

THE TWO-EDGED SWORD

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HAROLD CAMPING'S BIBLE PRINCIPLES (Part 2)

Having shown in the last issue of THE TWO-EDGED SWORD some of the prominent errors of Harold -Camping's principles of interpretation, we now focus upon specifics.

Let us remind ourselves that Mr. Camping's approach to the Word of God is characterized by wholesale allegorization. This means that every verse of the Bible, according to him, has "hidden" meaning. Every verse is an "historical parable" with a secret, redemptive meaning. Our final assessment of his approach highlighted five dangers. They are: (1) It leads us away from the natural interpretation, (2) It renders the Scripture ambiguous and destitute of certainty, (3) It stifles the ethical impact of Scripture, (4) It reduces the importance of creation and history, and, (5) It turns the Bible into a mystery book, to be understood only by the esoteric few. Only these can decipher its secret codes and riddles.

The sixth and final danger of Mr. Camping's Bible principles concerns disunity in the body of Christ. The bottom line is that Mr. Camping's "Bible" principles have created a widening chasm between fellow believers. How great is this disunity? Because of Mr. Camping's errant hermeneutic, we disagree with virtually every verse of the Bible. Because of the allegorical interpretation, a self-conscious Campingite can only feel deprived, if not cheated, if he does not receive similar Campingite instruction. Yet, Mr. Camping's creative use of the Bible goes much further than the attempt to read a "spiritual" meaning into the most elementary historical incident. The allegorical approach is symptomatic of other exegetical gaffes.

WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC ISSUES?

Mr. Camping and his followers embrace the doctrine of soul sleep – for the wicked. They are not annihilationists in the strict sense of that word, as they do believe in the resurrection of the wicked on the last day and the final sentencing of the wicked into eternal damnation.

The passage used to support soul sleep is found in Psalm 115:17, which states that *"the dead*

praise not the Lord, nor any that go down into silence." (See [The Fig Tree](#), p.183.) The verse has no relationship to soul sleep. All it says is that those who die no longer enjoy the noisy activities of this world. Because they are physically dead, they are in physical quietude. The other verse used (Revelation 20:5 – "The rest of the dead did not live again until the 1000 years were finished...") has nothing to do with soul sleep. This disputed verse is describing either the non-martyred Christians or the wicked and their bodily resurrection.

Although Camping believes in eternal damnation, we may properly ask if there are any harmful ramifications that may ensue to the church militant because of the soul sleep doctrine. Does even a limited doctrine of soul sleep jeopardize any other doctrine or activity of the Christian church? Is the doctrine of soul sleep a legitimate difference among fellow believers, or the compromise of a cardinal article of Christianity? A few preliminary things may be said that could anticipate further deviation from Biblical truth.

To begin with, Mr. Camping's doctrine of soul sleep may have precisely the opposite effect that the doctrine of the sleep of the soul for Christians, as stated by the [7th Day Adventists](#), has for the church. Whereas the Adventist doctrine robs the Christian of his comfort in Christ, thinking that death will in fact sever his fellowship with Christ which is defined in Scripture as "eternal life" fellowship, the Campingite doctrine of temporary soul sleep for the wicked implicitly provides the wicked with additional comfort and ease in his sin. The bottom line is that death for the wicked would be temporary annihilation – not entrance into eternal hell.

The effect of this is detrimental for Biblical preaching. If death does not spell immediate damnation for the wicked, then the urgency of the "repent or perish" proclamation of the Gospel might be threatened. In short, the unbeliever receives additional time and excuse for procrastination. Sudden damnation is no longer a heartbeat away.

The soul sleep doctrine also means the interruption of the wrath of God against sinners and their sin. While the unrepentant sinner lives, Scripture teaches that the wrath of God "is abiding" (present tense) upon him ([John 3:36](#)). At death, that wrath is now suspended until the day of wrath. God, in effect, stops being angry until judgment day.

There is, perhaps, an implicit relaxation of the heinousness of sin in all this too, for how can a holy God stop hating what deserves eternal wrath? Moreover, if an unrepentant sinner can cease to experience the wrath of God for a millennia or two, why cannot the justice of God on the day of judgment be further suspended, so that the sinner does not have to face eternal hell after all? If the doctrine of soul sleep for the wicked is true, then it is also true that there is no inherent necessity in the nature of God for the sinner to be punished everlastingly.

All the above are logical implications that flow from the soul sleep doctrine. Whether they have been formally owned by Campingite followers is unclear; we only specify them to portray what could (and, logically, should) materialize in the future.

IS THIS REALLY AMILLENIAL ESCHATOLOGY?

