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The Hazardous Hermeneutics of Harold Camping The End of the Church or His End?

by G. Richard Fisher

“And the oracle of the Lord you shall mention no more. For every man’s word will be his oracle, for you have perverted the words of the Living God, the Lord of Hosts, our God” (Jeremiah 23:36).

Harold Camping is at it — again! One would have thought that his failed prediction of the return of Christ in 1994¹ would have shamed and silenced him.

Camping left himself very little wiggle room in his book titled *1994?*, when he stated:

“I will be surprised if we reach October 1, 1994. ... By God’s mercy there are a few months left. However, if this study is accurate, and I believe with all my heart that it is, there will be no extensions in time. There will be no time for second guessing. When September 6, 1994, arrives, no one else can become saved. The end has come.”²

Camping’s heart and his hermeneutics were dead wrong. He should have ended his foolishness then and



there. However, as another purveyor of false prophecy, the Watchtower Society has proved time and again,

some false prophets don’t know when to quit.

Back in 1993, after writing about Camping and stating that his premise for 1994 was unbiblical, PFO received from Camping’s followers stern warnings and predictions of dire judgment because we dared to question his hermeneutics, interpretations, and date-setting. PFO was called “judgmental” for even questioning Camping. When September 1994 came and went without incident, and Camping went on as if his false prophecies had never occurred, we heard no more from his avid devotees and were no longer promised God’s judgment. Camping slipped back, at least part way, into the woodwork.

That all changed this past September when Camping gathered his staff for a solemn meeting to announce
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that “the Church was dead.” PFO has on file a tape recording of the Family Bible Radio staff meeting. At the meeting, employees asked for specific Scriptures. Camping replies with out-of-context Old Testament verses twisted to conform to his new thesis. In the recording, Camping tells his employees that if they cannot accept this new revelation, he will help them find other work.³

Is the Church dead? Camping goes on record when he writes:

Biblical prediction of the expectation of an increasingly dead church and the actuality of a robust healthy presentation of the Gospel by means of an organization like Family Radio.”⁵

“Indeed we must realistically admit the churches of today cannot by any means fulfill Christ’s command to go into all the world with the Gospel. Fact is, if we honestly evaluate the totality of the mission effort that is based on a true presentation of the whole counsel of God, we must admit the situation is hopeless.”⁶

must now refer to any Christian gathering as a fellowship only. Camping will not even refer to Family Radio as “parachurch.”

- The Church today cannot, in any way, fulfill the Great Commission. The proof of this, says Camping, is the church of Sardis in Revelation 3:1. It says that Sardis “had a name that lives” meaning the whole Church is dead and this verse is a prophecy of that fact. Hazardous hermeneutics.

- Only Family Radio stations can preach and fulfill the Great Commission. This is a fulfillment of radio airwaves as the instrument of God during the tribulation period that we already have entered. Preaching is the instrument of God, whether done in pulpits or on air waves. Camping has no right to arbitrarily confine God to his radio station in an elitist fashion.

- The ceasing of Old Testament ceremonies somehow proves that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are obsolete and can no longer be practiced. In the question and answer session at the staff meeting, Camping did not declare the exact timing of this ceasing, but only specified it was a few years back and corresponded to what he labels the “satanic Charismatic signs and wonders movement.” Ordinances are down and out — period. Camping seems to know this, based on some misty timeline that was crossed years ago. He seems to be the only one who knows for sure.

- Even Bible-believing churches are the same as Baal altars and “high places” of the Old Testament. In God’s eyes, they need to be destroyed. The arrogance and elitism of Camping is blatant and obnoxious here.

- All offices of pastor, elder, and deacon are abolished as there is no longer any office in God’s eyes because there is no Church. If one meets with other believers, it is without leaders and is to be called a fellowship.

“On the one hand we see churches everywhere becoming more and more apostate. Yet on the other hand we see a ministry like Family Radio becoming more and more useful to the Lord in sending the true Gospel into the world.”

– Harold Camping

“What is going on? Certainly something strange is happening. On the one hand we see churches everywhere becoming more and more apostate. Yet on the other hand we see a ministry like Family Radio becoming more and more useful to the Lord in sending the true Gospel into the world. ... Indeed any spiritually minded believer must admit something drastic has happened and is happening in even the most conservative of the churches.”⁴

The dead state of the churches today and the rise of Family Radio is right from the Bible — or so Camping says:

“However, there appears to be a major contradiction between the

Perhaps, it has not dawned on Camping that many of his shows are church-sponsored, church-related, church-funded, and that his supporters are connected to churches. Moreover, Camping acts as though he is omniscient. He cannot know the state of all churches.

The broad strokes of Camping’s startling and shocking new revelations or new discoveries from the Bible (he says) are as follows. A summary of his booklet, *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?*, as well as the tape of his September 20 staff meeting reveals:

- The Church is dead. Not just the apostate or liberal churches. God is finished with *all* churches and the Church age is over. It is even wrong to use the word “church” and we

• Somehow Daniel 12 predicted this very day and the light Camping has received. This new teaching, he claims, on the Church age ending is all there in that chapter.

