

Three Reasons Why May 21 Prophecy Falls Flat

Here are three reasons why Harold Camping's end-times prediction should be ignored.

I spent the past week in Guyana, a South American nation where the people are friendly, the food is spicy and churches are growing at a healthy pace. But Christians there face a serious challenge because of the sad legacy of Jim Jones, the American cult leader who ordered his followers to drink poisoned Kool-Aid at their compound in Jonestown in 1978. The mass suicide, which killed 909 people (including Jones), went down in history as the world's worst example of religion gone wrong.

"Even today, the Jim Jones tragedy poses a problem of credibility for us," one pastor in the city of Corriverton told me last week.

You can imagine my dismay when I arrived in Guyana and learned that groups of Americans were combing the streets and passing out literature claiming that Jesus will rapture the church on May 21. These Christians apparently are so convinced of the prediction that they traveled to the only English-speaking country in South America to deliver a last-minute warning.

This outbreak of rapture fever originated with Harold Camping, 89, a California-based Bible teacher who says he figured out the date of Jesus' return by studying the book of Daniel and other biblical texts. Never mind that Jesus said no one would know the timing of His return (see Matt. 24:36). And never mind that Camping has a bad track record—he previously set Sept. 6, 1994, as the date for the Apocalypse. Many gullible Christians are still willing to trust Camping's instincts.

I cringed when I heard that Americans were telling Guyanese people they have two weeks left before Jesus arrives to take

all true Christians to heaven. Camping's followers also believe the world will end in October. I've learned in the last week that many believers have jumped on this bandwagon; they've put up billboards, purchased TV ads, painted warnings on rooftops, issued radio alerts and flooded nations with printed warnings.

I can't compete with this doomsday madness, but I can offer an appeal for sanity. Here are three reasons why we should not spread Camping's prediction:

1. It is a false prophecy. How can I say this with assurance? Because Jesus Himself said all end-times date setting is strictly off-limits. He told His disciples on the day He ascended: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:8, NASB). If it is not for us to know, then how does Harold Camping know? Is he God? Only the worst form of spiritual pride would lead a person to claim such knowledge.

2. Failed date-setting has discredited Christians many times before. Why can't we learn from history? William Miller, the father of Seventh-day Adventism, was convinced that Jesus would come back in 1844. When his prediction turned out to be bogus (a moment known as "the Great Disappointment"), many disillusioned "Millerites" abandoned their faith.

Jehovah's Witnesses taught that Jesus would begin His millennial reign in 1914. When that didn't happen, they pointed to the outbreak of World War I and began teaching that this was the "beginning of the end." A few years later they moved the date to 1925. Nothing happened that year, but more than a generation later they circulated the prediction that the world would end in 1975. (They also taught that only Jehovah's Witnesses would survive a global holocaust.)

Recent history is littered with more of these embarrassing predictions, including Jim Jones' claim that the world would

end in nuclear war on July 15, 1967. Jones was a communist who believed he was the reincarnation of Jesus, Buddha and Lenin, so Christians didn't take him seriously. But when a Christian layman, Edgar Whisenant, wrote *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, millions of believers bought it. You won't get much money for that book at a garage sale today.

3. End-times date-setting hinders the cause of Christ. Just imagine what will go through the minds of unbelievers on May 22, 2011. Christians told them Jesus would return, but He didn't. This will make followers of Christ look silly and unreliable.

As sincere as Camping's devotees may be, sincerity is no excuse for theological error. It is wrong-headed and irresponsible for any Christian to tell an unbeliever when Jesus is coming back or when the world will end. That is not the message we were commissioned to preach. Dates and deadlines do not have the power to save souls—only the gospel can do that.

When we share Christ with others, we don't need to provide a date for His Second Coming. Instead, we tell them about the miracle of Calvary and remind them: "*Today* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). No one knows when he will die; every new day could be his last. And every person will stand before God when this life is over.

There is urgency in the gospel, for sure, but it is not about a countdown to the rapture. Hundreds of thousands of people die every day without Jesus, whether or not He returns in their generation. This alone should motivate us to avoid foolish distractions and false prophecies so we can get busy with the task of genuine evangelism.

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