



May 21st Movement

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Introduction

The May 21st Movement was a diverse constellation of individuals, groups, and networks that gathered around the figure of Bible teacher [Harold E. Camping](#) (1921–2013) and his message that 21 May 2011 would be Judgment Day, with the end of the world to follow five months later on 21 October. This movement was composed of three distinct but often overlapping circles. Camping and his Family Radio (FR) network were the lynchpins. In his role as the president and general manager of FR, Camping's views about biblical interpretation, eschatology, and a host of other theological doctrines eventually served as the ideological basis of the entire movement. FR's programming, particularly Camping's *Open Forum* call-in Bible show, became the key medium for promulgating his beliefs. This network also included Camping's many devoted radio listeners. Though disparaged as 'Campingites' by critics, Camping called those who accepted his biblical interpretation the 'True Believers' without any trace of irony. These True Believers were key constituents in missionary efforts to get the word out about Judgment Day.

A second important part of this movement were local Bible fellowships scattered throughout the United States. These included Camping's home fellowship located in Alameda, California, which served as a Mecca of sorts for his followers, as well as a few other fellowships led by adept teachers on the East Coast. Thirdly, a virtual online community, begun in the late 1990s and operating primarily through Yahoo message boards, was a further means of dissemination and helped to organize these individuals and groups into a formidable force of faith. While Camping had no part in creating the online community and paid little attention to it, it served as a significant site for True Believers attempting to make sense of events both before and after 21 May 2011.

The development of these three distinct components was historically contingent, and, while they coordinated to some degree, they did so in a very informal and uneven fashion. This triad gained such notoriety that on the cusp of 21 May 2011, that date was the most popular Google search worldwide as the movement had garnered significant global media attention. The ultimate disappointment that followed the day, combined with Camping's own absence because of a debilitating stroke three weeks later, left the movement fragmented and confused. After 21 October came and went, the movement scattered in multiple directions, several at odds with one another.

Camping and the Family Radio Network

Camping was born and raised in the Christian Reformed faith. As a strict five-point Calvinist, he started out believing in the total depravity of humans, who could be redeemed only by the atoning death of Jesus on the Cross. But this atonement was limited to the Elect, who could do nothing to earn their salvation. Rather, the Elect were chosen to be saved from 'before the foundations of the world' by an absolutely sovereign God whose judgment on the matter could not be questioned. In addition, Camping adhered to the five *solae* of the Protestant Reformation, with a special emphasis on *sola scriptura*, or 'the Bible alone', as the only guiding authority on faith and practice.

Camping earned a university degree in civil engineering and, for three decades after World War II, ran a very successful construction company in the San Francisco Bay area, which eventually left him financially independent. In his early twenties, Camping joined the Alameda Christian Reformed Church (ACRC), where he remained a member in good standing for the next forty years, serving as an adult Sunday school teacher for much of that time. Early on he was searching for his religious vocation to complement his avocation in construction. In 1958 Camping co-founded FR with a young Baptist missionary named Richard 'Dick' Palmquist (b. 1931) as a means of spreading the Gospel through the airwaves. Starting out, the FR network played a mix of traditional Christian music along with conservative Bible teaching by well-respected evangelical stalwarts of the likes of Francis Schaffer, Billy Graham, and Charles Stanley. For the most part the programming was theologically conservative, but also ecumenical and catholic in the sense of having broad appeal and focusing on what united evangelical Christians in the faith. Its goal was to support the church by providing encouragement to believers as well as reaching the unsaved. The idea was to avoid controversy and divisiveness while nonetheless proclaiming biblical truth.

Initially Camping's role was behind the scenes as a businessman providing financial and technical assistance to the network. But as the FR network grew, he gradually took a position in front of the microphone, beginning with his *Open Forum* programme in the mid-1960s and expanding to other teaching programmes as the years progressed. The *Open Forum* was a radio show wherein listeners would call in Bible questions to Camping, and he would attempt to answer them using the Bible as his sole authority. The *Open Forum* generated some controversy because of Camping's often dogmatic tone and his Calvinist emphasis, in contrast to the more 'free-will' offerings of some other programming. But the *Open Forum* was also quite popular and attracted a dedicated following.