Camping has spent his entire career formulating and trying to float mystical numerology, prophetic dates, and strange and inaccurate translations of select verses. Often his wobbly ideas are held up by one verse and a shaky cultic interpretation of it. He seems incapable of sorting out the Bible from his interpretation of the Bible.

In a past phone interview when PFO pressed him to show us a verse to verify his interpretation of certain numbers in Scripture, he kept saying, "All Scripture is given by inspiration from God." It was hardly an answer for his strange understanding of certain verses. He serves up his distorted biblical interpretations and his followers hardly understand they are being grossly misled.

A LEAKY BOAT

The teaching of the Church's demise also was given at Camping's 2001 Tuscarora Conference, held August 2001 at the Tuscarora Inn and Conference Center in Mt. Bethel, Pa. Here Camping "proved" his wild claim by rambling through the Book of Acts. He called the boat in the storm in Acts 27 a picture of the Church and observed that Jesus was not in the boat. This, Camping believes, means that Christ is no longer with or in the Church.

Apparently, it means nothing to Camping that the "angel of God" was in the boat (v. 23) or that Paul knew Christ was *in him* in the boat (Colossians 1:27). Also, Paul promised them deliverance only if they stayed in the boat. It also apparently means nothing to Camping that the Church is never likened to a boat in the New Testament. The Tuscarora Conference errors were rebroadcast Thanksgiving week 2001 over the Family Radio network.

If anyone had doubts before that Camping was strange, quirky, and even cultic, there is little doubt now.

This new revelation is a partial rehash of his *1994?* and *Are You Ready?* books. The same misinterpreted verses and numerology are used in the new paradigm — except for the date for Christ's return, which is now left out. Camping has ratcheted things up a bit and painted himself into the proverbial corner. He has locked himself into an impossible extreme.

THE WILDER THE BETTER

As our culture overtakes the Church, we see laughing revivals, Vineyard craziness with people justifying animal sounds in worship, claims of gold dust and angel feathers, promotion of healing statues, vomiting as a sign of ancestral demons being expelled, and the nonsense and altered states of Benny Hinn and Pensacola meetings. There is also the latest in Jabez paraphernalia — Jabez coins.

This is "believe it or not." The bizarre is not only welcomed, but demanded. Designer prophets — who are no longer called fortune-tellers — will deliver personal prophecies. Nothing is off-limits and no experience is too wild and crazy to report and pass off as being from God. Everyone's experience or interpretation seems valid. It is really the era of the confused and superstitious Church.

Joni Eareckson Tada sees the disastrous trend:

"We play fast and loose with the word of God these days. In-depth Bible study and examining verses in their context takes too much time. People seem to prefer instant revelation and 'words of knowledge' on the spot."⁷

Tada also sees the real issue:

"How can I possibly engage this brother or sister in a meaningful debate, if they claim they are speaking *ex cathedra*, or 'from the throne'? It's a dead-end discussion."⁸

Enter Harold Camping and a world already primed for the new and

strange. A world where anything goes and even God seems out of control and unable to govern Himself by His own Word.

As earlier noted, everything that Camping articulated to his staff at the September 20 staff meeting was all taught by him to a degree in the book *1994?* Because of his insistence on Jesus returning in September 1994, most critics took on that issue and overlooked the rest. After all, the end of the world should get some attention. Did Camping know something no one else did?

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

Camping has always played a sleight-of-hand game that is hardly picked up by a casual observer. It is what could be called "sandwich hermeneutics." Camping believes that not only is the Bible inspired, but his interpretations are, too. However, he would never directly say it that way. He may hardly notice that that is what he is doing when he makes the claim that he only gets his teaching from the Bible and proves one verse by proof-texting and "comparing the Bible with the Bible." His followers will swear he "only uses the Bible." Major cults claim the same thing. The manipulation is hard to catch — at least at first.

His sandwich hermeneutics work like this: Imagine I tell you, "I have a good piece of bread," but I then (very quickly) lay on the bread a tainted piece of meat (which you've hardly noticed) and quickly top it with another piece of good bread. I deftly add another slice of tainted meat and then top that with another piece of good bread. I did it so fast and so easily that it was hardly seen. I then declare it a good sandwich. It is good because I said so.

Camping's good bread is Scripture. The bad meat is his interpretation. Camping's sandwiches are Scriptures with tainted and twisted interpretations which are put together so fast you hardly realize what you have been given. He is in a closed circle of

reasoning. He then assures us that he only uses the Bible and nothing else. However, he is interpreting and assigning questionable definitions and false meanings as he goes.

BIBLE HOPSCOTCH

So Camping will quote a verse saying, for instance, that “judgment begins at the house of God.” He quickly drops in a statement that all churches fail and go apostate. He tops it with a verse to the church in Sardis “having a name that lives and is dead” (Revelation 3:1). He suggests that Sardis is prophetic of the whole Church (tainted interpretation). The final piece of bread is Satan warring against the Church in Revelation. Has he really proven his point and only used the Bible?