Harold Camping is a decided Amillennialist. It is beyond the scope of this writing to assess the Amillennial position, as we are most concerned with Mr. Camping's misuse of Scripture. Not all 'amils,' however, argue identically. Indeed, Amillennialists may want to disassociate themselves from Mr. Camping's expression of that position, an Amillennialism whose hallmark is not only

doom and gloom, but an amillennialism that often relies upon poor interpretive principles.

In recent years, some who know him have claimed (we hope erroneously) that he believes that the church is now in the Great Tribulation and that he knows the approximate time of the Lord's return. Our goal is to evaluate the things that he has written in his books, and only that.

In his treatment of Matthew 24, for example, Mr. Camping completely passes over the "time text" of verse 34, which places everything that appears before it in the generation of the first century church. He simply assumes that the great tribulation described will have its final fulfillment in the days shortly before the second coming of Christ. That this is a characteristic amillennial interpretation cannot be denied and should not create tension among brethren who disagree. Mr. Camping, however, seems to take the Amillennial position one giant step further when he makes the coming great tribulation the center of his "paranoid" focus. He seems to specialize in writing books on this subject and relates many Scriptures to it. For example, while using his parabolical approach in the interpretation of Acts 27 and the shipwreck in which 276 sailors were saved, he posits that the storm represents the final tribulation period and the 276 sailors those who will not be spiritually lost. He tells us in no uncertain terms that 276 is a special number. Here are his words:

"The number 276=3x4x23. It also equals the sum of all the numbers that come before 23. Thus, 276=1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10...+21+22+23. By this unique arrangement, God focuses our attention on the number 23."

"The number 3 signifies the purpose of God, and the number 4 signifies universality..."

"The number 23 is identified with the final tribulation period, when God's judgment comes upon the church. Therefore, one can understand why God gives the precise number 276 in the Acts 27 account: the ship represents the church. During the final tribulation, the era of the New Testament church will end, i.e., the ship is entirely destroyed."

"True believers within the church, represented by the 276 people aboard the ship, are saved... The number 276, which equals 3x4x23, represents the purpose of God that in all the world the believers who are present during God's judgment on the external church – during the final tribulation period – cannot lose their salvation..." (The Great Tribulation, pp. 149-150).

This virtually unintelligible statement is based upon the premise that God would never have allowed the number 276 appear in the Bible unless there was some salvational significance. One again, we are thrown back into the secret meaning syndrome.

Keep in mind that for Mr. Camping the most elementary and routine historical incident or statement possesses secret meaning. In addition to this, it might well be asked how 276 unsaved sailors could represent the saved church?

Camping's eschatology is an eschatology of woe. He says that no one will be saved during the final tribulation and that the church will be ruled by Satan. Mr. Camping's definition of the "man of sin" who sits in the temple of God, showing himself to be God, is that this man is no man at

all, but rather Satan ([The Final Tribulation](#), p.123). He believes that just as the king of Babylon was a type of Satan, so the man of sin is also a type of Satan. Yet, he seems to say that, unlike the king of Babylon, there will be no (literal) man who sits in the temple of God; rather, it is Satan himself. His logic for denying the humanity of the "man of sin" is difficult to understand. Mr. Camping does not even entertain the idea that "the abomination of desolation that stands in the holy place" could have any reference to the Roman desecration of the temple in 70 A.D. ([Matthew 24:15](#)).

Mr. Camping's millennialism often sounds more premillennial than amillennial. Just as we might ask the premillennialist how Christ could be King when He rules sitting in Jerusalem for 1000 years, sitting over a worldwide rebellion against His authority, we could also ask Mr. Camping how Christ's church, which He rules, could be taken over by Satan? True, churches do become apostate. But the promise of Christ in Matthew 16:18, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," guarantees the victory and protection of the church universal.

CAMPING'S SWORD-ERRORS

The Bible reader should also be aware that Mr. Camping's hermeneutics concern far more than the parabolical method that he so thunderously claims. Not only does he posit the hidden meaning of Scripture, he also misuses Biblical words. To be sure, his word errors are quantitatively less than his wholesale allegorizations, but still plentiful in number. For example, by affirming that the shipwreck of Acts 27 represents the final tribulation, he "proves" this contention by the name of the storm, Euroclydon. He tells us that this word is identified with the Greek word eurochoors, which is used only in Matthew 7:13, and is translated broad: "*broad is the way that leads to destruction.*" He goes on to speak of the Acts 27 storm and the storm that Jesus Himself quelled, as historical parables of the final tribulation. Just how the word "broad" relates to the final tribulation is not clear. Moreover, he seems to say that because the word Euroclydon sounds similar to eurochoors, that they must be referring to the same thing. This example is typical of his irrational jumps and leaps.

