

# How does Harold Camping interpret the Bible?

-- By Richard Palmquist

Harold Camping, President of Family Stations, Inc.,<sup>1</sup> predicts Judgment Day will come, date certain, on May 11, 2011. How did he come to this conclusion? Why does he believe the Bible sets this date? He claims there is evidence in the Bible that the Church age is over, that churches are no longer controlled by God, but that Satan controls the voices of the preachers and priests of the world, and that when believers do get together they should not practice baptism or the Lord's Supper. He energetically spends the resources of Family Radio to proclaim his message, which he admits is "dreadful." He spares nothing in expressing his declaration that Judgment Day is not only "near" but is certain to happen May 11, 2011. Here is the question: *Is it more important to know the date or to live each day with integrity?*

## How Family Radio began

The network began life in April 1958, when I met Civil Engineer Harold Camping. I enlisted his financial support to start a Christian radio station serving the San Francisco Bay Area. Camping then owned Camping Construction Company.<sup>2</sup> My wife Dolores and I had recently returned from Nome, Alaska, where I worked with a group seeking to build a missionary radio station to serve Siberia. I wrote and filed Articles of Incorporation for Family Stations, Inc., and I negotiated tax exempt status in a personal meeting with IRS executives in Washington, D.C. On February 4, 1959, our small staff began operating Radio Station KEAR, San Francisco. With \$20,000 down, monthly payments created a \$100,000 asset. That spot on the dial later was sold to CBS for \$1,000,000 plus a replacement FM station serving the San Francisco Bay area. The replacement station was recently traded for a powerful AM outlet in a transaction creating a multi-million dollar cash surplus now being used to promote Camping's message. Family Radio monthly expenses are supported by listener gifts, but the pool of cash from these sales has allowed Camping to purchase time on outlets around the world. So, in many languages his message is influencing millions of listeners.

## The Source of Camping's Message

The network is marked by Camping's announcement that judgment day will be May 11, 2011. He says, "This is not a prediction. It is a fact." He calls the Bible an "Engineering Handbook." Listeners would be wise to learn what tools Camping brings to the process of Bible interpretation. We two founders of Family Radio came from two separate academic backgrounds. Camping majored in engineering. I majored in English. Camping's training is based on numbers. My academic background is based on words. His chief tool for construction work was mathematics. To my English major I added three years of post graduate work in theology. My career includes the founding of Grand Prairie Bible Church, Grand Prairie, Texas, the establishment of a telephone directory publishing company, a newspaper, and a powerful Central California radio station.<sup>3</sup> I left Family Stations after about five years to pursue my career in broadcasting and publishing. In retirement I operate [www.truthradio.com](http://www.truthradio.com) and [www.truthradio.info](http://www.truthradio.info). My academic qualifications are not superior to Camping's. His academic qualifications are not superior to mine. He learned how to use numbers. I learned how to use words. He uses both numbers and words with skill. I am skilled with words but my only claim to skill with numbers is that I taught the basics of math to our eldest son who has become a prominent CPA.

## Numbers contrasted with words

It would seem to be as difficult for Camping to frame a trustworthy interpretation of the Bible based upon skill with numbers as it would be for me to create a viable set of blueprints for a construction project based upon my skill with words. I would be arrogant to claim I could design and construct a commercial building. It takes the talent of a civil engineer with Camping's credentials to build great structures. Number-tools are different from word-tools. I believe the controversial message of Family Radio today is an example of faulty Bible interpretation using numbers rather than the meanings of words. Whether I am correct depends upon whether the Bible is verbal or non-verbal. Is the Bible based upon numbers or upon words?

<sup>1</sup> Family Stations, Inc., Oakland, California, controls more than sixty domestic radio stations, short wave facilities and television outlets not including hundreds of low power outlets. It adds impact to its message by purchasing time from radio stations in many nations of the world in countless languages.

<sup>2</sup> That business place has since been converted into the headquarters of Family Stations, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Fifty kilowatt KDNO, Delano, California which we sold in 1997 in order to repay a half million dollar long term debt.

What is the significance of approaching the Bible through the number gateway as contrasted with interpreting the Bible through examining its words? Numbers can appear as words, and words can speak of numbers; however, the test of correct interpretation has to do with the nature of the document to be interpreted. Is it an algebraic formula? If so, use “math” to interpret it. Is the document a product of words? Then, it should be interpreted as a verbal expression. Numbers are an analytical tool of human reasoning. The Words of the Bible are God's tool of revelation and creativity. Whereas Camping does use words to express his view of the Bible, nevertheless his tool for interpreting the Bible is a “blueprint” he sees in Biblical history. He calls that pattern the Biblical time line. His intensive lay-study of the Bible and historic documents causes him to identify a precise “to the day” calendar of Biblical events. He believes he knows the precise day of each reported occurrence. He claims patterns of date-numbers verify his findings. Based upon those findings, he has projected into the future a date that to him expresses the incontrovertible time when those who are God's chosen people will be taken from the earth, leaving the residue to destruction.

### **Math is faith-based**

Math has been the tool used by thinkers since ancient mathematicians set the foundations of logic. Math can be a tool used by men who with human reasoning seek to understand the Universe. Historically, math has worked from axioms (assumptions) serving as foundations for “provable” ideas. Math requires faith in those axioms. Mathematics produces expressions of perceived truth hopefully based upon logic, in line with those faith-based axioms. Mathematical theories cannot be viewed with confidence as truth because the foundation of math is those slippery maxims, incapable of proof. Math is a function of faith sourced in the reasoning of men.