In the 1960s, as Camping's Bible studies intensified, he commenced work on a biblical timeline of history, beginning with the Creation. His first published work on the subject, *Adam When? A Biblical Solution to the Timetable of Mankind* (1974), concluded that the Creation had occurred a little more than 13,000 years ago. As time went on, Camping shifted his attention to the end of history—eschatology—and by the late 1980s he had begun to see Jesus's return as imminent. His views on the subject were developed through an increasingly allegorical reading of scripture as well as his belief that the churches were 'falling away' and becoming less faithful to the cause of Christ. This brought him into conflict with his home church authorities, who asked him to step down as Sunday school teacher in May 1988. This eventually resulted in him leaving the ACRC later that year, taking a sizeable portion of the congregation with him. This departing group never joined any larger denomination and had no formal ecclesiastical structure. Occasionally ordained pastors would fill the pulpit, but over time the worship service became sparser, eventually resembling an extended Sunday school class with some hymn singing and with Camping doing

the bulk of the teaching.

By the early 1990s, Camping's end-time studies had so progressed that he believed he had figured out the month and year of Jesus's return. These findings were published in a book titled *1994?* (1992), which posited September of that year as when the Rapture would occur. Beyond the book, Camping used the *Open Forum* as his primary means of broadcasting his apocalyptic message. While 1994 served as a dry run for 2011, it did not have the same dramatic impact, firstly because the date was not as specific or as certain as it would become in 2011 and secondly because not all of FR's resources were poured into the effort due to limitations placed on Camping by the two other members of the FR Board (Cohen 1994). When his predicted dates came and went, Camping suggested several other possibilities in the mid-1990s, but thereafter refrained from offering specific times for almost a decade.

Nonetheless, in Camping's estimation, Jesus's return was imminent, and elements were added to his biblical timeline when he began teaching about being in the period of the 'Latter Rain' towards the end of the 1990s. By 2001 he had determined that the 'Church Age' was over and it was time to 'depart out' of the corporate churches, which had become completely corrupted. These views were laid out in two publications: *The End of the Church Age... and After* (2002) and *Wheat and Tares* (2003). Perhaps symptomatically, 21 May 1988—roughly the date he was asked to step down as Sunday school teacher—became the date when the Great Tribulation had commenced. This marked the beginning of the end of the Church Age, which would last twenty-three years according to his timeline. Relying increasingly on progressive revelation as God opened his 'spiritual eyes' (a term Camping increasingly used on his *Open Forum* program), he published another apocalyptic opus, *Time Has an End* (2005), which surmised, through a series of increasingly esoteric numerological 'proofs', that 2011 would be the year of Christ's return. By 2008, in a work titled *Almost There!* (2008), he began specifically teaching that 21 May 2011 would be Judgment Day, effectively ending God's plan for humanity's salvation; beyond that day, there would be no hope of deliverance. Beginning on the international dateline that day at 6 p.m. local time, a rolling apocalypse would occur in each time zone, marked by cataclysmic earthquakes that would open all the graves around the world. Those True Believers who had died in Christ would be resurrected and, along with the living Elect, Raptured to meet Christ. The next five months after Judgment Day on earth would be like hell for those unsaved and left behind. By this point Camping's increasingly heterodox views had led him to dismiss the idea of eternal damnation in a literal hell. He instead opted for a belief in annihilationism, in which God in his mercy would destroy the souls of unbelievers upon death, ending their conscious existence. The final destruction of the world would follow on 21 October, when God would annihilate this sinful cosmos by fire and create a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1) where the True Believers would reign forever with Christ.

Bible Fellowships and the Internet

The second component crucial of the May 21st Movement was a series of local Bible fellowships that arose when Camping began teaching his 'end of the Church Age' doctrine. As part of this doctrine, Camping had urged his followers to 'depart out' of the established churches, which had all fallen away and were now seen as the 'High Places' of Satan (Camping 2002, 78). Consequently, a number of individuals left their local congregations, including some ordained clergy members. A handful of small groups of like-minded believers decided to follow the lead of the Alameda congregation, where Camping was de facto leader, and

became 'Bible fellowships'. Camping's belief was that salvation could occur only through the medium of 'faithful ministries' like FR and these fellowships. This doctrine, even more than his eschatology, was what finally caused conservative churches to withdraw support from FR and declare Camping a heretic.

