

HAROLD CAMPING AND THE END OF THE WORLD

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt ©

As part of a PhD thesis I wrote about Harold Camping, the man who is now warning that 21 May will be the end of the world. Here an abstract from my Phd of what I wrote about Camping and his work and views. I have not included his calculations for now adopting 21 May as the final date.

1. HISTORY

Family Radio was set up by Harold Camping (b. 1921) as Family Stations Inc. in Oakland, California (USA) in 1958. Camping finished his studies of Civil Engineering at the University of California at Berkeley in 1942. Thereafter he began Camping Construction. He later sold that successful business and devoted himself fully to the Family Radio ministry.¹

Camping was a member of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America (CRCNA) when he founded Family Radio. He left that denomination in 1988, when he was no longer allowed to teach his eschatology in his

¹ www.familyradio.com. See also the transcript of 'Interview with Harold Camping' by Stephen C. Meyers (8 June 1994), on www.bibleandscience.com/otherviews/camping.htm (30 September 2004). Meyers wrote that Camping married in 1942 with Shirley Vander Schuur whom he knew from Alameda Reformed Church. Many in the Reformed churches in the USA have Dutch ancestry.

local congregation. He described Family Radio as ‘a nonprofit, nondenominational, educational organization dedicated to obeying our Lord's command to preach the Gospel to every creature.’ It was ‘not associated with any organization, religious or political. It is a faith-based ministry’.²

Camping served as president and general manager of Family Radio, but he called himself a ‘full-time volunteer’. He received no salary from Family Radio, as his income from selling his construction company around 1960 continued to support him. Family Radio regarded ‘the Lord Jesus Christ as its Chief Executive Officer because it operates altogether under the authority of the Bible’, Camping held

In the beginning of his ministry, Camping allowed many, mostly Reformed, organizations to broadcast their programs on Family Radio, as long as he agreed fully with their message. Camping guarded his ‘pulpit’ with jealousy. Family Radio refused to receive payment from those Program Suppliers. That is commendable, as that sort of financial independence of external producers was the precondition for being able to seriously implement any programming strategy for a radio broadcaster.

Family Radio was best known for the programs of Camping himself, who taught the Family Bible Study program and hosted the Open Forum. That was a semi-live weeknight call-in program. On the Open Forum, Camping gave ‘Biblical responses to [...] questions and comments and in this way continues to present the Gos-

² www.familyradio.com. Mr. A. Camping of the Arabic Department in an email to the author (8 April 2003).

pel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the marketplace of the world.’³

On 4 February 1959 Family Radio aired its first broadcast, over radio station KEAR FM in San Francisco. Since then, Family Radio has built a number of powerful AM and FM stations in the United States and around the world. In January 1973, Family Radio bought airtime on a SW station in Scituate, California, and in October 1973 Camping bought that station altogether. Family Radio’s International Department used that SW station in 1973 to broadcast English and Spanish programs. In 1974 Chinese, Russian, German, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish and Arabic were added to the bouquet of languages.⁴ In 1976 Family Radio bought a SW station WYFR in Okeechobee, Florida, and began broadcasting from there a year later. In 1979 that location had four 100 kW transmitters.⁵

Family Radio has since 1982 cooperated with the nationalist broadcaster Radio Free China of Taiwan, by exchanging transmission facilities. Radio Free China has since 1982 been broadcasting from Okeechobee to reach the Chinese in the USA. Family Radio has been broadcasting from Taiwan in English, Chinese and Hindi.⁶ This cooperation with a secular broadcaster contrasted sharply with Camping’s refusal to cooperate with Chris-

³ www.familyradio.com.

⁴ Ibid. Hansjörg Biener, *Christliche Rundfunksender Weltweit: Rundfunderarbeit im Klima der Konkurrenz* (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 105. Hansjörg Biener in an email to the author (3 July 2003).

⁵ Biener, *Christliche Rundfunksender Weltweit*, pp. 105-107.

⁶ Ibid., p. 108. ‘Reaching Out to the World’, in *Family Radio News* Volume 36 No. 4 (October-December 2001), p. 5.

tians he disagreed with, but was in line with the anti-communist views that he shared with the Taiwanese broadcaster.

