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DANGEROUS AIRWAVES: HAROLD CAMPING'S CALL TO FLEE THE CHURCH

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SYNOPSIS

Harold Camping is the president of Family Radio. He teaches that God has done away with the church, and thus there should be no more local congregations, elders, deacons, and ordinances such as baptism or the Lord's Supper. He maintains that the Holy Spirit has left the church as an empty shell with no power to proclaim the gospel. Because Camping calls his followers to flee the churches and form fellowships around his teachings, Christians must understand what the Bible teaches about the church and what the proper means of biblical interpretation are in order to counter Camping's false teachings.

He has the ears of millions across the world through his far-flung radio empire. His listeners tend to develop a strong attachment to him, finding in his esoteric, allegorical interpretations a view of Scripture they do not hear anywhere else (and for good reason). His name is Harold Camping, famous for his failed prophecy concerning the return of Christ in 1994, and now becoming more famous for his teaching against the very church of Jesus Christ.

Harold Camping is the president of Family Station, Inc., a California-based ministry with worldwide broadcast facilities, including more than 150 outlets in the United States.¹ His deep, sonorous voice can be heard any hour of the day — by radio, satellite, or Internet broadcast. Camping helped begin Family Stations in 1958, and he later devoted himself full time to the ministry. He is especially known for his daily call-in program, "Open Forum." His style is unmistakably unique: he speaks slowly with a distinctive voice and cadence.

Over the years, Family Radio has provided a valuable service to many churches and pastors. Many very solid, godly men have proclaimed the gospel of grace through the facilities of Family Radio, including the late Dr. James Boice of the Tenth Presbyterian Church. Many local ministries have been greatly blessed by having their services aired in their area on the network.

Today, however, churches and ministries are fleeing Family Radio as people would flee a burning building. Why? Harold Camping has chosen to pit himself against the entire church, proclaiming that God has destroyed the church, that the era of the church is finished, and that the only means God now uses to evangelize the world is Family Radio "and ministries like it." Camping spends much of his on-air time explaining to listeners why they should leave their churches, abandon the oversight of elders, stop using the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), and gather around their radios for "fellowship" in the "post-church age." He has declared that churches that once aired their worship services on the network must follow new rules. They can no longer call themselves churches on the program. They cannot announce meeting times, and pastors cannot refer to themselves by that title on the air. As a result, most have removed their services, leaving Family Radio a relative ghost town.

People are nevertheless still listening to Camping. Pastors who had no idea that Camping had a hold on members of their churches are reporting losing individual families, up to as many as 10 families from a single congregation. They are “fleeing” the church.

Camping’s teachings are unbiblical and dangerous. He has misrepresented the church and challenged the wisdom of God in ordering it as He has. For all who love Christ’s church and His truth, an answer must be given.

CAMPING’S TEACHINGS DEFINED

According to Harold Camping, the church age of 1,900 years is over. The church as an organized entity has come to an end. The invisible or eternal church still exists in heaven, but the visible church, made up of congregations and denominations, has been done away with. God has destroyed the church. Why has God done this?

Camping says Israel is a “picture” of the church. Throughout Israel’s history, God brought judgment upon it for the presence of the “high places,” which were centers of idolatrous worship often associated with the Canaanite gods. Camping points out that while God blessed Israel despite the presence of the high places, eventually His patience wore out, and He brought judgment against it. In the same way, says Camping, “high places” have been in the Christian church from the very beginning. What are these high places? They are false teachings Camping believes come from human minds rather than from God. Some are commonly debated topics, such as baptismal regeneration and women as pastors in churches. Some are unique to Camping himself, such as his insistence that faith has no role in salvation (seemingly over responding to an emphasis on man’s role in salvation). It is a small list, and it is relevant only to conservative, and especially Reformed, churches. Camping does not really include liberal Protestant denominations in his thinking. His teachings are specifically directed against conservative, evangelical, Reformed churches.

