

Family Radio/Harold Camping

By Tim Martin

Founder: Harold Camping

Founding Date: 1958

Location: Family Radio is broadcast out of Oakland, California. It has 49 stations across 23 states in the USA.¹ The programs can also be heard around the world in 14 different languages via shortwave and mediumwave radios.²

Official Publications: Family Radio News, Open Forum (Radio Program).

Other Names: The official name of Family Radio is “Family Stations, Inc.”

History

In 1942, Harold Camping earned a B.S. degree in Civil Engineering from the University of California.³ In 1953 he purchased “Plymouth Construction” and renamed it “Camping Construction.”⁴ Camping Construction “grew into a large company that, among other things, built churches all over the country. He’d always dreamed of evangelizing, though, and in 1958, with money from his successful business and some shrewd East Bay real estate dealings, he turned that dream into Family Radio.”⁵

The network, officially named Family Stations Inc., started “in 1958 with the express purpose of sending the Christian Gospel into the world.”⁶ Camping serves as “president and general manager on a full time volunteer basis, receiving no salary or other financial compensation.”⁷ Daily programming on Family Radio consists of a variety of regular programming such as “Creation Moments” and “Positive Parenting.” The music is traditional and conservative in nature. Family Radio also has a “School of the Bible” with an enrollment of over 30,000 students which offers an associates degree.⁸ Camping can be heard four times a day, Monday through Friday: three times on *Family Bible Study* and once on *Open Forum*, a ninety minute live call in program.⁹

Sometime around 1962 Camping began developing some unique dates for the creation of the world and other Bible events.¹⁰ Due to his prediction of 1994 as the end of the world, he was asked to stop teaching classes at a Christian Reformed Church in May 1988.¹¹ He left and founded Alameda Bible Fellowship. In 1992, Camping published the book *1994?* in which he taught that the final tribulation period began in 1988 and “should encompass twenty-three years”¹² (thus, ending in 2011). The tribulation will be marked by Satan’s rulership in the church; he will introduce “satanically inspired gospels” and will be “binding ...the hearts of the unsaved.” This will result in fewer and fewer people being saved every year, until at some point, “...no flesh can be saved if it [the tribulation] continues the full length.” Therefore, God promised in Matthew 24:22 to shorten the tribulation. Instead of 2011, God would end the tribulation in 1994.¹³

Camping normally qualified his 1994 prediction with the possibility that he could be wrong: “...1994 AD appears to be a likely candidate for the year of the end of history.”¹⁴ When 1994 failed to be the end of the world, Camping still held that 1988, 1994 and 2011 are significant dates for the end times. However, he changed their significance. In 2002, Camping taught that “1994 was the official end of the church age.”¹⁵ In other words, in 1994, Satan had completely taken over all the churches. God would no longer save anybody through the ministry of the church; true believers should flee the local church and never go back. In 2005, Camping changed the end of the Church age to 1988, and reaffirmed 2011 as the “probable end of the world.”¹⁶

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Doctrines

Most of Camping's beliefs are Biblically sound. He affirms the full deity of Jesus Christ, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, trinity, inerrancy etc. However, within some of these doctrines, he has some clear aberrations from the Bible.

Atonement: Camping has an orthodox understanding of what Christ's atonement accomplishes. He explains that Jesus was a substitute provided by God to satisfy the demands of the law. He does not however, have an orthodox explanation of how Jesus accomplished the atonement. Instead of Jesus' death on the cross, the atonement was accomplished between the time He was in the Garden of Gethsemane until He said "It is finished" on the cross.¹⁷ At that time, "the penalty for our sins had been completely paid."¹⁸ But, what did Jesus do during this time to pay for sin? Camping says that "we do not know how God was punishing Him." But, we do know that Jesus "had to perfectly exact a punishment that would be completely equal to that which should have been endured by each and every one of those whom God had elected to salvation."¹⁹

Church: In 1988, the church age ended and the great tribulation began. During the Church age (33-1988), Satan had been slowly taking over the Church by sowing tares (non-Christians under Satan's authority) into the Church. The result was that in 1988 "Satan ha[d] complete control of the local congregation"²⁰ and no one could be saved through the ministry of a local church. Their source of authority is no longer God, but Satan. Even if a church gives a valid gospel presentation, the Holy Spirit will not apply it to the listeners, thus, they cannot be saved.