In 1984, Family Radio owned eight 100 kW SW transmitters and two of 50 kW, with a fine field of antennas. This made Family Radio the largest owner of broadcasting facilities among the international Christian broadcasters, and not a small one among SW broadcasters in general. Broadcasts from Okeechobee could be heard with excellent signals in Europe, North Africa and the Americas.⁷

At the beginning of the 21st century, Family Radio continued to expand. Since July 2001 Family Radio used Radio Abu Dhabi's facilities for its transmissions to Asia.⁸ By 2004, the programs were also broadcast via the audio channels of some satellites and through the internet.

In 2004, Family Radio was broadcasting in seventeen languages.⁹ This expansion of its ministry came at a time when Family Radio had isolated itself totally from the Churches and most Christians in the USA. It is tragic that the Christian missionary radio broadcasting organi-

⁷ Reginald Kennedy, 'The Word Senders: A Personal Assessment of the Work of the Major Protestant, Evangelical Missionary Radio Stations' (n.p, 1980), chapter 2, p. 44. This unpublished reflection on the Christian broadcasters was found in the library of the World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC) in London. It was numbered A 302.

⁸ Biener in an email to the author (3 July 2003).

⁹ David Hoff in an email to the author (6 August 2004).

Www.familyradio.com spoke of English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, German, French, Hindi, Arabic, Italian, Portuguese and Turkish, with Polish, Korean, Indonesian and Vietnamese 'in the process'.

zation with the largest facilities and the strongest combined transmission power was non-cooperative and exclusivist. That was due to the unique opinions of Camping, which were considered heretical by his traditional Reformed *milieu* as well as most other North American Christians.

2. STATEMENT OF FAITH

‘At family radio we empathically teach that the whole Bible is the Word of God. [...] The Bible alone, and in its entirety, is the Word of God’, according to Family Radio.¹⁰ Because of that belief, the organization refused to create a formal Statement of Faith. Camping rejected all creedal statements. The idea that Family Radio operated fully under the authority of the Bible, in the authorized King James Version, was an important concept in Camping’s theology. In order to understand the theological lines of thought of Family Radio, it is therefore necessary to study its publications and broadcasts.

Camping’s personality and theology have been preponderant in Family Radio. He has written a number of books, including *Adam When, What God Hath Joined Together* and *God’s Magnificent Salvation Plan*. The topics of creationism, Christian marriage and how not to go to hell have always been paramount in Family Radio’s programming.¹¹

The American counselor Jay Adams has had a program on the English broadcasts of Family Radio for many years. Adam’s conservative approach, using the

¹⁰ www.familyradio.com.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Bible as the only tool in counseling and rejecting any scientific psychological knowledge, fitted well with the approach Camping's 'the Bible only' approach to solving problems in life.¹² BTGH has also placed its programs on Family Radio, as well as many other conservative Christian organizations in the USA. Especially in the Reformed churches in the USA Family Radio had been popular.

Family radio has always had a conservative view of the role of women in church and in the family, what music is acceptable, Sunday as a day of rest, and the authority of the Bible in the authorized King James Version. The station was known for its half-hour long uninterrupted readings from the Bible. It was fiercely anti-charismatic, had a traditional Reformed view of free will and a dispensationalist-style approach to eschatology, even though Camping always claimed that he had an *amillennial* theology. Eschatology played an ever increasing role of importance on Family Radio.¹³

Family Radio did not participate in *The World by 2000* project that since 1985 brought all other international protestant broadcasters together for a common strategy regarding what language to broadcast programs in. The only other Arabic Christian broadcaster that did not participate in *The World by 2000* was Adventist

¹² Biener in an email to the author (3 July 2003). James R. White, 'Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping's Call to Flee the Church', in *Christian Research Journal* Vol. 25 No. 1 (2002), as published on www.equip.org/free/DC989.pdf (30 September 2004).

¹³ See for instance Harold Camping, *The End of the Church Age...and After* (Oakland, 2001). Kennedy, 'The Word Senders', chapter 2, p. 45.

World Radio (AWR).¹⁴ The reason why Family Radio abstained from cooperating with the project was related to its exclusivist theology. In the 1980s, its theology was still mostly within the parameters of the Reformed tradition, however.

Camping's most exclusive views had to do with his eschatology. He believed that as 'we must be close to the end of time, the meaning of a great many Biblical passages should become revealed to the minds of careful, diligent students of the Bible'.¹⁵ Camping obviously believed in his own ability to explain those parts of the Bible that were considered unclear by most theologians.