According to Camping, fellowships were pointedly not churches, but rather places where the True Believers could gather on a Sunday to study the Bible. They lacked any ecclesiastical structure or practice, kept no membership list, and had no spiritual authority over their attendees (Camping 2002). Even so, other fellowships looked to Alameda to see what Camping was saying and doing as their guide as to how things should be organized and taught. In addition, it was not uncommon for Camping's supporters visiting from out of town to make a pilgrimage of sorts to the Alameda fellowship to see what was going on.

The most notable fellowship, besides Alameda, was the Delco fellowship, located just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was led by a former Reformed pastor named Chris McCann (b. c. 1962), who had been an FR devotee since the early 1990s. McCann was quite in tune with Camping's complex interpretive style and very adept at generating and promulgating his own Judgment Day messages, though at this time he strictly followed Camping's lead. He was aided in this venture by another East Coast Bible teacher named Gunther von Harringa Sr. (b. c. 1953). While von Harringa did not lead his own fellowship, he and his large family had done some programme production for FR over the previous decade and were well connected to the network. In the few years leading up to Judgment Day, while not formally affiliated with FR, both McCann and von Harringa were clearly coordinating their message and efforts, appearing almost as spokesmen, and apparently receiving some tacit support from FR in doing so.

A further means of coordination came via numerous online efforts that cropped up at the end of the 1990s and intensified over the next decade as people's 'spiritual eyes' were increasingly opened to Camping's teachings about the Bible. In addition to the Delco fellowship, McCann had a virtual presence with his EBible (for Electronic Bible) fellowship, which served as a repository for McCann's own messages and provided a link to FR and Camping's publications. McCann was also instrumental in creating a Yahoo message group, initially named the Reformed Watchmen (later becoming the Latter Rain), which parsed the latest Camping teachings. In 2008, when Camping announced his specific date, McCann created a second Yahoo chat group called 'Time & Judgement'. For his part, von Harringa ran a website called Bible Ministries International, another important clearinghouse for Judgment Day information, and he participated frequently on the Latter Rain message board at the beginning. By the start of 2010, a number of other independently operated websites had spouted up to further proclaim Camping's May 21st teaching. This virtual online community was primarily composed of FR listeners who generally did not live near network headquarters in Oakland or have their own fellowship. While they were not active members of either one of those venues, they might occasionally travel to visit either site, resulting in a very loose and highly mediated but committed network of individuals.

True Believers on the Cusp of Judgment Day

The highly mediated and networked nature of the movement is worth emphasizing. During its golden age, FR had cultivated an extremely loyal listenership who were willing to volunteer time, money, and other personal resources to the network. Under the vision of a previous board member named Scott Smith, the organization kept its listeners well engaged by inviting them to various events that created a personal

connection and made them part of the Family Radio family. This happened primarily through 'share days'—fundraising events that occurred roughly once a month at local stations where supporters from the area were invited to come into the studio and be on the radio live. In addition, there were annual week-long summer Bible conferences that took place on both the East Coast and the West Coast, attracting people from all over the country. This was how McCann and von Harringa first became involved with FR. Finally, FR would celebrate its founding with an annual banquet in February that drew hundreds of supporters. While not initially serving as a platform for Camping, the network had created an institutional basis that he later employed to motivate and mobilize thousands of supporters on the cusp of Judgment Day.

Given the movement's informal and mediated network structure, it is impossible to know how many people subscribed to Camping's eschatology on the cusp of Judgment Day. The best guesstimate, based on circumstantial evidence such as online participation, FR donations, and fellowship attendance, is that there were at least several thousand (perhaps in the range of three to five thousand) dedicated followers worldwide willing to give significantly of their time and treasure to the effort, with many others following along in some rough agreement or sincere curiosity. The various Yahoo message boards had at least a thousand nonduplicated participants. According to financial 990 reports filed with the US government, FR radio received listener donations equalling \$18.7 million in 2010 and \$17.2 in 2011. Conservatively assuming that each listener donated \$1,000, and that a quarter of those who believed what Camping was saying sent in a donation, provides a figure of at least four and a half thousand financial supporters. (It should be noted here that Camping never received any financial compensation from FR and instead served as a full-time volunteer for the organization from the early 1970s onward. In fact, during crucial times, he lent or donated significant amounts to the ministry, though it is not known what he contributed to the May 21st effort. Many of his followers pointed to his relatively humble lifestyle in explaining their attraction to his message.) Finally, in the few months leading up to 21 May 2011, roughly 200 people on average per Sunday attended the Alameda fellowship, a few out of curiosity but most as True Believers.