Camping, in his booklet, *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?*, asserts, “As a matter of fact God declared in 1 Peter 4:17 ‘**judgment must begin at the house of God.**’”⁹ By this he means that judgment has already taken place (his interpretation), as his booklet later concludes. We will see that as we progress.

Camping goes on:

“But there is a larger plan of God that must be looked at. This plan shows that a time will come when God will no longer use the churches and congregations to bring the Gospel to the world. They instead will come under the wrath of God.”¹⁰

Using Leviticus 26:27-31, Camping then begins to compare the Church to “high places” or pagan altars.¹¹ Is this really comparing Scripture to Scripture or just imposing non-related Scripture on other parts of the Bible? It all happens so quickly. Nearly without our realizing it, the pagan altars have quickly been turned into churches!

Camping then compares churches to Baalism, saying, “But is it true, that our churches are free of high places? The Bible shows us that the churches of today are not at all free of the high places.”¹² Camping does not prove

his statement, but simply quotes 2 Corinthians 10:4-6 and pretends it makes his point. It’s another quickly made sandwich.

Camping then goes on to name the “high places” that are in the Church:

“Such conclusions that there can be divorce for fornication, baptismal regeneration, our faith is an instrument that God uses to bring us to salvation, a future millennium, women can pastor a church, universal atonement, our acceptance of Christ as a requirement for salvation, are typical of many doctrines solemnly adopted by churches. But these are high places, in that they have come from the exalted minds of men instead of coming from God.”¹³

We can be absolutely sure that Baal worshipers of the Old Testament were not involved in any of the above issues.

While some may feel very strongly about trying to counteract ideas of baptismal regeneration and women pastors, can we honestly say that all the rest of the statements are pagan ideas equivalent to Baalism or “high places” and divide over them? Cannot the other things be debated under the pale of orthodoxy? Unfortunately, Camping has set himself up unilaterally as the new evangelical pope. His view is the only view.

He continues:

“This coincides with the warning of Revelation 11 that the time will come when the work of the church to bring the Gospel, as typified by the two witnesses, is finished. ... This punishment would take place when the obedience of the churches had been fulfilled. We have already seen that the obedience was fulfilled when the work of the two witnesses had been finished.”¹⁴

If the finishing of the witnesses is the present finishing of the Church, what is the resurrection of the wit-

nesses in the same chapter? Camping does not get that far.

Over the centuries, good men have argued for the two witnesses of Revelation 11 being past (preterists), or the witnesses being future (futurists), but only Camping has used these witnesses to prove the most unlikely scenario that the Church is now dead. Other than Camping saying so, why would one interpret the witnesses as being the Church? Camping also misses the point that the witnesses have the approval of God (Revelation 11:11-12), not His condemnation.

Camping further teaches we are in the tribulation period:

“While a number of Scriptures detail the character of the great tribulation, there are two that are especially in evidence so that we need have no doubt that we have arrived to that final event.”¹⁵

Matthew 24:24 talks of false christs and false prophets and is cited by Camping, asserting that “This evidence alone assures us that we are living in the period of the great tribulation.”¹⁶ While the verse does address the facts of the tribulation, *it does not address the timing*. The interpretation Camping gives for the timing of the tribulation is tainted meat thrown into the sandwich. The timing issue is foisted in. Nowhere is the exact timing of these events laid out.

During his September 20 staff meeting, Camping talked of seeing the tribulation *occurring now*, just about everywhere he opens the Bible. The truth is he imposes that idea on every Scripture he looks at. He told his staff:

“But as I studied Hezekiah. ... I began to get an understanding of the great tribulation ... in which we are a part of right now. ... when we came to Acts 21 we found that it was guiding us down the same path. Exactly the same path, that — that there’s going to come a time when the Church Age has come to an end. ... I’m scared, I’m frightened at

where this is going. ... It looks like we are going to come to a point where the Bible is teaching the Church is dead."¹⁷

So sandwiched between Hezekiah and Acts 21 we are told we are in the tribulation and Camping is leading down a road that will tell us the Church is now dead.

Camping further says he found this tribulation/death of the Church truth in Ezekiel with Tyre and Sidon, and in Luke 21 where Jerusalem is encompassed with enemies. He says "a light went on." So it seems whenever and wherever he opens the Bible, he sees the death of all institutional churches. He then is so bold as to say, "The Bible is clear." The Bible may be clear, but his interpretations are not.

ONLY ME

Camping seems out of touch and has gone tone deaf to others' music. He has acquired some kind of remnant syndrome, and in the words of Elijah, must be thinking, "I alone am left."

Camping says that the fact that Family Radio is not under Church authority and yet remains true to Scripture is a reason "we can know that we are in that time of the great tribulation."¹⁸ How does being a parachurch organization prove anything — unless Camping is trying to reinforce his argument to say everyone's organization is dead but Family Radio. But it still does not make his point.