Camping believes, as do most Christians, that the Bible uses the word "Church" in two different senses. Sometimes the Bible uses "church" to refer to a local assembly of professing believers. Other times, it refers to the "universal church," which is all believers without respect to their individual assemblies. When Camping claims that the church age is over, he is referring to the local church, not the universal. Hence, when discussing a verse that indicates the church will continue (like Matthew 16:18), Camping says it refers to the universal church, not the local.²¹

Camping claims that from 1988 until 1994, nobody was saved. He uses Revelation 8:1 to demonstrate this: "there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour." Since there is joy in heaven when somebody is saved (Luke 15:7, 15:10), then the half hour of silence in Revelation 8:1 means that nobody was saved.²² In 1994, God started saving people again, but not through the ministry of the local church. Instead, people were saved through the ministry of individuals and organizations like Family Radio.

Scripture: Camping uses an allegorical method of interpreting the Bible. In other words, the stories and instructions in the Bible have a spiritual meaning beyond the literal sense. "The spiritual meaning must identify with some aspect of God's Gospel program that is discussed in the Bible."²³ For instance, in Joshua 6, God commands the Israelites to march around the walls of Jericho, then the city walls collapse, allowing the Israelites to conquer the city. All the inhabitants were destroyed except for those in Rahab's house. Subsequently, Israel began the conquest of Canaan. Camping explains that "there was another important truth hidden in the account." He explains that it illustrates how national Israel (Jericho) would lose its salvation (walls falling down) when Jesus was born; meanwhile, a remnant of believers (Rahab) would flee Jericho to evangelize the world (conquest of Canaan). The story in Jericho has a third meaning as well. The Church (Jericho) would be destroyed (walls falling down), while a remnant of believers (Rahab) would flee the Churches to evangelize the world (conquest of Canaan).²⁴

Camping not only assigns hidden meanings to narratives, but also to numbers. In Acts 27:37, 276 people are saved from a shipwreck. Camping explains that $276=3 \times 4 \times 23$. "Three signifies God's purpose, four signifies universality or the end, twenty-three signifies judgement." Therefore, God is indicating, "God's purpose (3) that the believers all over the world at the end of the church age (4) will escape God's judgment (23)."²⁵

Christian Response

Atonement: Christ's atonement was accomplished with His physical death. The necessity of Jesus' physical death was foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrificial system. Once a year a goat was slain in the Temple's holy place, and its blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for Israel's sins. The blood symbolized the life of the animal that was sacrificed for the atonement (Lev. 16:9-15, 17:11). The animal did not suffer anything besides death to foreshadow the atonement. Hebrews 9:11-14 shows that Christ fulfilled this event by being the "once for all" sacrifice for sin "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once

into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (v. 12). Just as the physical death of the goat was required, Jesus offered His physical death for our redemption.

Also, 1 Peter 3:18 says, “For Christ also died for sins once and for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...” Camping may want to insist that this is not referring to Jesus’ physical death, but His suffering the equivalent of spiritual death. However, the verse continues, “having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” Hence, Jesus’ death in the flesh (physical death) is what enables Him to “bring us to God.”

Church: The word “church” is translated from the New Testament Greek word “ecclesia.” In classical Greek, this word “meant originally any public assembly of citizens summoned by a herald.”²⁶ In Christianity, the local “church” is a public assembly of members of the universal church (body of Christ) summoned by God for fellowship, worship, and spreading the gospel (Heb. 10:24-25). Although some of Camping’s complaints about the local church may be valid, the Bible never indicates that God expects any individual Christian, or assembly of Christians to perfectly reflect His truth and morality. Individual Christians are a “work in process” as they grow in their understanding and application of God’s truth. Naturally, when Christians assemble to worship God, they will fail to live up to a complete understanding and application of God’s word. Hence, God gives commandments on how to organize these gatherings with leadership. This organized assembly is the local church, which Camping says is no longer used by God.

Interestingly, Camping’s replacement for the church is nearly identical to a local church. It is not only an organized assembly for the purpose of worshipping God, but it is formatted much like a Church service. The Sunday meetings at Alameda Bible Fellowship (ABF) start with a Bible study, followed by a 90 minute “worship service,” a one hour fellowship lunch, a one hour “song service” followed by a one hour “Open Forum” with Harold Camping.²⁷ Interestingly, in 1992, Camping considered ABF to be a church.²⁸ Hence, it is difficult to see how ABF is not a church today. Though it does not use the title “elder” or “deacon,” ABF still functions as a church with people in leadership as overseeing the teaching, services, etc. Apparently, the only functional difference between ABF and a church is that ABF does not baptize nor serve communion.

