numbers. In the summer of 1942, Camping graduated with a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from the University of California at Berkeley. He turned twenty-one in July and five days later married his eighteen-year-old sweetheart, Shirley Vander Schuur (b. 1924), whom he had met at a local church. They would remain married for more than seventy years. While discussing his youth, Camping described himself as 'always in a hurry'. Immediately upon graduation, he secured an engineering job with the Kaiser Company as part of the war effort. The couple's first child, Carol, was born in August 1943. Six more children would follow, with the last child being born in 1959. The Campings had a total of seven children: six girls and one boy (Olsson and Sternegard 2011; Piestrup 2011).

By the early 1950s, Camping had started his own engineering firm, which proved to be very lucrative. While many of his firm's building projects were commercial in nature, he also took great pride in building over eighty churches across the United States, including his home church in Alameda, California, which was constructed in 1954. A few years earlier he had built his family home, a modest three-bedroom split-level ranch, less than a mile away from the church, where he resided until his death. During this time Camping came to view engineering and construction simply as his career realizing by his account that his vocation would be to serve God in some greater capacity. His long-term goal was to become financially independent enough—perhaps by age forty—to devote himself as a full-time volunteer to some Christian organization spreading the Gospel. Money for Camping was never an end in itself; rather, it was the means of proclaiming the glory of God (Olsson and Sternegard 2011; Piestrup 2011).

During the postwar period, Camping became a respected pillar of the Alameda Christian Reformed Church (ACRC), where he remained a member for more than forty years. The ACRC is part of the larger Christian Reformed Church (CRC) denomination, which historically had been ethnically Dutch and strictly adhered to the Calvinistic branch of the Reformation. For Camping, the height of the CRC in terms of faithfulness was the 1950s. For most members, the Bible alone—*sola scriptura*—was paramount. Moreover, given its roots, many CRC members, including Camping, emphasized the five main points of Calvinism summed up in the well-known acronym TULIP (Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance in the faith). Overall, the absolute sovereignty of God, in and out of history, and in relationship to his Creation, was accentuated.

At the ACRC, Camping served as a deacon before finally becoming a teaching elder in the adult Sunday school classes. In the mid-1950s, he had considered going back to school, perhaps even to seminary, to get a doctorate, but after much prayer decided against doing so. Instead, he decided—or was called—to 'make the Bible my university' (Olsson and Sternegard 2011) and he undertook a more intense study of scripture. The experience he had in his engineering and maths classes in college was thus brought over to his early theological studies. With careful and diligent searching and research, he believed the answer to nearly any question could be found in the Bible.

The Genesis of Family Radio

The original idea for FR began not with Camping but in the mind of a young evangelical missionary named Richard 'Dick' Palmquist (b. 1931). In 1958 Palmquist met Camping through happenstance and began

discussing the former's vision of a Christian radio station. By his own admission, Camping knew nothing about radio and had never considered it as a means to his vocation, but he saw the evident opportunity for Gospel outreach in Palmquist's idea. Initially it was thought that Palmquist knew enough about the day-to-day operations of radio to get such a station off the ground. Camping, as a well-placed businessman with some expertise in negotiating contracts and dealing with regulations, could remain behind the scenes. The key proviso for Camping was that the station must be set up as a nonprofit, noncommercial corporation and be arranged so that none of its directors could ever derive any financial benefit from the organization. Its main mission was to spread the Gospel via the airwaves. By the autumn of 1958, an FM station in San Francisco—KEAR—had been purchased for \$100,000, and the first FR broadcast occurred on 4 February 1959.

Over the next five years the network acquired additional stations, including its crown jewel, WFME, which was located in the middle of the FM dial. WFME possessed a strong signal that blanketed the New York metropolitan region, representing a real coup for the fledging network. In its first two years, FR experimented with charging a 'cost of service fee' to those Bible teachers and programmes that used its airwaves, but this was soon dropped, and the network relied solely on listener support. As a nonprofit relying on the goodwill of its listeners, its money was always tight. By the middle of 1964, organizational tensions came to a head between Palmquist and Camping, and Palmquist was terminated. Camping, who was already president of the network, assumed the day-to-day responsibilities of general manager on a volunteer basis. This would be an important turning point in the early history of FR, the first and in many ways biggest step Camping took to assert his own sole authority over the organization, eventually to the exclusion of all other voices. But that change would come gradually, with its effects not fully apparent until more than twenty-five years later (Sarno 2012b).