Using Jeremiah 29 and the prophecy of the Babylonian destruction, Camping concludes that we ought not to stay in our churches:

"In other words it was God's plan that no one was to remain in Jerusalem. ... Get out of Jerusalem (the church). No longer are you to be under the spiritual rulership of the church. This command is given because God is finished with the era of churches being used of God to evangelize. ... The message should be clear. We must remove ourselves from the church."¹⁹

Camping further maintains that "Because the church era has come to an end the churches have become dead as the church of Sardis long ago became dead."²⁰

To use the Babylonian captivity of Israel as a model for the Church raises the question: Does the Church die and then in 70 years come alive again? Should we even try to salvage our churches? Camping quickly throws in "there will not be left one stone upon another."²¹ Yes, Camping decrees, forget your church — do not try to redeem it. He speaks against anyone who may think they can resurrect this dead church by removing all the "high places."

Camping arbitrarily picks things that were destroyed and subjectively makes them pictures of the Church. Why not take all the things that were not destroyed? The wood, hay, and stubble of 1 Corinthians 3 is clearly defined in the Bible as the believer's "work" (v. 14), not the Church.

Though the Jewish Temple was destroyed and that prophecy fulfilled in A.D. 70 as Jesus prophesied, it means nothing to Camping. The Temple's destruction has Camping simply concluding that "the era of the church as an institution used of God has come to and [sic] end."²²

We must realize that this new teaching has dire and disastrous consequences, which Camping cavalierly brushes over in his final words. He pushes lack of accountability and independence to a new level:

"If a person or family is a member of a church they can withdraw their membership and fellowship on sundays [sic] with whomever there may be who are of like mind."²³

Roughly translated, this means Camping's followers can meet with other Camping followers with no leadership or direction. Camping cares little if churches everywhere collapse. Consider further:

"For that individual that is not a trauma because he has become

convinced that the church era has come to an end and the church no longer has any divine authority. ... The elders will no longer be elders. The deacons will no longer be deacons. The Pastor will no longer be pastor. In other words no individuals will have spiritual rule over the congregation. ... This is so because now that the church as a corporate institution has no spiritual authority, each person must answer directly to God."²⁴

TIME TO JUST SAY "NO!"

Camping has no hermeneutic but his own. In short, verses mean whatever he wants them to mean. It is time for his board and staff to deal with him and not let him go on with the doctrinal insanity he is promoting. It is time for the Church to rise up and say "enough is enough." This should have been done in 1992 (when he first published his book 1994?), and we would not now have the proliferation of even more cultic teaching. Unfortunately, money and power talk, and talk so loud they often silence the recipients. Money, it seems, does talk, and in this case says whatever it pleases. At a time when truth is needed, many are falling silent. Camping's extremes call not for public relations, but for public rebuke (Romans 16:17-18). The other sad fact is that Camping, no doubt, is taking the compromise and silence as endorsement and encouragement.

In writing about terrorism, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mentions a motto of Zionists Israel Zangwill, one of Israel's early leaders. This principle is *Obsta principiis*, which Netanyahu says is "oppose bad things when they are small."²⁵

People around Camping did not confront him with his strange numerology in the early years. Everyone looked the other way because of what they saw as all the good he was doing with the radio. They did not stop him with his 1994 extremes and his scheme of the Second Coming and the

end of the world. After all, jobs were at stake. Now the bad things are no longer small, but have reached alarming proportions with his wholesale indictment of all churches and his denigrating of pastors and church leaders. He has forgotten that these are his support base.

Sadly, some ministries have accommodated Camping and are editing out all references to the Church, pastors, elders, deacons, or ordinances of the Church. It is a compromise that is a tacit endorsement of Camping's extremes and elitism. All for the sake of staying on the radio.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

The 1993 PFO article labeled Camping's book *1994?* as "a labyrinth of subjective speculation, private interpretation and numerical guesswork."²⁶ Camping's view of the Church (all churches) being overrun by false gospels and being ruled by Satan was already being proclaimed nearly a decade ago.²⁷ At that time, however, Camping did not make the death of the Church a do-or-die situation, and his employees were not confronted with "my way or the highway." It may be too late for *Obsta principis*.

Camping has now gone on record with the publication of his new booklet, *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?* It is essentially what he tried to convey to his staff, and his answer to the title is definite, emphatic, and *affirmative*, as we have seen.

This sweeping judgment on all churches further points up one of Camping's major flaws and one of the crucial fallacies in his thinking. He constantly argues from the general and universal to the specific. For instance, all liberal churches have departed from the truth and many conservative churches have compromised the truth, therefore *all* churches are under God's judgment. Or, many churches are not preaching the Gospel, therefore only Family Radio is. Arguing general principles into specific conclusions is not logical.

During the September 20 staff meeting, Camping tries to prove his point by wrestling, twisting, and bending 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10 (regarding Satan in the sanctuary). In effect, Camping says, See, there it is! Satan setting up shop in the temple. And with that, Presto! Satan is somehow ruling all believers in the Church. To further "prove" his argument, Camping throws in Daniel 8:10-14 about the sanctuary being trodden underfoot for 2300 days. How any of that fits, he does not explain. Many Bible commentators have seen Daniel 8 in regard to Israel. And regardless of whether you take the verses literally or figuratively, there is no way to apply them to the Church as does Camping.