In terms of who his supporters were, Camping drew people from a dizzying array of backgrounds. His own Dutch Reformed Calvinist faith taught a mostly radically egalitarian message in that all were sinners worthy of divine punishment, but that God had selected the Elect from before the foundations of the world according to his own counsel and pleasure. Thus, human-generated distinctions made no difference. Camping's Alameda fellowship was extraordinarily racially diverse, with African Americans and Asians particularly overrepresented compared to local population figures. Moreover, thanks to FR's short-wave international mission, there was also a strong global flavour to the movement, with immigrants from Brazil, Jamaica, India, Italy, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, and Ukraine, to name a few of the countries represented. Finally, Camping attracted people of all educational levels and occupational statuses, ranging from university professors and dentists with professional degrees to mechanics, bakers, and homemakers, some of whom had not finished high school. Engineers of various types seemed especially drawn to his numerical proofs and were overrepresented in the group. Interestingly, most of the long-term employees at FR's headquarters in Oakland were conservative evangelicals who attended their own churches. On the eve of Judgment Day, less than one-fourth of the paid staff at FR's headquarters attended the Alameda fellowship or even subscribed to Camping's theology.

In the half-year leading up to 21 May 2011, anticipation and activity intensified. Most of Camping's *Open Forums* and other teaching programmes were preoccupied with discussing the end. Many of the True

Believers volunteered for evangelization efforts either overseas or in the United States. Some did so independently, quitting jobs to go to various mission fields as they felt led by the Lord. For instance, one intrepid True Believer quit his job as a New York City transit driver to trek to the Golden Triangle of southeast Asia, delivering Judgment Day tracts to the Hmong people of Laos (Sarno 2011). For his part Camping did not encourage these efforts and always advised people to pray on the matter and not make any rash decisions. Nonetheless, FR partially sponsored some domestic and overseas missionary trips for volunteers. For example, to gain notice, FR sent out four caravan groups—each group composed of four huge recreational vehicles shrink-wrapped with the Judgment Day message—to crisscross the United States. The sight of these vehicles cruising around small and mid-sized cities would garner much local media attention. Leafleting events by large-sized groups of True Believers in New York City attracted national and international news coverage. In an effort called the ‘Jonah Project’, FR partially sponsored American supporters to travel overseas. The fact that the message was being distributed worldwide itself became seen as a sign of the end and further ratified the belief. On other fronts, McCann, von Harringa, and other quasi-affiliated online community members appeared on numerous AM talk radio programmes to announce the end. Added to this were billboards proclaiming that ‘May 21 is Judgment Day’ and ‘The Bible Guarantees It!’, posted throughout the United States and internationally, costing the ministry at least an estimated \$5 million. In the days leading up to May 21st, many large media outlets such as the BBC and American network news shows covered the story. Documentary crews were close at hand in the Alameda fellowship to record the events and provide personal accounts. ‘May 21’ was the top trending item on Yahoo from 20 to 22 May and also registered in the top five Google searches in English for the same time frame.

May 21st and Beyond

The date 21 May 2011 passed like almost any other day in world history. In Alameda the weather was sunny and pleasant. Different True Believers waited for Jesus in their own ways, some together with one another, some with disbelieving family members. When 22 May dawned and the world was unchanged, Camping was, in his own words, ‘flabbergasted’ (Kane 2011). He had sincerely believed he would not see the day.

This mistaken belief had two direct and immediate consequences. The first was the need to explain what happened. The second was the need to figure out the purpose of FR, which was in deep debt after having spent like there was no tomorrow. For some of the True Believers who had given up their jobs and been estranged from their families, the question of ‘what’s next’ loomed large. While Camping had advised people beforehand not to sell their belongings or burn bridges, the disorientation and disappointment were unmistakable among people who had acted on faith.