At some point in time, God brought judgment upon the church and destroyed it.² Since that day, the church has been an “empty shell.” What does it mean that God has destroyed the church? Camping lists a number of results.

First, the gospel is no longer applied within the church, and the Holy Spirit is no longer active in the church. You can preach the gospel in the church all you want, but the Holy Spirit is not there; hence, there is no salvation taking place in the church. Anyone who is saved is saved “outside” the church (a phrase Camping repeats over and over again). When pressed, Camping has admitted that those who have been “converted” since the end of the church age within formal churches only *look* like they are saved — they are actually still unsaved. God is working entirely separate from the church today.

Second, there are no more elders or deacons. The church no longer has divine authority. Those who act as if they have this authority do so without divine warrant. There is no more church discipline nor any reason to fear such discipline should one of Camping’s followers encounter it for promoting his teachings.

Third, the ordinances have been done away with. Camping believes baptism and the Lord’s Supper were “ceremonial laws” that were given to the church alone. Since the church is gone, so are the ordinances. There is to be no more baptism and celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Camping says, amazingly, the “postchurch believer” can read about the ordinances and receive a spiritual benefit by doing so.

So what is the “postchurch believer” to do? Camping teaches that such precepts as a “Sunday Sabbath” and the command not to forsake the gathering of believers (Heb. 10:25) are still binding. Believers therefore are first to flee the local churches because they no longer have divine authority and then seek fellowship with other “like-minded” believers. If there are only a few such people, they can gather on Sundays, sing hymns, and listen to Family Radio together. If there is a group, they can form a fellowship. These fellowships, however, are to have no elders, deacons, or ordinances. They are unorganized groups that simply meet for edification. If an entire church embraces Camping’s views, they are to reorganize as a fellowship by removing their elders and deacons and removing the name “church” from their door.

CAMPING ON THE CHURCH

Harold Camping is first and foremost a radio personality. While he has written some books in the past (including the infamous 1994? which asserted his false prediction of the return of Christ in 1994), his teachings are promulgated primarily through radio, tapes, and audio files on the Internet. He has produced, at the time of this writing, a single pamphlet titled "Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?"³ Most of his teaching, therefore, must be presented by citation of his radio programs. He presented a 13-part series on his new doctrine during the summer of 2001.⁴ He has also inserted commentary on this particular teaching into every other aspect of his radio ministry, so that we are able to draw primarily from comments he made in his study of the Book of Hebrews.⁵ Here he provided a concise summary of the fundamental tenets of his new teaching:

At the beginning of the final tribulation, God has a quick change in His action. The beginning of the tribulation signified that the churches have ceased to be the means by which God plans to evangelize the world, and this is why it is great tribulation. Remember in our last study we talked about, it's a time of weeping. It's a time when we ought to be sorrowing in our hearts because we see the churches that should have known better, they have not turned away from their wrong doctrines, and so finally God has removed the candlestick so they have a form of godliness, but they really deny the power of it.

Camping focuses his attention on the churches from which he has drawn his most devoted followers. He says they should have "known better" than to believe the doctrines that make up the "high places." Camping draws heavily from Revelation 11:7, asserting that the two witnesses are a picture of the church. Since these "candlesticks" were killed when their testimony was finished, so, too, the church will be destroyed when God ceases to use it as the means of evangelization.⁶ He "removes the candlestick" of the church, leaving it a "hollow shell."

God brings the church to an end, signaling the beginning of what the Bible describes as the great tribulation. It is a great tribulation because God has set aside the church as the means by which He evangelizes the world. Although the Bible is still present in the church, where people still preach from the Bible to some degree, the power of salvation is absent. God has another plan. For a few years, therefore, it is doom and gloom.