What Camping does to Daniel 8 and other passages is criminal. The context of Daniel 8 is clear, and the "sanctuary trampled underfoot" (v. 13) has nothing to do with the Church of today. Daniel was given understanding of the vision (vv. 16-17) and the details were for events some days ahead (v. 26). The details have to do with things that will occur during the time of Persian and into Greek rule (vv. 20-21). The Scripture is its own best interpreter in its context. We know that the Greek Seleucids at the command of Antiochus IV Epiphanes trampled the holy Sanctuary of the temple and committed the "abomination of desolation" by killing a sow on the Jewish altar in Jerusalem. Any of this can be checked in any major commentary.²⁸

Dr. Harry Ironside agrees that "The sanctuary contemplated by Daniel is earthly, and the prophecy has already been fulfilled in 2300 evening-mornings after Antiochus Epiphanes polluted it by setting up a statue of Jupiter Olympus in the holiest."²⁹

The sealing of the vision (Daniel 8:26) had to do with waiting for the unfolding and fulfilling of the details, not waiting for Harold Camping. Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch inform us regarding "time of the end" in Daniel 8:

"...not of the time of the end of all history, but of a nearer relative end of the prophecy. 'Time of the end' is the general prophetic expression for the time which, as the period of fulfillment, lies at the end of the existing prophetic horizon — in the present case the time of Antiochus."³⁰

It eludes Camping that he is proving too much. If Satan were ruling the Temple, and the New Testament says that our body is the Temple, Satan would be ruling Camping's body as well. However, this would be lost on him. Camping will make the Temple the Christian in one place and the Church in another where it suits him.

It is silly to make one symbol the be-all and end-all of any interpretive system. The Church is a building, a flock, a branch, a bride, a lampstand, an army, salt, light, a body, and so forth. Each has a specific thing to teach about the Church's makeup and mission. These are not prophecies in the strict sense and they each have a small bit to tell us about the many functions and responsibilities that we have as Christians. We cannot press the figure of the sanctuary totally out of shape, just as we cannot press any of the other figures and make them a comprehensive picture of all that the Church is. Besides, the Old Testament Sanctuary is clearly of a different category than the New Testament Church in a myriad of ways.

Timothy D. Oliver, director of Christian Soldiers Ministries, has it right when he says, "This all stems from his '1994' fallacy..., which is, of course, a result of his pathetic hermeneutic (he has no boundaries, nor accountability to anyone, or any balanced method)."³¹

Camping tries to tie in Daniel 12 and suggests that the sealing of "the scroll until the time of the end" (v. 4) refers to his new discoveries. This was the same error in interpretation that was used to prop up Camping's *1994?* book. The context is clearly *resurrec-*

tion of bodies (vv. 2-3). The shutting of the book has to do with the awaiting of fulfillment and a guarantee of the same. Again, note Daniel is not speaking of discovery of interpretation, but an absolute promise of *fulfillment of details*. This has been pointed out by many commentaries in the past. However, Camping's imagination is his own commentary. He is more like a mystical kabalist than a Christian.

Consider what PFO said back in 1993 and how applicable it remains today:

"So, does Camping have anything new to offer in the way of prophetic interpretation? Like a lot of cultists, he misuses Daniel 12:4, 8-9, which speaks of sealing the book until the end and are taken to mean that someone in the end time finally will see into information heretofore unknown and be able to date the coming of Jesus. Many others before Camping have claimed to have this insight."³²

The PFO article then observed:

"Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch deal at length with these verses from Daniel. In Volume 9, pp. 312-313, they show that the Hebrew text has to do with the preservation of Scripture, that Daniel's prophecies will be guarded and preserved until their fulfillment. The 'sealing of the believer' by the Holy Spirit is the preservation of the believer. The text suggests the rendering 'preserved in security against defilement' or 'in safety continue to the end.' The verses are not a license for private interpretation."³³

To state it again, these verses are an indication of future fulfillment and a guarantee from God as to their coming to pass — not an interpretive scheme or a mystical unfolding to one individual. It has nothing to do with our understanding, but with God's

power to do in resurrection all he said He would do.

HARMENEUTICS NOT HERMENEUTICS

There is an old saying that states: "He is a poor judge who starts with his own verdict." Camping starts with his verdict of judgment on the Church and sees it everywhere and in everything.

It is easy to see that he imposes it on every text he visits.

For example, Camping utilizes Matthew 24:24, which says that false christs and false prophets will arise with signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, the very elect. His sweeping conclusion or private interpretation from this broad and general statement is that "No one can honestly say that all is well in today's congregations."³⁴ What does that really mean? Obviously we could not say that all congregations are perfect or that all congregations have other than fallible humans that make them up. However, we do not have to conclude, as Camping subtly suggests, that all congregations are deceived and ruled by Satan. He just does not make his point. He starts with his own verdict.

Further, Camping's use of the church of Sardis is wrong. In Revelation, Christ addresses seven churches, each of them differently. There is no biblical proof that Sardis primarily represents any church but itself.