The Golden Age of Family Radio and the Open Forum

The next couple of decades, from approximately the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, would be considered the golden age of FR by many of its staff and listeners. During this period some financial stability was achieved, important growth occurred, and the network's overall sound—including some of its most famous programming—was established. For the most part FR eschewed contemporary Christian or Gospel songs. Its programming was theologically conservative, but also ecumenical and catholic in the sense of having broad appeal and focusing on what united evangelicals in the faith. Its goal was to support the church by providing encouragement to believers as well as reaching the unsaved and getting them to church. The idea was to avoid controversy and divisiveness while nonetheless proclaiming biblical truth.

After Palmquist's departure, Camping's 'behind the scenes' persona became more front and centre. This began in the mid-1960s with the start of the *Open Forum*, a show wherein Camping would answer questions about the Bible from his call-in listeners. Camping, now general manager, initially had two hours a week on select network stations. This would incrementally increase so that by 1975 he would have four hours a week on every station. By 1980 it was five nights a week; meanwhile he had also begun doing a half-hour teaching class called *Family Bible Study*. By 1985, when the time slot for the *Open Forum* was expanded to an hour and a half per day, FR listeners across the network could consistently hear Camping for ten hours a week during prime time, and sometimes more if a Bible conference talk of his was broadcast. This general schedule would persist until and slightly beyond [21 May 2011](#), Judgment Day.

Even from the beginning, the *Open Forum* was not without controversy. While Camping during this period gave no specific indication of end-time dates, his authoritative tone and dogmatic teaching on key tenets of Calvinism were seen as divisive by some staff and listeners. Others, however, appreciated the *Open Forum*. Even those who did not agree with Camping's perspective at least found it engaging and entertaining radio. Many Camping supporters commented how they learned a lot from the show, and those who agreed with him found his directness refreshing. Moreover, his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible was captivating, especially to the novice Bible student. Camping seemed to be 'in the know' about the scriptures in a special way. In an age before the internet and other computerized resources such as concordances, Camping was able to relate passages from very different parts of the text in an extremely quick and unusually adept—albeit sometimes controversial—fashion. Finally, while often stern and somewhat unforgiving in tone, the overall theology espoused on the programme would be considered orthodox within conservative Christian circles (Sarno 2012b).

Camping's Bible studies intensified over the course of the late 1960s as his participation in the organizational life of FR increased. In the early 1970s, he sold off his construction business and became a full-time volunteer at FR, receiving annual compensation of \$1.00 for his efforts. During this period, he started working intently on a biblical timeline of history, attempting to establish a date for the beginning of the Creation, though not its end. Through an innovative reading of the genealogies in Genesis he arrived at the conclusion that God created Adam—along with the rest of Creation—approximately 13,000 years ago, or more specifically in 11,013 bce. Camping published his findings in a book-length monograph titled *Adam When? A Biblical Solution to the Timetable of Mankind* in 1974. *Adam When?* became the basis for all of Camping's future work on the timeline of history.

While Camping never claimed to be anything more than a Bible teacher, his commanding pronouncements—made on the *Open Forum*, in other FR programming, and in his Sunday school classes—were, by the mid-1980s, putting him at odds with church authorities. This included elders within his own congregation, who were increasingly suspicious about his way of interpreting the Bible. Over time Camping's mode of biblical interpretation had become increasingly allegorical as he began to flesh out a detailed study of the end times (or eschatology). While Camping was not yet teaching any specific end date publicly, he was hinting that the end was near. In his eyes, the falling away that was occurring in the churches and other changes, including an increasingly lax attitude towards divorce and less strict adherence to the Sunday Sabbath, constituted clear signs of the times. Towards the end of the 1980s at FR-sponsored Bible conferences, he was suggesting some possible end-time dates in private among close friends. Camping soon came to believe that 1988 could very likely be the year, and he started to mention this more publicly, resulting in pushback from authorities in his local church (Sarno 2011; Sarno 2012a).