Starting on Monday 23 May and for nearly the next three weeks on the *Open Forum*, Camping employed a variety of rationalizations to explain what had (not) happened. The primary one was spiritualization: 21 May had been a spiritual Judgment Day, and thereafter no one could be saved as the ‘Door of Salvation’ had been shut forever. In addition, Camping continuously asserted that ‘God was in charge’ and things had transpired according to his perfect sovereign will. By the start of June, Camping was back to reaffirming his general timeline, emphasizing that nothing had fundamentally changed and that Christ would appear on 21 October, the still anticipated end of the world. For the next five months the function of FR was simply to

'Feed the Sheep' (Sarno et al. 2015).

A dramatic twist of events occurred immediately following the 9 June *Open Forum* programme. That evening, Camping suffered a debilitating stroke that severely impaired his speech and mobility and left him unable to teach for the next year. Camping saw no need for organizational succession, and those in key administrative roles were there because they would not challenge Camping's authority (Sarno 2012a). The entire May 21st Movement was left reeling as there was no one immediately available to offer an authoritative interpretation of unfolding events, including the significance of Camping's apparently God-imposed silence. The Yahoo message boards were rampant with confusing conjectures about the meaning of everything, with similar questions being asked at FR headquarters and at the local fellowship level.

Replacing Camping's voice on air with fresh programming presented the most urgent problem. McCann was already doing a teaching series on the Book of Exodus at the Delco fellowship, and he was called upon to fill the void. McCann was in fact the only True Believer adept enough to generate new teachings explaining events that were similar in style and substance to Camping's. Consequently, McCann's messages from Delco were broadcast over the FR airwaves and at the Alameda fellowship in Camping's stead throughout the summer of 2011. McCann's teachings served to fully reaffirm Camping's apocalyptic timeline. While it looked like McCann was being groomed as Camping's successor, this was a moot point because the world was still going to end on 21 October.

If most True Believers had been 100 percent certain about 21 May, they remained sure, though slightly less certain, that 21 October would be the day of Christ's return. The mood was best captured by one ardent True Believer, who possessed a PhD in computer engineering from an elite university and worked in Silicon Valley designing the latest generation of chips. When asked what he would be doing on 21 October, he said he would await Christ's return at work because he had 'a time sensitive project deadline' to meet (Sarno 2011). Even Camping started softening in his language and his certainty. Tom Evans (b. 1956), the vice president of FR, delivered a message to the Alameda fellowship on 16 October, the last Sunday gathering before the putative end. There he mentioned that in a private conversation, 'Mr Camping suggested [the end] would likely come quietly' and without fanfare, with everyone passing in their sleep (Sarno 2011).

When 21 October came and went, the disappointment was real but not so stunning as after 21 May. Nonetheless, the True Believers still had much to figure out, including the accuracy of the timeline, the significance of 21 May, whether Judgment Day had happened, and what would happen next. This uncertainty and confusion continued for the next two months. Camping was slow in recovering from his stroke, could not provide any guidance, and would not physically return to the fellowship until June 2012. FR was able to carry on by rebroadcasting previously recorded messages which made no references to the timeline, and which consequently did nothing to elucidate the current situation (Sarno 2011). However, in December 2011, after a month of his own silence, McCann undertook a new study on the Book of Esther. Employing the same elaborate interpretative logic he had learned from Camping, McCann's spiritual eyes saw that the Jewish feast of Purim, occurring in early March 2012, was now likely the date of Christ's return. McCann never guaranteed this date, but his expectations were clear. Swiftly, and without warning, FR removed all of McCann's studies from its airwaves and audio archives. McCann's teachings remained available on his own EBible fellowship website and were circulated on the Yahoo message boards, especially the 'Time & Judgement' group. Moreover, McCann's messages continued to be played periodically at the Alameda fellowship at the beginning of 2012, as many fellowship attendees were

intrigued by the Purim message and wanted to hear more, and there was no one with any spiritual authority to block it.