Revelation 3:2-3 indicates that God was not through with the church at Sardis. Camping's mangling of the text imposes something on Scripture that is not there. Keep in mind Jesus' words to the people at Sardis: "Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember, therefore, how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent." Christ then proceeds to speak of those in Sardis who walk with Him and will be honored and confessed by Him. This is not Camping's message at all. Christ honored the remnant in Sardis

and kept working with them. Camping wants to jettison them and the whole Church.

No one — including Camping — knows when the Christian community at Sardis came to an end. This awaits more archaeological information. It is generally assumed that the church there went on with its candlestick burning until the Muslim conquests in the seventh century A.D.³⁵ Other evidence indicates that a Christian community and church continued to exist in Sardis up through the Byzantine era or into the fifth century A.D. There is also evidence of a Christian clergy from this time.³⁶ As the text clearly indicates, the Lord was not through with them.

EAT THIS BREAD, BUT ONLY UNTIL CAMPING SAYS SO

Camping further inflicts injury on the Church and his staff by misleading Christians in thinking that they should no longer practice the ordinances of Baptism or the Lord's Supper. During his initial comments at the September 20 staff meeting, Camping affirmed his obsolescence of the Lord's Supper. Later, in the employee question and answer session, a discerning staff member queried Camping with 1 Corinthians 11:26 ("For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"). The verse is as clear as day. This ordinance is to continue until Jesus returns. It is "*until He comes.*"

Unfortunately, Camping never answered the question. As is his custom, and as he so often does, he evades the question altogether and goes into a filibuster about Old Testament ceremonial laws which have nothing at all to do with the issue. He calls the New Testament ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper ceremonial laws. Camping mistakes verbosity for explanation. He even talks about creeds, which take the pretended answer even further afield.

Here, in his many words and in many other places, Camping makes a

major category mistake. A category mistake would be like discussing the physical make-up of a man by studying a rock. There is a huge difference between the two, and they are each of a totally different category. Though Baptism and Circumcision are paralleled by Paul in the New Testament, and the Lord's Supper is paralleled with the Passover, they are different categories by content and meaning.

What applies to the duration of the Old Testament ceremonies is never said to apply to Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The purpose of the parallel is to show how one is fulfilled in the other. That is, that the Old is fulfilled in the New. Camping also slips in the idea that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are "ceremonial laws." The New Testament never identifies them that way.

Bible students know that many of the Jewish ceremonial ordinances were said to be "forever." The Hebrew word translated "forever" in the Old Testament is *olam*. The Hebrew word *olam* is wonderfully exegeted and explained by Bible commentator Adam Clarke. Clarke simply says that "in general a time the limits of which are unknown."³⁷

Olam can mean age-long or for an undetermined period of time. The English translation (*everlasting* or *forever*) throws us off. We also know from Jeremiah 31:31 that the Old Testament would be replaced by the New Covenant. So Baptism and the Lord's Supper are totally unrelated to the past ceremonial laws. Old Testament ceremonies and the Lord's Supper are of different categories.

Camping seems to think that a long discourse, responding to anything but the question, qualifies as an answer. As Camping hems and haws through a long dissertation about Old Testament ceremonies, many have already forgotten the question, and that the New Testament text affirms not *olam*, but *until He comes again*. The New Testament wording is not even close to *olam*. The duration is clearly stated

and defined by the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Camping would rob us of this ordinance and our Lord's command. In contrast, Paul warns: "If anyone does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine that accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words" (1 Timothy 6:3-4).

Likewise, Baptism is clearly outlined in Matthew 28 and is never said to be *olam*, but is to be practiced continually until the end of the present age (vv. 19-20). Christ will tell us by His coming when the end of the age is.

Camping then goes on to try to twist the Baptism of Matthew 28:19 and make it Spirit baptism.³⁸ This does not hold water, since it is a command that the Apostles were told *to do to others*. One person cannot "Spirit baptize" another person — only God can. It makes no sense to read the verse, "Make disciples and then you baptize them in the Spirit." They would not and could not understand it that way. Acts 8, with the conversion of the Ethiopian and his baptism, gives us the confirmation of the understanding of performing water baptism after profession of faith.

Camping's new age has no churches, no ordinances, and no pastors. Responding to Camping's severing the office of pastors and elders, there is no biblical reason for saying these positions are no longer valid. The Apostle Peter instructs elders to go on feeding and instructing the flock until Jesus returns (1 Peter 5:1-4). Peter did not want his charge to those serving as shepherds misunderstood and so he made it very clear.

To read 1 Peter 5:4 in Camping's way, one would have to reword it to say, "When Jesus comes, He better not find you acting like or calling yourselves pastors." Camping may be forced to come up with a scheme like the Jehovah's Witnesses and suggest that Jesus has already returned.

Camping seems to want to get rid of the word "pastor" (Greek: *poimen*), which means "shepherd," and is often used of Jesus. It is used in Acts 20:17, 28, and again in Ephesians 4:11 to indicate the ministry committed to elders.³⁹

In Camping's design, elders and deacons, along with all their responsibilities, should be clipped from major portions of Scriptures. We are also left with no church-planting missionaries, and a hymn book much reduced in size since we can no longer sing, "The Church's one foundation," or any songs that remotely relate to Baptism or the Lord's Supper. Can this new thing be called Christianity at all? Does Camping really realize the ramifications and extent of this bizarre path on which he is trying to take us?