ANTI-DOMINION THEOLOGY

In his book, [Feed My Sheep](#), he argues that the "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:26, where man was commanded "to subdue the earth," was intended "strictly for our first parents and must have no relationship to the believer today" (p.10). He argues that the Hebrew word radah, which means to rule or reign, is never used outside of Genesis 1. Therefore, Mr. Camping draws the premature conclusion that man is not commanded to exercise dominion over the creatures, excluding man. Thus, a significant portion of the covenant of creation is deemed obsolete.

In his treatment of [Psalm 8:4-8](#), where man is commanded to have "dominion" over all the works of God's hands (the Hebrew word being mashal), Mr. Camping appeals to [Hebrews 2:5-9](#) "where these verses are quoted to show that it is in the world to come that this condition will apply" ([Feed My Sheep](#), p. 34). Why the world to come? Because Hebrews 2:8 says "*we see not yet all things under him.*" So, Mr. Camping argues that "*this will be in the world to come.*" A careful reading of the text, however, indicates that if we see not yet all things under him, then certainly some things, or even many things must now be under Him!

Brother Camping then goes on to argue that the Psalm 8 passage is to be realized only in

Christ, not in the believer. True, Psalm 8 is about Christ because Christ is the ideal man, the second Adam. But is it not also true that believers are united to Christ, that they are "in Christ?" In short, the Psalmist is reflecting upon the creation and the loftiness of man's creation. But he also speaks prophetically of Christ Who is the ideal Man and, by implication, of all those who are in Christ. When men are in Christ, then they will rule in the radah or mashal sense!

Mr. Camping's misunderstanding of the "dominion covenant" leads him to depreciate the physical at the expense of what is considered spiritual. Certain anti-material statements become intelligible when we understand his reluctance to own the fullness of the covenant of creation. For example, he says: "The Gospel is concerned with the spiritual needs of mankind. Only within the congregation does the Gospel concern itself with physical needs" (The Final Tribulation, p.80). Apparently, Mr. Camping has not read such verses as [Galatians 6:10](#).

DIVORCE

Divorce occupies center stage for Mr. Camping's unique interpretations of Scripture. His book, What God hath joined together..., contains a large number of his mistaken hermeneutical principles.

Basically, (and this is fundamental) Mr. Camping's beginning place is [Romans 7:1-4](#) and [Mark 10:2-10](#). The Romans passage says that "the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives." Someone phoned Mr. Camping on Open Forum, and asked: "*My husband has been committing adultery for years. What should I do if he will not break it off?*" Mr. Camping replied: "*The Bible says that you're bound to your husband as long as he lives. You're to love him unconditionally. By praying for him and loving him, you may win him back. But you're not ever to divorce him for his infidelity.*" Thus, Mr. Camping's starting place is Romans 7 and it is Romans 7 that colors all of his thinking about the sin of divorce in all circumstances. (See What God hath joined together, p. 79.)

There are two problems here. To begin with, it is usually unwise to make an illustration the beginning place of one's hermeneutic. In Romans 7 Paul is addressing the relationship of the believer to the law. He uses marriage as an illustration of that relationship. His purpose is not to give us information about grounds for divorce. A better Bible principle would be to start with those passages that deal more directly with marriage and divorce and interpret Romans 7 in the light of them.

Second, there are many absolute statements in the Bible that appear incapable of qualification. Romans 7 is no different from these. For example, Jesus tells us in Mark 11:24 that "*what things soever you desire when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.*" A first reading may tell us that this verse is a carte blanche promise; whatever you desire when you shall pray, you shall certainly receive. There are no qualifications attached, other than the qualification of faith. However, when you compare this verse with other verses in the Bible, you will shortly see that the promise of Mark 11:24 is qualified. For example, when you pray, you must pray according to the will of God and you must pray with thanksgiving ([1 John 5:14](#); [Philippians 4:6](#)). Likewise, the Romans 7 statement about the wife's "permanent" marriage, is not dealing with the divorce question. It does not anticipate possible sins that may make a divorce lawful.

Because Mr. Camping starts in the wrong place of the Bible, he prematurely comes to the

conclusion that there is to be "no divorce for any reason whatsoever" (What God hath joined together..., p. 35). This forces him to do two things: (1) He inordinately exalts Romans 7 as "the king of the hill" divorce passage; (2) He must change the "exceptive clause" of Matthew 19:9, and all such verses like it. Matthew 19:9 reads: *"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery..."* Mr. Camping's rendering of the verse is: *"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, in addition to fornication, and marries another, commits adultery..."* Thus, the clause that is universally translated by Greek scholars as meaning "except" is translated to mean precisely the opposite!