In early March 2012, on the eve of Purim, in a letter posted online and mailed to supporters, FR publicly 'disaffiliated' from McCann and other groups with whom it had previously worked (Staff 2012). Camping publicly apologized for his mistaken eschatological pronouncements, retreating back to the long-held Reformed position that 'no man can know the day or the hour' (a paraphrase of Mark 13:32). In private he referred to those who trafficked in date setting as 'spiritual gangsters', simply in it for the money (Sarno and Shoemaker 2016).

This generated clear splits in the May 21st Movement, with some people still waiting to hear more from Camping and FR, while others followed McCann, and a third group drifted either back to church or out on their own to seek other spiritual guidance or no guidance at all. The split was most apparent online between the two main Yahoo groups, but also at the fellowship in Alameda. Some attendees questioned the origin and veracity of official pronouncements offered on FR that were critical of McCann, who returned to the timeline to fathom further dates.

While Camping declaimed his own eschatology, one unwavering point remained: the Church Age was still over. Given that the doctrine was linked closely to the timeline, which Camping had implicitly repudiated, this did not make logical sense. Nonetheless, Camping's animus towards the church still stood, and the church responded in kind. To fill the programming gap which had resulted from Camping's stroke, *Open Forum* shows from between 2002 and 2007 were now repackaged as half-hour shows called *Excerpts from the Open Forum*, but heavily edited to remove certain timeline references and doctrinal shifts. This iteration of Camping continued to teach the 'depart out' doctrine as its focal message: salvation could not be found in the churches. But the timeline itself, while still assumed true by many of the True Believers, was no longer a broadcast focus.

Camping returned to the FR airwaves in the summer of 2012, but he would never do another live *Open Forum*. Instead, he gave brief, heavily edited recorded messages of an anodyne nature, essentially offering words of encouragement to his listeners. He died in December 2013. Organizational control of FR passed to Evans, who over the course of the next five years gradually dissociated the network from Camping and his teaching. In August 2018 Evans formally apologized for the 'end of the Church Age' doctrine and FR has since been welcomed back into the evangelical fold, but not without suffering a significant drop in listenership and revenue. The network has been able to survive financially by drastically downsizing its operations and selling off some major radio and real estate assets, thereby reducing costs and infusing enough cash to keep its creditors at bay. In October 2018, Camping's voice was broadcast on the network for the final time, and all trace of his teachings has since been scoured from the website.

For his part, McCann continued to promulgate new end-time messages at Delco and online. Using Camping's timeline, he postulated that 7 October 2015 would be the date of Christ's return, a numerologically significant 1,600 days after 21 May 2011 (see Bailey 2015; Horton 2015). He and his small group of about 150 followers managed to garner some national and international attention around this date. McCann still maintains an online presence, having migrated to newer social media platforms such as Facebook when Yahoo's message boards grew dormant and were eventually shut down. As of 2021 he still does Bible teaching and runs an online call-in programme called the *EBF Open Forum*. He is currently teaching that Jesus is expected to return in 2033.

As of around 2019, about 25–30 True Believers would gather at the Alameda fellowship for Bible study; they maintained a small online footprint during the coronavirus pandemic. While they continue to believe the timeline is true and Jesus's return is imminent, there are no new dates being set. Instead, they are generally content to hear recorded messages that Camping gave on air in the 1980s, during the golden age of FR.

A Note on Sources

Most of this account of the May 21st Movement is based on fieldwork and interviews I conducted at the Alameda Bible Fellowship from June 2011 to July 2012. This information was supplemented by an examination of the Yahoo message boards and other online material described above. Unfortunately, the Yahoo message boards are now defunct and have not been archived by Yahoo, although I was able to download many of these messages before they disappeared.

Some of the other websites from the period can be found using the Internet archive called the Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web>). To get a sense of Chris McCann's EBible fellowship from the period, see https://web.archive.org/web/*/ebible.com. EBible's more recent apocalyptic teachings can be found at <http://www.ebiblefellowship.com/studies/why-october-7-2015-is-the-likely-end-of-the-world> and <https://vimeo.com/ebfworldwide>. Gunther von Harringa Sr's Bible Ministries International website from the period can be found at https://web.archive.org/web/20100815000000*/https://www.bmius.org. One can get a sense of some of the other True Believers acting on their own by looking at https://web.archive.org/web/20110301000000*/wecanknow.com.

The [Harold Camping](#) dictionary entry contains additional information on his biographical sourcing. 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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