### **Words are faith-based**

Proving a fact with words also involves faith. Religion is man seeking God. Revelation is God showing Himself to man. The Word is God's tool of revelation. The Word is the function of God's Holy Spirit Who enlightens us through revelation. According to the rules of science, revelation cannot be proved. The Word is the tool of persuasion-without-proof used by God Who moved the pens of men as they wrote the Bible. God speaks with logic based upon His eternal personal experience that cannot be controverted. Absolute facts are within His knowledge. He rules the Universe. God's Word requires only acceptance and belief by the reader, enabling God to do His work.

### **The Problem**

To choose between numbers and words we need to learn which offers the better way to interpret: man's reasoning through math, or God's revelation through Word? If you accept Camping's Bible and live by his predictions of the future, you value maxims of human reason sourced in the thinking of men. If you accept the Bible as WORD, you live in its light, reading it carefully. You apply its words to your life day by day trusting God's Holy Spirit.

We who choose the Word method will agree with Camping that it is only by the sovereign will of God that any of us will be eternally saved. We will agree that no work can save us. We agree with Camping that faith is a gift from God. We agree with the Bible when it says, “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me may not abide in the darkness” (John 12:46). I do not have the mathematical tools to contradict Mr. Camping's findings. However, I view the Bible as the “Word” of God, not the “Numbers” of God. I do not see the Bible exclusively as an engineering handbook, a book of numbers. It is the WORD. Its purpose is to reach our hearts and cause us to worship and to live in a way that honors the God of Word. Numbers are for the head. Words can best reach the heart. Both head and heart should be under God's control. The question is – which gateway can more accurately be used to interpret the Bible?

Harold Camping has good intentions. His life is dedicated to the study of the Bible, and he wants his life to glorify God. We should applaud his intent. However, his teaching has created problems in the lives of many listeners to Family Radio. Some are reputed to be refinancing their homes to receive “free money,” never intending to repay the mortgage because “after May of 2011, it will not matter.” Others are said to be

spending irresponsibly, using up what God has entrusted to them. Immediate gratification in the teenager is the gateway to drug abuse. The attitude of “I want it now” on the part of someone who should be seeking to please and glorify the Lord is an act of greed, not worthy of a good steward. A faithful servant will not want to meet the Lord on Judgment Day with empty or soiled hands. Do you believe Camping when he says that the Church Age has ended? Do you believe with Camping that we are living in the Great Tribulation? Do you believe May 21, 2011, will be the Day of Judgment? If so, try finding proof of these beliefs by restudying the Bible's words. Whatever you conclude, ask if your day to day behavior matches Bible values.

### **The Solution**

The servant in the parable (Matthew 25) was entrusted with a “talent” but he had nothing to show when the lord of the house returned, because he drove that asset into the dirt. Dirt suggests a picture of deficit spending. The unworthy servant created a deficit by what economists call “opportunity loss.” What was the fate of that servant? The lord of the house called him “unprofitable.” Whether you accept Mr. Camping's teachings or not, you should live each day in accord with Biblical ethics, passionately wanting the Holy Spirit to control your life to be profitable to Him. We should:

1. Take care of the resources God has given us.
2. Avoid greed and materialism (see Matthew 6:19; Luke 12:13-21, James 5:3 and 5:5, I John 3:17).
3. Practice honesty and faithfulness when we buy and sell goods, applying fairness and freedom of choice.
4. Earn Profit. The faithful servants used the entrusted talents to make other talents and the returning lord of the house condemned the servant who in fear of the householder's return buried his talent in the ground. Knowing the Lord will return, we should spend each day seeking to increase contentment and prosperity with the financial resources He has entrusted to us. We should not (in fear) divest ourselves of anything. Fearing the Lord's return would displease Him at the Day of Reckoning. He wants us to welcome Him.
5. We should give to others, imitating God's mercy and love through helping support spiritual activities and evangelism, thus bringing others into the kingdom.
6. God knows our hearts. We should glorify Him by developing the attitudes He delights to see.
7. If others work for us, we need to think of them as equal in value as human beings made in the image of God, and our heart's desire should be that the job bring them good and not harm.
8. We should conduct our borrowing and lending with honor, refuse to over-extend ourselves and use money belonging to others as a sacred trust obligating us to repay as agreed.
9. We should demonstrate trustworthiness and faithful stewardship, honesty, wisdom, love, and mercy.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Friend is Coming**

The Bible tells us the reason for Creation was that God wants companionship with friends. He sacrificed Jesus on the cross to make it possible for us to be His friends. He is such a friend that He took upon Himself the sin punishment we deserve. This is the Gospel, the Good News. That is why He created us in His image. We are told that His return will be “as a thief.” Our Lord is not a thief. His coming will be “like” a thief. Does a thief phone in advance to tell you he is coming to visit? No. A thief is “like” a close friend who does not need to phone in advance. Friends walk up without warning and ring the doorbell. Friends expect your friendly face to appear. The “doorbell” of the coming of the Lord is “the Last Trump.” When you hear that sound, what will you hand over to the Master of the house? “Sorry but it is all gone, Lord” or “You blessed me with much. Here is the increase.”

In conclusion, if you lack faith, you can try to use numbers to support your beliefs. However, if you live by faith content yourself with the Word written by God, trusting His Word to give purpose and enthusiasm to your life. If we live by word, not numbers, it is not that we abandon reason. Instead, we recognize God's revealed reason and we structure our lives upon His presence and power in our lives.

One day at a time, live to God's glory. Those like myself may disagree with Camping's numerical view of Bible interpretation, but all of us can agree that we should live today for God's glory in the Light of His Word, with watchful integrity.

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Wayne A. Grudem for the list. He is research professor of Bible and theology at Phoenix Seminary, Scottsdale, AZ. He formerly was chairman of the department of Biblical and systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, where he taught for twenty years.