In May 1988, Camping was asked to step down as a Sunday school teacher, and by the autumn had had left the ACRC, taking about 40 percent of the congregation with him. The dispute was in equal parts personal, organizational, and doctrinal. It remains an open question as to whether Camping was pushed out of the ACRC or whether he left of his own volition. Like many parts of his life, this one is subject to interpretation and perspectives vary (Sarno 2011). During the course of interviews in later years, he would minimize any negative feelings he might have had around leaving the ACRC, suggesting it was simply a difference of opinion on some matters and that the split was amicable (Olsson and Sternegard 2011; Piestrup 2011). He may have wanted to leave, believing that the church was losing faithfulness because of its more liberal tendencies on certain social and theological issues, even as his own opinion on many of

these matters appears to have grown more conservative. Nonetheless, his life and those of his wife and other family members were by this time deeply entwined with others in the ACRC, with forty years' worth of relationships built up, so leaving could not have been easy. The way Camping would teach about the apostasy of the church in later years, and the 'fact' that the Great Tribulation of twenty-three years had begun in May 1988, suggests that he had much more emotion invested in the episode than he was willing to admit (Sarno 2011; Olsson and Sternegard 2011).

Apocalypse 1.0: 1994?

After his split from the ACRC, Camping served as a 'teaching elder' in the new rump congregation he had formed. For the first few years, the church was ostensibly looking for a pastor, but one never materialized, primarily because candidates knew they would have to contend with Camping and his authority. And then there was the looming question of 1994, which from Camping's perspective would make developing the organization a moot point (St. Clair 2003).

In 1992 Camping put the final touches on a manuscript he had been working on for nearly twenty years. The 551-page tome was simply titled *1994? Now*—with his own growing sense of power at FR and unencumbered by any ecclesiastical authority—he felt free and called by God to share his message. On the *Open Forum* in September 1992, he announced to the general public that 6 September 1994 would 'very likely' conclude the 'Final Tribulation'. According to Camping, immediately after that date dramatic signs and wonders would follow. Subsequently, Jesus would return to Rapture the Elect and the end of the world would occur later that month, sometime between 15 and 28 September. While no person could know 'the day or the hour' (a paraphrase of Mark 13:32), as Jesus carefully put it, according to Camping they could know the month and the year. In terms of the interpretative method used to constrict his timeline, Camping had now pushed his allegorical reading in the direction of numerology, with his engineering mind finding hidden spiritual meaning in the Bible's many numerical references. Although the title of *1994?* contained a question mark, Camping stated on several *Open Forum* programmes that as a teacher well steeped in the Bible, he was 99.9 percent certain of his calculations. But as always, he advised folks to check out his conclusions for themselves, using the Bible.

Over the course of the next year and a half, Camping engaged in several well-attended public debates with conservative Bible scholars. Subsequently he—and by association FR—began to generate much hostility in conservative Christian circles, much to the chagrin of staff and the two other members of the FR board. It did not help matters that Camping's work suggested one distinctive feature of the Great Tribulation was that most churches had 'fallen away' and that this apostasy was itself a sign that the end was near. As September 1994 loomed, both secular and Christian media picked up the story around Camping's prediction. In the late summer, anticipation was high and the bulk of callers to the *Open Forum* programme had ongoing questions about the timing of the end.

As 6 September approached, Camping displayed a certain subtle giddiness, at odds with his generally no-nonsense demeanour. When that day passed uneventfully, and the next few came and went without any apparent signs as well, Camping suggested some alternative dates on the *Open Forum*. He remained confident that the end would come between 15 September and 27 or 28 September, suggesting several dates during this time frame. The fact that Camping's prediction was neither 100 percent certain (only

99.9 percent) and somewhat inexact meant that he could gradually deflate expectations when each possible date came and went (Cohen 1995).

When all the possible September dates passed and the month came to a close, Camping took the entire second segment of the 29 September *Open Forum* to discuss the situation. Using the royal 'we', Camping stressed that 'we have been learning a lot' over the course of the past several years of Bible study as more and more truth had been revealed. He reiterated that 'we can always trust the Bible', but he also stated that as human beings 'we are not infallible' and prone to error. As he had done throughout the period, he reminded listeners that 'we need to be patient and to walk humbly and by faith'. Camping suggested that this delay in Christ's return might in fact be a test of our faithfulness to the scriptures. While this 29 September programme would have been a logical one during which to admit personal error and move on, Camping did not directly do so.