Ultra-dispensationalism has been fought vigorously by the Church since the 1920s and 1930s because it robs us of a portion of the Bible and truth needed by the Church. Dr. Harry Ironside informs us that "some have ignored dispensational truth altogether. Others have swung to an ultra-dispensationalism which is most pernicious in its effect upon one's own soul and upon testimony for God generally."⁴⁰

One of the major defects in ultra-dispensationalism is its revisionist view of the Bible. It reassigned many New Testament passages to a past dispensation and robbed the Church of its direction. Ironside addresses this major flaw, stating "it is insisted that the four Gospels are entirely Jewish and have no real message for the Church, the Body of Christ. All might not put it quite as boldly as this, but certainly their disciples go to the limit in repudiating the authority of the Gospels."⁴¹

REAL RAMIFICATIONS

Camping has now gone beyond the ultra-dispensationalists into an ultra-ultra-dispensational position. It is anti-clerical and anti-ordinance. In his view, there is no institutional Church, therefore we are in a new era or new

dispensation of some kind, or as (according to his staff) he has called it, "the latter rain."⁴²

The anti-ordinance movement is not new, but shows up occasionally in cultic teachings. In the 1880s, "some preachers advocated doing away with Baptism and the Lord's Supper (the ordinances)."⁴³ Similarly, the Anabaptist Ambrosians "taught that ministers were unnecessary."⁴⁴ Fortunately these things were short-lived.

Like it or not, Camping's followers, by virtue of his extremes, have a new Bible. It is a cut-and-paste Bible full of passages that now have no meaning. These archaic passages may have helped the Church for 2,000 years, but no longer. We must now, in essence, jettison large parts of First Timothy and Second Timothy and parts of Titus since they are addressed to churches and are for church use, church structure, and church government. We must throw out all passages that instruct elders and deacons, or instruct the Church regarding elders and deacons.

Just as Thomas Jefferson hoped to eliminate certain things that he deemed unneeded and false with his amended *The Jefferson Bible*,⁴⁵ Camping now stands as final judge and sole arbiter and interpreter of sacred Scripture. We must seek his approval and imprimatur on what is in and what is out.

Camping tries to relegate everything to an understanding of only a universal Church (spiritual remnant Church) — that is, just born-again believers in the world. He is critical of creeds especially as they relate to Church structure and ordinances, but does not deal with the fact that some churches do not use creeds. Though the majority of the references to "Church" in the New Testament are a local body, we are to dismiss those. Camping is wrong in playing one aspect of the Church against the other.

Rev. John Thornbury, a biographer of David Brainerd, wrote a masterful biblical treatment of the Church titled,

The Doctrine of the Church. His words are powerful and perceptive:

"There is nothing inconsistent or incompatible about the contrasting concepts of a local visible church and a universal invisible church. Each has its place in the plan and revelation of God. To deny or despise either is to repudiate a considerable part of God's word. Man is, of course, an extremist by nature, so there is always a danger of one's going too far in one direction or another. One can dote on or even make a fetish of the local church while utterly disregarding the teachings of Scripture on the one universal spiritual body of Christ. On the other hand, it is possible for one to glory so much in membership in the universal church that he fails to pay proper respect to the visible churches on earth. Either situation represents an abnormal and unbalanced approach. As is the case in so many areas of Christian belief, *the truth lies between two extremes*. A *balanced* view of the New Testament teachings on the church comprehends an understanding and appreciation of the oneness of all God's people in the invisible church and a recognition of the importance of the local church and its tasks. ... Until the middle of the 19th century it never occurred to anyone that there was an inconsistency in holding to both."⁴⁶

CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE?

PFO applauds the courage of Joseph Jacowitz, an 18-year veteran at Family Radio on KEAR-San Francisco and the host of the network's "Prayer-time" program for ten years. On Monday, Nov. 5, 2001, Jacowitz resigned publicly over the airwaves, stating:

"In good conscience I can no longer be identified with a ministry whose President calls for the destruction and dissolution of the church. I have disagreed with

Mr. Camping on other points in the past, such as his prediction that Christ would return in 1994, but I stayed with Family Radio because I believe we can serve the Lord together without having to agree on every point of doctrine. But Harold Camping's latest teaching, that every church is apostate, and that all Christians are to leave their churches, and that the office of Pastor and the office of deacon are no longer valid, is crossing the line into severe heresy, and I can no longer serve the Lord in a ministry that hurts the body of Christ in this way."⁴⁷

Sadly, spiritual schizophrenia has set in with some remaining employees and they have rationalized their staying on with Family Radio, saying that they will quietly object to Camping's ideas since the work has done such good in the past.⁴⁸ They will live with extremes in false teaching because part of the station still broadcasts good music and good teachings. Some urge listeners to turn off their radios when Camping comes on. They will not mention churches or pastors, and pray for God to resolve the mess.