Camping explains what he means when he says the church has become a "hollow shell." Since most in the church do not even know what God has done, they continue to try to do what is right, teaching and preaching the gospel as they had done when the church still existed and was being used by God. Something, however, has changed. Even though most do not sense it, the Holy Spirit is no longer in the church, guiding, directing, blessing the preaching, giving divine authority to the proclamation of the Word, and especially applying the gospel in order for souls to be saved. The result is that the church continues on — impotent and running solely on inertia. This is the state of the church today, according to Camping. In his written presentation, Camping says:

It is no wonder that it is almost impossible to find a church today that will modify its Confessions to make them more faithful to the Bible. Remember the Bible says that it is God who works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure. Therefore, if a church no longer has a candlestick it means God is no longer working in that church. The elders and deacons are being guided by their own minds rather than by the Holy Spirit.⁷

Today's pastors and elders are bereft of the Spirit's guidance, according to Camping, and can see only with human eyes, not divinely enlightened eyes. Those outside the church in Family Radio, on the other hand, have the Spirit, continue to proclaim the true gospel, and are seeing multitudes saved as a result. When speaking of his understanding of John 21, which he says no one has ever understood until now, Camping utters words that, to the apologetically attuned ear, sound frighteningly similar to the words of Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell, or Victor Paul Weirwille. Now that people are to flee their churches, to whom are they to look for guidance concerning the organization of these "fellowships" in which they are to gather? Who else but Harold Camping?

No matter what Camping's motives might be, this is how aberrant groups begin. His attitude is surely not that of humility when he writes:

Obedience to the command of Luke 21:20–24 can be accomplished in various ways. If a person or family is a member of a church they can withdraw their membership and fellowship on Sundays with whomever there may be who are of like mind. Such withdrawal may initiate a move by the church to excommunicate. 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.⁸

Knowing the tremendous spiritual damage resulting from Camping's teachings in churches all across America and beyond, such flippant references to church discipline and the denial of the divine authority of the church the Lord Jesus established are deeply troubling.

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION REFUTED

How has Camping arrived at the conclusion that the church has been destroyed? There is one simple answer: unfettered, inconsistent, arbitrary, and, at times, incoherent allegorical interpretation of the text of Scripture. Camping has long taught the view, popularized by Origen in the early church, that first sees a basic, literal meaning anyone can understand. More important is the moral meaning, which requires more insight. Most important is the "real" meaning, or the "spiritual" meaning, which requires spiritual insight and knowledge. According to Camping, every passage of the Bible has some relevance to the gospel message.

This becomes the basis, then, for his allegorical interpretations where anything in the Bible becomes "fair game" to be made into a picture of whatever Harold Camping desires. For example, to substantiate his current teachings against the church, Camping has used the two witnesses of Revelation 11, Jerusalem, Judea, all of Old Testament Israel, Hezekiah's life, and the boat the disciples used in John 21 as "pictures" of the church. Within less than the span of five verses Peter can "represent" the church as a whole, a disciple, and Christ. There is no limitation to what can be "seen" with such "interpretation."

Allegorical interpretation contrasts with the grammatical-historical method, which first determines a passage's meaning by reference to its language, context, and background. When we read the biblical text, we wish to know what the original author intended to convey to his original audience in his own context. Until we determine this, we truly have no basis for asking other questions, such as, "What does this mean to me today?"

Allegorical interpretation ignores the grammar and original context of the Scriptures, which is why it must be rejected as a valid method of interpretation. It is simply unverifiable. In other words, no person using the allegorical method can honestly and logically affirm that his or her conclusions are actually based upon the *text* that is being interpreted. Because the actual meaning of the text is ignored, the allegorical meaning can have no more weight than one invests in the allegorical interpreter. Since each allegorical interpreter may "see" or "feel" something different in the text, allegorical interpretations can never be verified by others working with the same text (unlike real biblical exegesis, where the work of generations of scholars verifies and re-verifies the conclusions already reached).

The result of this fatal flaw in the system is that no allegorical interpretation can claim the authority of the original text. This is because the source of the interpretation is not the text itself but the mind of the interpreter who "sees" things in it. Allegorical interpretation cannot compel anyone else to belief since it is personally derived, and the people who accept it do so only because they accept the word of the *interpreter*, not because they invest any authority in the text itself. Allegorical interpretations have no more authority than the one announcing them.