The immediate organizational impact of the 1994 prediction was mixed. It caused a major split in the pastorless congregation in Alameda, where Camping was the de facto leader. For the FR network there was a slight decline of donations, but nothing crippling. Camping certainly generated some harsh personal criticism and even condemnation from various church figures and ecclesiastical authorities, including a few who had once broadcasted on FR stations. Besides the false prophecy, these critics were especially irritated that Camping had not apologized for his actions. Nonetheless, many critics were willing to stick with FR, and the network was able to recover from the whole affair in relatively short order.

Apocalypse 2.0: 21 May 2011

As the end of the 1990s approached, Camping continued thinking about the end times. While not explicitly setting any new dates, he was nonetheless able to implicitly introduce his eschatological ideas as he began talking about the 'Latter Rain' at FR Bible conferences and on the *Open Forum*. By the summer of 2001, Camping had concluded that the 'Church Age' had come to an end and it was now time to 'depart out'. Over the next couple of years, he published a number of studies related to the topic, including *The End of the Church Age... and After* (2002) and *Wheat and Tares* (2003), with the main thesis being that God was no longer saving by means of the local church. Instead, the task of world evangelization had now been assigned by God to individuals working alone or collectively in ministries such as FR. But Camping went even further, stating that Satan was now ruling every local church throughout the world, and that this was now the time of 'Great Tribulation' spoken of by Jesus. Furthermore, God was now commanding that the true believers in Christ immediately leave their church. While no precise number exists for how many people 'departed out', the pastors of some small Reformed congregations reported on Yahoo message boards losing upwards of 20 percent of their flock due to Camping's teachings. As would be expected, the churches reacted with hostility against Camping's message as most content providers pulled their programming off FR and many began calling his teachings heretical. Given that the Church Age had ended, the local congregation that Camping was teaching at now became a 'Bible fellowship', with all ecclesiastical structures and practices done away with, resulting in a further division and spitting off of members.

Camping's new spiritual insights on the subject had so progressed that, by the spring of 2005, he felt comfortable enough publishing a new treatise on the subject named *Time Has an End*. This work, like its

predecessor *1994?*, was a lengthy tome numbering just over 500 pages and defying any easy or straightforward summary. In *Time Has an End*, Camping now understood the period of Great Tribulation mentioned in the Bible to be twenty-three years in length, having begun on Pentecost on 21 May 1988. Notably this central date in God's history was also a key turning point in his own life: being asked to step down as Sunday school teacher at the ACRC.

Camping's heterodox teachings on others matters began to accelerate as a new end-time date emerged. Through progressive revelation he gave up on the doctrine of eternal damnation and concluded that the souls of unbelievers were simply annihilated at death, a measure of God's mercy. His animus against the church was such that it was now considered a 'High Place' of Satan and anyone still affiliated with an ecclesiastical body was likely *not* among God's Elect (Camping 2002, 78).

By 2009 Camping felt God had so opened his spiritual eyes that he *could* know the day and the hour as two dates came into focus on his timeline: 21 May and 21 October 2011. [21 May](#) would be the 'Day of Judgment'. Given the nature of time zones—and that there is never a single date globally—Judgment Day would be a rolling apocalypse beginning at 6 p.m. local time just west of the international dateline and continuing to move westward. On that day Jesus would appear in the clouds at the appointed hour. There would be tremendous earthquakes, opening all the graves and leading to massive destruction, wherein Jesus would Rapture all the true believers, including those who had fallen asleep in Christ. The resulting destruction and anarchy would be akin to five months of hell on earth. Then, on 21 October 2011, God would finally annihilate the universe through fire and create a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1).

Over the next two years Camping broadcast this message throughout the world using the extensive resources of the FR network. In addition to the *Open Forum*, FR distributed tracts and other materials in a variety of languages to spread the word. Spending upwards of \$5–10 million on billboards and various missionary efforts (Sarno 2012a), Camping employed listener volunteers to promulgate the message globally, to great effect. Attendance at the local Alameda fellowship swelled in early 2011 and his radio network gained increased attention. As the world took notice, documentary crews from the BBC and other European networks came to chronicle events in the months and weeks leading up to Judgment Day. On 20 May, all the major American news networks ran long opening segments about Camping and his 'May 21st Movement', and 'May 21' was the leading Google search in English for that day.