Scripture: Camping is inconsistent and arbitrary in his allegorical use of scripture. As noted above, Camping claims the spiritual meaning “must identify with some aspect of God’s Gospel program.” Why? How does He come to this conclusion? Why doesn’t the spiritual meaning have to identify with the deity of Jesus, or the nature of God? Camping does not say. When 1994 failed to be the end, Camping radically re-interpreted verses. He formerly interpreted “...for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Mat. 24:22) to mean that the tribulation would be moved from 2011 to 1994. Later, Camping used this very verse to say that God would start saving people in 1994 outside the local church.²⁹

Another example of Camping’s arbitrariness is seen in his spiritual interpretation of the word “harvest.” Camping turns to Matthew 9:37 which says, “the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few.” He concludes that the “harvest is concerned with people becoming saved.”³⁰ True, the harvest in Matthew 9:37 is concerned with people being saved. But, Camping imposes the Matthew 9:37 use of “harvest” on Matthew 13:30, 39. Interestingly, Jesus already gives us the spiritual interpretation of “harvest” in Matthew 13:39: “the harvest is the end of the world.” Clearly then, Jesus’ parable in Matthew 13 uses “harvest” in a different way than in Matthew 9. This may seem like a minor issue at first, but Camping builds elaborate ideas after changing the plain meaning of verses. Also, he applies this spiritual meaning inconsistently. When Jesus uses “harvest” in Matthew 21:34, Camping says it refers to the coming of Jesus and the gospel more than 2000 years ago.³¹

Camping’s use of numbers are also without justification. Take the example of Acts 27:37 above. Camping says 276 breaks down as 3x4x23. Even if Camping is correct that the number three means “God’s purpose,” four is “universality” and twenty-three is “judgment,” then why should we understand this to mean that it is God’s purpose that believers will escape God’s judgment at the end of the church age? Why doesn’t it mean that the believers would be raptured at the beginning of the tribulation? Also, what rule of interpretation says that 276 should be broken down as 3x4x23? Why not 276=(7x43)-(5x5)? Interestingly, if this last formula were used, it could be consistent with Camping’s theology.³²

Authority: Either these unique dates and teachings offered by Camping are from God, or they are not. Camping often claims both. For instance, he admits that these “end-time dates ...are not being offered as absolute fact...we are not infallible in our conclusions.” But, several pages earlier he says that these dates have been in the Bible from the beginning, and God is now revealing

them.³³ Since God is revealing these dates, a person can confidently preach that 2011 will be the end. “The teacher is compelled to speak because he knows it is not his own word, but God’s Word that He is declaring.”³⁴

Camping makes a similar contradiction when he claims that unsaved people will reject 2011 as the end of the world.³⁵ If this is true, then God must be the source of these dates; how else could salvation be evidenced in the acceptance or rejection of them? But, in the preceding paragraph, Camping says that 2011 is only a “likelihood” for the end. How can salvation be evidenced by the acceptance of a date that is only “likely” to be the end?

It is understandable why Camping would not want to claim that his teachings are directly from God; 1994 showed that he was wrong. It is also understandable that he wants to claim that God is behind these new teachings. If God were not behind them, he would be creating a new teaching that is heretical compared to teaching throughout history. The problem comes when one puts these two ideas together. These unique teachings cannot, at the same time, be given by God and not be given by God. Camping’s explanation of this problem is that God has not seen fit to reveal everything yet. Though God has given a lot of information about the end time dates, there was more to reveal about 1994 than Camping had access to. Concerning the 2011 prediction then, Camping can say “If this world is still in existence after the end of 2011, we will know that there is still much more we can learn from the Bible.”³⁶

This conclusion, however, is not satisfying. How can one preach 2011 with confidence if there is a possibility that God has not revealed some information about that date? Also, if Camping’s prediction of 2011 has errors in it like 1994 did, then those errors are clearly the ideas of a man. Camping does not give any allowance for anybody to teach the ideas of man; therefore, he should not be afforded the privilege either. “When the pastor and the teachers in a congregation teach the ideas of men – even though they may use Biblical language and quote verses – if what they teach is not firmly based in the Word of God, then it is lies....”³⁷

Although Harold Camping has not taken the title of a prophet, he is acting as one by giving dates and introducing new teachings. The Bible makes it clear that when somebody predicts the end of the world, and it does not happen, then God is not guiding that person, and God’s people should not follow him (Deut. 18:18-22, Jer. 28:9).