In 1992 Camping predicted the return of Christ between 15 and 17 September 1994.¹⁶ According to him, the time of the Great Tribulation had begun on 21 May 1988. The sign of that event was that true Christians were being excommunicated from the churches that did not preach the Gospel as Camping understood it.¹⁷ That reflected Camping's own experience, as the Reformed churches were not accepting his esoteric exegesis any longer. In 1988, he was asked to stop teaching his unique eschatology in the Christian Reformed Church of Alameda in California, so he began his own Alameda Reformed Bible Church.¹⁸

Camping based his prediction of the return of Christ on his numerological and allegorical hermeneutics of the

¹⁴ Biener, *Christliche Rundfunksender Weltweit*, p. 108.

¹⁵ Camping, *The End of the Church Age...and After*, pp. 210-212, 216-217.

¹⁶ Harold Camping, *1994?* (New York, 1992), p. 531.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 218.

¹⁸ Stephen C. Meyers, 'Interview with Harold Camping'.

Bible. On that same basis he was able to pinpoint creation to the year 11.013 Before the Common Era (BCE) exactly.¹⁹ He realized that consistency in numerology was difficult. He sometimes took figures literally and at other times not, but he explained that it was ‘the prerogative of God to use numbers as He desires’.²⁰

Because of Camping’s date-setting of the return of Christ, the *classes* and synods of some Reformed denominations in the USA felt obliged to write reports which rejected Camping’s theology as heretical, calling him to repent. That was urgent for Reformed and Presbyterian churches as Camping had considerable influence in those churches.²¹

The exclusiveness of Family Radio came to a head when Camping announced in 2001 that Christians should no longer go to church. According to him the ‘dispensation of the church age had ended’. He believed that after centuries of patience with the sinful churches, God had now left them, and Satan was in charge of the churches. In his critique he also often focused on issues that were of special interest within the Reformed community, like female pastors, the teaching of universal atonement, baptismal regeneration, faith as an instrument of salvation, a future millennium, and allowing divorce in certain cases. He saw those as grave faults in the churches that made

¹⁹ Camping, *1994?*, p. 295.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

²¹ President Robert Grossman of the East Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States condemned Camping for his false prophecies and arrogance. See Rev. Robert Grossman, ‘Y2K and False Prophecy Today’, in *Reformed Herald* Vol. 56, No. 7 (March 2000), p. 11.

Gods judgment come in 2001.²² He especially decried the manner in which money was spent in churches:

What is going on? [...] One 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 to the world. [...] Virtually every one of us, as we look at the church we attend, and as we look at the other churches in our city, deplore what we are seeing. The worship service has increasingly become a time of entertainment. The preaching seldom, if ever, warns for the immanence of Judgment Day. Church after church feature signs and wonders. Little or no money is available for mission work because of increasing obligations to pay for newer and finer buildings and greater and greater pastor's salaries. Perhaps one of the most shocking experiences of the true believer within these churches is the rejection he will experience if he contends too strongly for greater purity in doctrine.²³

‘Even though many churches and denominations insist that the Bible is the only infallible Word of God, they cling to a number of doctrines of men rather than submit entirely to the truth of the Bible’, Camping wrote in his magazine Family Radio News in 2001. The fact that all churches had creeds and confessions was an important proof of the wickedness of the churches. Camping believed that the adoption of a creed was the negation of the sufficiency of the Bible. He believed that all churches

²² James R. White, *Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping Refuted and Christ's Church Defended* (New York, 2002), p. 40.

²³ Quote in J. Ligon Duncan and Mark R. Talbot, ‘Camping’s Folly: A Response to Harold Camping’s Erroneous Teaching on the Church’, on www.alliancenet.org (30 September 2004).

would be ‘destroyed during the Great Tribulation’, and that ‘we are living in the period of the Great Tribulation’.²⁴ In his book *The End of the Church Age...and After*, Camping wrote:

God has commanded that the believers must depart out of their churches. No matter how faithful their church appears, God has commanded His people to leave the church. [God gives] this commandment to believers today. [...] God has given no exceptions to this command. He has commanded each and every believer to leave the church. [...] The believers must leave the churches because the Holy Spirit has left them and has given the rulership to Satan. [...] Thus, we have learned that the time has now come when we must leave our churches and congregations even though we are to continue to gather together to fellowship with other true believers outside of the church.²⁵

According to Camping, people that have come to faith in churches since the end of the church age in 2001 were not truly saved, as the Holy Spirit was not present in those churches any longer. He advised believers to meet together on Sundays in small groups, sing hymns, and listen together to the broadcasts of Family Radio. These groups had to be careful not to call themselves church,

²⁴ Harold Camping, ‘Has The Era of the Church Age Come to An End?’, in *Family Radio News* Volume 36 No. 4 (October-December 2001), pp. 7, 14.