After Judgment Day

When Harold Camping awoke on Sunday morning, 22 May, he was, by his own admission, 'flabbergasted' (Kane 2011). He truly had not believed he would be around to see the day. It took him a couple of days to come up with a series of rationalizations to manage the cognitive dissonance he, his radio followers, and fellowship members were experiencing. Like others before, Camping used several arguments to explain his failed prophecy, with his most common ones being spiritualization and an appeal to God's sovereignty (Sarno et al. 2015). In addition, on the *Open Forum* shows that ran from 23 May to 9 June, he reaffirmed the essential accuracy of the timeline: May 21 had been a spiritual Judgment Day and no one could be saved thereafter. The visible end would follow on 21 October.

After the *Open Forum* on 9 June, Camping went home for dinner in his Alameda home, where he suffered a significant and debilitating stroke that affected his speech. He would never again be able to conduct a live show, and it was only towards the very end of the year that he had recovered enough to give a few very brief and heavily edited messages over the air. This consequently left his followers in disarray, as there was no one with sufficient authority to say what was happening. Most continued to hold fast, albeit with slightly less certainty, to the 21 October date, and there were no messages from Camping through intermediaries to dissuade them.

When this date came and went, the May 21st Movement split into several directions. One notable faction was led by a Bible teacher named Chris McCann (c. 1962), who ran a local online fellowship called EBible, and who was very adept at using Camping's interpretative methodologies. McCann posited 7–9 March 2012—the Jewish Feast of Purim—as the next likely date for Jesus's return. Camping never ratified this date, and in private called any teachers suggesting new dates 'spiritual gangsters'. A week before Purim, Camping released a public letter via FR repenting for his own date setting, retreating to the more orthodox Christian position that 'no man can know the day or the hour' and stating that he had no new dates in mind (Staff 2012). Notably, however, Camping did not repudiate his 'End of the Church Age' teachings, his biblical calendar, or other heterodox views. As the result of spending like there was literally no tomorrow and a precipitous drop in donations, the FR network faced a severe financial crisis. It was able to stay afloat by selling some prime assets, such as WFME—the New York station—in 2013. Camping returned to the FR airwaves that year, but in a much more muted form as his speech never fully recovered, offering short anodyne messages on certain Bible passages (Sarno and Shoemaker 2016).

Towards the end of November 2013, the ninety-one-year-old Camping sustained a fall from which he never recovered. He died in his home on 13 December. In August 2018 the network he had helped to create finally publicly repented of its error about the end of the Church Age and welcomed church figures back onto its airwaves. Later, in October, FR broadcasted Camping's voice for the last time. It has since removed all traces of him from its website, including his once extensive audio archives.

A Note on Sources

Harold Camping was generally reluctant to talk much about himself, and certainly not in print. Elements of his biography were gleaned from snippets he would mention occasionally on the *Open Forum* and in other teaching venues. While once public, these audio materials are no longer accessible through FR, but private collections exist, including some materials held by me. I would be glad to share what I have with any interested parties.

Immediately before 21 May 2011, Camping sat down for several lengthy interviews. One public interview, conducted by an evangelical Christian named Stephen Meyers, can be found online at (Meyers 2011). In addition, the documentarian Zeke Piestrup has a YouTube channel with a series of edited videos with Camping, counting down the two weeks before 21 May 2011 (Piestrup 2011). Mr Piestrup generously provided me with access to more than twenty hours of raw uncut footage shot during this period, which furnished a wealth of information. Likewise, a nonpublic interview conducted and generously provided to me by the Swedish documentarians Magnus Olsson and Nicklas Sternegard on 25 February 2011 added valuable information and insight (Olsson and Sternegard 2011).

Additional information was provided in structured interviews I conducted with more than 20 diverse associates of Harold Camping. Information from the key ones included here are ACRC member and son of the church's pastor from 1953-1982, Paul Petroelje, on 20 December 2011 (Sarno 2011), the long-time producer of the *Open Forum*, Matt Tuter, on 4 January 2012 (Sarno 2012a), and FR co-founder, Richard Palmquist, on 8 March 2012 (Sarno 2012b). Palmquist supplemented the picture with voluminous printed materials he had accumulated over the years, including the minutes of board meetings and programme guides. Finally, I personally heard Camping's quote about 'spiritual gangsters' at a small gathering at his house on 5 February 2012.

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