Notes

- 1 *Family Radio Stations & Locations*, Family Radio Stations, <http://www.familyradio.com/english/connect/broadcast/location-freq.html/> (accessed November 16, 2005). The website reports that these figures were last updated November 4, 2005.
- 2 *Short-wave & Medium-wave Schedules*, Family Radio Stations, <http://www.familyradio.com/international/frame/> (accessed November 16, 2005).
- 3 *A Brief Biography of Harold Camping*, Family Radio Stations, http://209.10.202.163/english/connect/bio/bio_haroldcamping.html.
- 4 *History*, Cubix Construction Company, <http://www.cubixcc.com/pages/2/index.htm> (accessed July 11, 2005).
- 5 Katy St. Clair, “Quit Your Church!” *East Bay Express*, July 2, 2003, http://eastbayexpress.com/issues/2003-07-02/news/feature_1.html.
- 6 *Family Radio News*, vol. 39 no 2, 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *A Brief Biography of Harold Camping*, Family Radio Stations, http://209.10.202.163/english/connect/bio/bio_haroldcamping.html (accessed November 2005).
- 9 *Program Guides*, Family Radio Stations, http://www.familyradio.com/english/connect/broadcast/zone_sched/ (accessed November 2005).
- 10 Former broadcasts of “Open Forum” can be found at Family Radio Stations, http://209.10.202.163/english/connect/audio_archive/forum/frame/download/ (accessed November 2005).
- 11 Joe Maxwell, “End-times Prediction Draws Strong Following,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 38 June 20 1994 <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1994/june20> (accessed May 2005).
- 12 Harold Camping, *1994?* (New York: Vantage Press, 1992) 222, 444.
- 13 *1994?* 192, 495-6.
- 14 *Ibid.* 470
- 15 Harold Camping, *The End of the Church Age...and After*, (Oakland: Family Stations, Inc., 2002) 125.
- 16 Harold Camping, *Time Has an End*, (New York: Vantage Press, 2005) 469.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 327.
- 18 *Topic From the Open Forum*, Family Radio Stations, http://209.10.202.163/graphical/literature/openforum/jesus.html#jesus_2 (accessed November 2005).
- 19 *Time Has An End*, 55.
- 20 Harold Camping, *Wheat and Tares*, (Oakland: Family Stations, Inc., date unknown) 22.
- 21 *The End of the Church Age...and After*, 282.
- 22 *Time Has an End*, 341. Camping does not explain how a half hour equals 6 years. He also applies the 42 months of Rev. 11:2 and 3.5 days of Rev. 11:8-9 to this time period (394).
- 23 *Wheat and Tares*, 52.
- 24 *Time Has an End*, 235-239.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 401.
- 26 J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 195.
- 27 A website promoting ABF explains, “We are a fellowship of believers. We have no members, no elders or deacons, and no baptism ceremonies or Lord’s suppers. We are NOT a church.” *User Distribution Activities*, Good message foundation, <http://goodmessage.webexone.com/default.asp?link=%2Fdbapp%2Fdbapp%2Easp%3F%5Fcommand%3Ddetail%26%5Fappid%3D217175%26id%3D16020>, emphasis in original, (accessed November 2005).
- 28 *1994?* 160.
- 29 *Time Has an End*, 391.
- 30 *Wheat and Tares*, 7.
- 31 Harold Camping, *Family Radio News* Vol. 38 no.4, Oct-Dec 2003, 6.
- 32 These numbers are identified by Camping in *Time Has an End*, 225, 299, and 294. Their meanings are: 7- perfect completeness, 43 and 5 both mean salvation and judgment. Hence, at the end of time, God’s salvation and judgment will be completed.
- 33 *Time Has An End*, xiv, xxii.
- 34 *Ibid.*, xviii.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 384.
- 36 *Ibid.*, xxii.
- 37 *1994?* 163.



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