²⁵ Camping, *The End of the Church Age...and After*, pp. 210-212, 216-217. The idea that believers should gather among themselves without calling that a church meeting, seems to closely resemble the congregational style of the Brethren Churches. The refusal to administer the sacraments also reflects habits in the Salvation Army.

not to appoint leaders, and not to celebrate baptism and Holy Communion.²⁶

One of the proofs that Camping used to show that the time of the Great Tribulation had begun, was that in his opinion the ‘great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindred, and people, and tongues’, had become a real possibility through radio:

God has provided means by which the true Gospel can be heralded forth all over the world. This is particularly true as the Gospel is sent out by radio, by satellite, by Internet. Never before in the history of the world can a whole continent come under the umbrella of the Gospel. Because we witness this phenomena [sic] by a ministry such as Family Radio which in no sense is under the authority of the church and which tries to be as faithful to the Bible as possible, we can know that we are in that time of the Great Tribulation.²⁷

Whereas the churches played no role in God’s schemes any longer, according to Camping Family Radio’s importance had only increased. When a listener to the Open Forum asked Camping whether the people listening to Family Radio who came to Christ in churches since 2001 were actually false converts, Camping denied that and made listening to Family Radio a criterion of knowing about someone’s salvation:

Well, but you see...the problem is that if they’re listeners to Family Radio... in order to be an intense listener you have to be ready to accept a lot of things that you’re not

²⁶ White, ‘Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping’s Call to Flee the Church’.

²⁷ Camping, ‘Has The Era of the Church Age Come to An End?’, pp. 14-15.

getting in churches. In Family Radio you hear that when you become saved you become a brand new person. You receive a brand new resurrected soul. You don't hear that in the churches. If you're listening to Family Radio, you hear that we cannot...trust in... that faith is a instrument that brings us to Christ. We can't accept the idea that baptism is a ...seal of any kind and you don't hear that in churches. In other words you have to have a different mindset to be an avid listener to Family Radio.²⁸

Camping believed that avid listeners to family Radio showed their true state of regeneration by their willingness to listen to Family Radio and accept his teachings. Camping always stressed that he resisted all authority that might be placed above the Bible, be that the Roman Catholic Pope, the Creeds of the Church, or charismatic visions.

3. PROGRAM STRATEGY AND ACTUAL PROGRAMS

3.1 Program Strategy

Family Radio's statement of faith was 'the Bible alone and in its entirety', and that was interpreted in such manner that specific program policies were considered unnecessary. Possibly Family Radio considered formal program strategies just as undesirable as any Creedal statement.

Camping was aware of the need to not proclaim an American Gospel to the world. He wanted to ensure that

²⁸ Question of Chris Arnzen and answer by Camping on Open Forum on 27 December 2001, as quoted by White, *Dangerous Airwaves*, pp. 117-8.

he would bring the ‘Gospel of the Bible, and not the Gospel of Europe or the Gospel of the United States or the Gospel of Mexico or any other perverted Gospel.’²⁹ He also expressed the hope: ‘May it never be that the gospel we present is resisted by the political authorities because we are preaching the culture and politics of a political nation. Such a gospel cannot be the Gospel of the Bible.’³⁰ He also believed that ‘as we focus on the basic fundamentals, the true Gospel is absolutely common to every nation. It makes no difference what nation we are in, we all have the exact same spiritual need for the exact same spiritual antidote.’³¹

Camping obviously held that what all that he proclaimed was exactly that ‘true Gospel’ and he did not show any awareness of the fact that what he considered the ‘true Gospel’, was pervaded with his own interpretations based on his own context. His individualist theology, where a church is no longer needed and the technology of Family Radio can do the work of mission in the world, is as North American as can be. ‘No missionaries, no public confessions, no submission to the body, no community, no pastors, no ordinances, and no obligations. Just me, Jesus, my Bible, and Family Radio’, is how J. Ligon Duncan of Reformed Theological Seminary and Mark R. Talbot of Wheaton College summarized the hyper-individualist ethos of Camping.

²⁹ Harold Camping, ‘What is the True Gospel’, on www.familyradio.com (30 September 2004).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.