Allegorical interpretation destroys the authority of the text of Scripture. No one using this method can honestly say, "The Word of God says," for their system replaces the meaning of the text (which is communicated through grammar, lexical meanings, context, and background) with the more-or-less relevant insights and imagination of the interpreter.

Christians believe the Scriptures are “God breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and therefore are authoritative *by nature*. When the allegorical interpreter ignores the text, the source of Scripture’s authority is replaced by the thoughts of mere men and women. This leads to every kind of abuse of God’s Word. False teachers often utilize such unverifiable forms of “interpretation” as a cover in order to replace biblical truth with their own false doctrines. Untaught and unstable believers (2 Pet. 3:16) are often susceptible to the “smooth speech” of such teachers, and without solid knowledge of how to properly interpret the Bible, they accept false conclusions, which are presented with great confidence and power. So when we point out Camping’s erroneous use of allegorical interpretation, we are not merely arguing about obtuse, insignificant points of theology. We are defending the very authority of the Scripture, for a Bible that cannot communicate God’s truth consistently to each generation cannot be a solid foundation for the faith.⁹

THE CHURCH DEFENDED

Camping’s attack comes when many in evangelicalism are more than willing to listen to criticism of the church. This is due to the very poor “ecclesiology” rampant today. Rather than seeing the church as the divine institution that the Bible teaches it to be, many today see it more as a commodity, something to be “shopped” and “tried” until you find a “nice fit.” Paul’s description rings empty in many ears today: “But in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).¹⁰

The context of the passage is that of the local church. Paul taught that the local body of believers is the household of the living God. This divine institution is the “pillar and support of the truth.” A pillar and support hold something else up, and in this case, the church provides the foundation of the proclamation of the truth about God and His purposes in this world. It is God’s will that the church, not any manmade substitute, function in this way. The Scriptures often speak of the church’s solidarity, divine purpose, and perpetuity.

Paul explained to the Ephesians: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

The church is built upon an unchanging and unshakable foundation. Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is the cornerstone, and He has provided a solid foundation in the apostles and prophets through whom God’s Word has been given to His people. This whole building is being divinely built “into a dwelling of God in the Spirit,” a description plainly proclaiming the divine nature of the church as God has established it. To denigrate the true church, which listens obediently to her Lord in His Word, is to attack the very home of the Holy Spirit Himself. Indeed, as Paul said a little later in the same epistle, “Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20–21).

God is to receive glory in the church and in Christ Jesus “to all generations forever and ever.” Not only does this speak to the purpose of the church (the glorification of her Lord) but also to the *perpetuity* of the church.¹¹ Unlike Harold Camping (or Joseph Smith before him), the Bible teaches the ongoing nature of the divine institution that is the church. Nowhere do we ever read that God has placed a time limitation on the church, nor would He end its role in bringing Him glory.

Christians are called to be a vital part of the local church. They are not mere “extras” outside the discipleship activity reserved only for “super Christians”; indeed, they are part and parcel of a life of obedience. Note the record of Luke in Acts 2:41–42, 47: “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....[They

were] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

God joins people to the church. It is as much a divine action as is His miraculous work of salvation. He does not bring Christians to spiritual life so they can experience it in solitude; rather, He brings Christians together in community, which is the church.