Is there support for this daring translation? Mr. Camping says there is, and proceeds to illustrate his point that the Greek word (ei me) means "other than" or "in addition to" in Matthew 19:17 and Mark 8:14. In the Matthew 19:17 passage, Jesus said to the rich young ruler: *"there is none good but (ei me) one, that is, God."* Camping writes: *"This verse could be read: 'there is none good 'in addition to' or 'other than' one, that is, God.'" Notice that if we translate Matthew 19:17 as "other than," then the thought of exception stands. If we translate it: "in addition to," then that makes little linguistic, and zero theological sense. Jesus is not telling the ruler: "There is none good, in addition to God." Such would be rigmarole.*

Mr. Camping tells us "many other examples could be given..." without telling us where to find these examples. The truth is that there are not a plentitude of examples. He also does not tell us that the normative meaning of ei me in the Gospel of Matthew, indeed, in the whole Bible is "except," "but," "save," – words that stress contrast and exception (see [Matthew 17:8](#); [19:9](#); [24:22](#); [Mark 2:21-22](#); [3:20](#); [9:9](#); [29](#); [John 19:11](#); [Romans 7:7](#); [9:29](#); [1 Corinthians 8:4](#)). He also does not tell us that the Greek word that appears in [Matthew 5:32](#), and that is also translated "except for fornication," is parektos, a different word, and can have no other meaning than "except" (see [Acts 26:29](#) another example of parektos). Clearly, Mr. Camping has read his own prejudices into Matthew 19:9, while at the same time slighting over the parallel passage in Matthew 5:32.

SANCTIMONIOUS PHARISEEISM?

Camping next deduces that allowance even of limited divorce, that is, for fornication, is due to permissiveness and the abandonment of the unconditional love that Christ requires of husbands and wives. Indeed, many of his disciples will accuse the church of liberalism and heresy for countenancing any kind of divorce. It is not our purpose to react to each and every criticism against those who enlist fornication as a legitimate grounds of divorce. But we will say that there are two extremes, not just one, that the modern church needs to avoid. Is there the danger of liberalism? Yes. But there is also the danger of Phariseeism. And one of the hallmarks of Phariseeism is that of imposing burdens upon men that cannot be borne ([Matthew 23:4](#)). The goal of the interpreter is to teach only what the Bible says, recognizing that both liberalism and Phariseeism are equally anti-scriptural.

What about Camping's claim that marrieds are to love each other unconditionally? Is this really what Paul means when he says: *"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it"* (Ephesians 5:25)? We would simply say that while love has no limits (love is always in the red), marital love does have limits. Because God has allowed fornication as a lawful grounds for divorce, we know that marital love does have specified perimeters. We see this not only in the Old Testament when God "put away" Israel the harlot,

but in the New Testament when Joseph, "a just man," sought to put away Mary his wife ([Matthew 1:19](#)). In short, only God can love unconditionally. The Lord has placed unrepented fornication as a limit upon marital love. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church; but the husband cannot love his wife in such a way that if he were to literally die for her, that he would accomplish her salvation. Remember too that Christ's love for His bride is an omnipotent love that actually keeps His bride on 'the straight and narrow.' Human love is not omnipotent. There are limits to what husbandly love can accomplish.

Camping believes (on the "basis" of Romans 7) that even if a divorce does come about, that the two are still married in God's eyes. He says: *"Even though she is legally (by the state) divorced, in God's sight she is still bound to her first husband"* ([What God hath joined together](#) p. 31). Interestingly, Mr. Camping does not grapple with the thorny problem that if the two are still married even upon a legal divorce, then divorce becomes the one sin that can never really be committed!

A GRIEVOUS, FINAL ASSESSMENT

The Bible in the hands of Mr. Camping is all too often distorted. We are not too bold to say that Mr. Camping should not be teaching on the radio or in the church. Christians who regularly listen to him should be zealots for their own churches. Sadly, the "Open Forum" program has become for many an electronic church that occupies the center place in their lives. And the fanciful theology that they often learn in this "church of the sky" all too often becomes ammunition that they use upon the local churches that they have covenanted to support.

We praise God that souls have benefited from those teachings' that are in accord with Biblical truth (of which there are many). The problem, however, is that Mr. Camping emphasizes teachings that are not consonant with Biblical truth. These are what he usually talks about; certainly, they are what his books are about. As an allegorist, Mr. Camping is a schismatic. Unsuspecting Christians and churches need to be informed. Certainly, churches that have an open door policy to Campingitism need forewarning about the inherent dangers of schism and church polarization.

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