Revelation 22 points strongly to the perpetuity or continuance of local churches until Jesus returns. The context clearly is His Second Coming — "I am coming quickly" (vv. 7, 12, 20). In the midst of that Jesus announces: "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things *for the churches*. I am the root and offspring of David, the bright and morning star" (v. 16). Christ gives His grace to the churches (v. 21), not His condemnation. From the testimony of Scripture, it appears that *churches* are there right up to the end. It is promised by the Alpha and Omega.

Camping certainly fits the sociological definition of a cult, as offered by Ron Rhodes. Rhodes writes that the "Sociological characteristics of cults include such things as authoritarianism, exclusivism, dogmatism, isolationism, and threats of satanic

attack."⁴⁹ Camping scores big in four out of five characteristics.

Camping in the past has had failed prophecies, and now in the present has false teaching. In the future, he will have a floundering organization, because some people are jumping ship for conscience sake.

In the reverse of the biblical character Samson, who destroyed the Philistine temple, Camping may bring down and destroy Family Radio. He may hurt and injure as many in his declining years as he helped earlier. Sandwich hermeneutics packed with tainted meat may be his end. It will surely not be the end of the Church in its local manifestation. The Church and churches will march on. Camping cannot succeed in simplistically reducing everything to Church universal.

The words of John Thornbury offer this fitting conclusion:

“Without a doubt, the local church has a very important place in the New Testament. One who would discredit or minimize the significance of this divinely ordained institution or forsake it under any pretense whatever has committed a grievous fault.”⁵⁰

Thornbury closes his volume with the words of G. Dana Boardman, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Philadelphia:

“Not that I would for a moment hint that we do not need church organizations or the enforcement of our Master’s ordinances. These we must have and must strenuously maintain; for they are, at least in this world, essential not only to the spread of the gospel, but also to the preservation of the Christian life itself. Indeed, I am almost ready to affirm that without churches — that is, formal organizations — we could hardly have the church — that is, the spiritual organism of which I am speaking to-day. In fact, all life tends to organization, even as

all death tends to disorganization. Accordingly, a church in the sense of a formal organization is as truly a divine institution as the church in the sense of a spiritual organism. He who is too good for a local, visible church is not good enough for the universal, invisible church.”⁵¹

Endnotes:

1. See further, G. Richard Fisher, “Will Jesus Return in 1994? The Prognostications of Harold Camping,” *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, and “Ready for Failure? The Further Prognostications of Harold Camping,” *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3.
2. Harold Camping, *1994?* New York: Vantage Press, 1992, pg. 533.
3. “Family Radio Staff Meeting,” Sept. 20, 2001, tape on file.
4. Harold Camping, *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?* Oakland: Family Stations, Inc., no date, pg. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
7. Joni Eareckson Tada, *More Precious Than Silver*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998, entry for November 26.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?*, op. cit., pg. 6, bold in original.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 7.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.
12. *Ibid.*, pg. 11.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 17.
16. *Ibid.*
17. “Family Radio Staff Meeting,” op. cit.
18. *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?*, op. cit., pg. 18.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 21.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 22.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
25. Benjamin Netanyahu, *Fighting Terrorism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, pg. 130.
26. “Will Jesus Return in 1994?,” op. cit., pg. 1.
27. *1994?*, op. cit., pg. 52-54.
28. See, for example, Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, pp. 40-46; and Paul L. Maier, *Josephus - The Essential Writings*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1988,

pp. 209-210.

29. Harry Ironside, *Daniel The Prophet*. New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1960, pg. 248.
30. Johann Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983, Vol. 9, pg. 310.
31. Letter to PFO, Oct. 30, 2001, ellipsis and parenthesis in original, copy on file.
32. “Will Jesus Return in 1994?,” op. cit., pg. 13.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?*, op. cit., pg. 4.
35. See further, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, Vol. 5, pg. 278.
36. See further, Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989, pp. 258-259.
37. Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*. New York: Abingdon Press, no date, Vol. 1, pg. 137, italic in original.
38. “Family Radio Staff Meeting,” op. cit.
39. See further, W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, New Testament section, pg. 462.
40. Harry Ironside, *Miscellaneous Papers*. New York: Loizeaux Bros., Inc., 1945, Vol. 2, last chapter, pg. 8.
41. *Ibid.*
42. “Family Radio Staff Meeting,” op. cit.
43. Stephen Lang, *1001 Things You Always Wanted to Know About the Holy Spirit*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, pg. 103.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 184.
45. See further, Daniel G. Reid, editor, *The Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, pg. 590.
46. John Thornbury, *The Doctrine of the Church*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Heritage Publishers, 1971, pp. 191-192, italics in original.
47. Pastor Joe Jacowitz, “Prayer-time” program, Nov. 5, 2001, transcript of closing comments of broadcast on file. Available online at: www.geocities.com/daverastetter/camping_prayertime.htm
48. See further information posted on www.familyradioiswrong.com
49. Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001, pg. 31.
50. *The Doctrine of the Church*, op. cit., pg. 190.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.