Part of God’s concern for the church is expressed in the fact that He *organizes* it and places elders¹² within it by the gifting of the Spirit. These elders are commanded to keep watch over the flock. Note Luke’s recounting of the work of the apostles: “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

These elders were appointed in *every* church. No church was exempt from this apostolic activity, for every local body was in need of this divinely given leadership. God, moreover, speaks to those who have been put in this position of service and leadership concerning their duties and role: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The elders are divinely commanded and gifted to guard the flock. Theirs is a sacred trust, for the object of their service is precious to God. Those who are in the church are likewise commanded to obey those in positions of authority over them (a command Camping, based upon his allegorical errors, openly encourages others to transgress): “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

The person who cannot answer the question: “Who are those to whom you are to submit as noted in Hebrews 13:17?” is not only in grave spiritual danger from every kind of cult and –ism but is also in clear rebellion against the revealed will of God, who places elders in the church to provide guidance and places believers in the fellowship for their own benefit and growth. The properly organized and constituted church provides spiritual protection, resulting in mature, stable believers. This is all a part of the demonstration of God’s “manifold wisdom” in the church (see Eph. 3:10).

FLEE FROM HAROLD CAMPING

The airwaves are a dangerous place for the Christian who is vulnerable to spiritual error. Heresy and false teaching abound all across the television and radio dials. Hidden within the plethora of obviously false teachings, however, is an equally dangerous, if less flamboyant, stream of teaching that is just as spiritually dangerous.

Harold Camping attracts listeners by eschewing the surface-level, entertainment-based glitz of so many radio and television preachers and teachers. He rightly identifies many problems in the modern church and uses his willingness to speak out on these issues to gain spiritual capital and trust with his listeners. He knows the Bible, quotes the Bible, and professes allegiance to it. His consistency is attractive in a day when many are blown about by every wind of doctrine and flash-in-the-pan evangelists who come and go with frightening regularity.

Calm consistency, however, can mask deadly error, and this is the case with Harold Camping. He refused to repent of his 1994 prediction, which was based on the erroneous allegorical interpretation and numerological speculation that marks his teaching. Although many decried his prediction, once it was past, it was “old news,” and few cared whether he continued on, undaunted, teaching his false methods of interpretation.

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that eight years after his first debacle Camping is again leading multitudes astray, this time by teaching men and women to remove themselves from God’s ordained means of spiritual growth and protection and to join in unorganized, aimless, and purposeless

“fellowships” that lack divine guidance and approbation. His new error is considerably more serious and reprehensible than the first; sadly, it is not garnering nearly the kind of critical response from Christian leaders that his first error did, for many today lack a biblically based love for, and commitment to, the church Christ has established.

We should learn from Camping’s errors. Camping has always functioned “outside” the church. His teachings force us to clarify our own commitment to the church and our ministry in it. Camping’s attacks may well be used by God to move His people to reaffirm their love for His church.

We must also learn from Camping’s error to see that our methods of interpretation are not dry subjects best left to theologians to hash out. Each of us is responsible to learn where we received the Bible and how we are to properly understand its message. Only then can we help those who have been misled by Harold Camping and all who, like him, replace the divine message of Scripture with their own thoughts and fancies.

NOTES

1. This number includes “repeaters” as well as free-standing stations, both AM and FM.
2. Some are speculating that Camping is moving toward identifying the end of the church age with 1994 in order to “rescue” his past failed prophecy concerning that date. (Harold Camping, *1994?* [New York: Vantage Press, 1992].)
3. It is understood that Camping is preparing to write a full-length book on this topic.
4. <http://www.familyradio.com/original/realaudio/class.htm>.
5. Family Radio’s Family Bible Study, Based upon Heb. 11:34, A Study on Hezekiah, Part 59, Lesson no. 883, aired in August 2001.
6. The fact that the two witnesses are then brought back to life *on earth* is missing in Camping’s allegorical explanation at this point.
7. “Has the Era of the Church Age Come to an End?” (Oakland: Family Stations, 2002), 21.
8. *Ibid.*, 22.
9. I deal with the defenses offered by practitioners of allegorical interpretation, particularly those based on Paul’s use of allegory in Galatians 4, in *Dangerous Airwaves* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2002).
10. Bible quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.
11. Many other evidences exist in reference to the church’s longevity. One that is striking is the fact that the church is to celebrate the Lord’s Supper as a proclamation of the Lord’s death “until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).
12. Elders and bishops or overseers are all one office, for the terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament.