An Experiment in Apocalypse

by Stephen Cox

A major religious network is about to reveal what people do when they're proved to be utterly wrong about something tremendously important to them.

If you travel around the country, you will see, from time to time, a billboard that proclaims, "Judgment Day: May 21, 2011." Or you may see one that says, in more detail: "The Rapture: May 21, 2011. The End of the World: October 21, 2011."

Early this summer, the Portuguese sailing ship "Sagres" visited my town, San Diego. At the wharf, swarms of middle-aged men and women materialized with stacks of pamphlets in English and Portuguese. "The End of the World Is Almost Here!" the pamphlets said. "Holy God Will Bring Judgment Day on May 21, 2011."

The same information is being dispensed in many parts of the world. In origin, however, this is an American phenomenon, and Americans are likely to see much more of it in the days ahead. It provides a rare opportunity to study what happens when prophecy fails.

Those words — "When Prophecy Fails" — are the title of a seminal work in social psychology, published in 1956. The authors, Leon Festinger and two colleagues, researchers from the University of Minnesota, learned that a flying saucer enthusiast in Oak Park, Illinois, had received messages from another planet informing her that the world would soon (in December 1954) be devastated by earthquakes and floods. They immediately organized a team of investigators to infiltrate her followers, observe what was happening, and document the results.

The message bearer, Dorothy Martin, whom Festinger and his colleagues call "Marian Keech," reacted to the initial failure of her prophecies by making further prophecies. When these also failed, she rationalized the disconfirmation by conveying messages indicating that the world had been saved because of the spiritual light shed by her disciples. For a while, the fervor of her inner circle actually increased. The authors attributed this to the heightened intensity of the believers' struggle to retain their faith and explain it to the world.

Yet within a short time the group dissolved. Some people simply lost their faith. Others succumbed to social pressures.

Martin's neighbors tried to get her arrested for disturbing the peace, and relatives tried to get some of her disciples declared insane and unfit to rear their children.

Martin fled her home, but she never gave up on self-invented spirituality. She continued to operate as a guru of eccentric spiritual groups until her death in 1992. (Her story is perceptively told by Jerome Clark in "Alien Worlds" [ed. Diana G. Tumminia, 2007].) This kind of faithfulness is perhaps to be expected of a woman so poignantly gullible that when a group of teenage pranksters visited her home in 1954, determined to make fun of her prophecies, she immediately recognized them as flying saucer pilots on a mission to test her resolve: "As soon as they had entered the house she had felt the force of their superhuman personalities, their strength, their intelligence."

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Peace to Mrs. Martin. "When Prophecy Fails" remains the most influential study of why people believe in preposterous time prophecies, and why some of them continue to believe, even after the prophecies have been proven false. Yet it has to do with only a tiny group of outer space aficionados — about two dozen. That's a very small experiment. By contrast, the prophecies about May 21, 2011 (and collaterally, October 21, 2011), emanate from a large, well-funded Christian institution, formerly mainstream but now veering into hyperspace.

The institution is Family Stations, Inc., usually known as Family Radio. Based in Oakland, California, it is a worldwide network of AM, FM, and shortwave radio outlets (over 100 stations in the United States alone). No one can calculate how many steady adherents Family Radio has; doubtless, they are only a fraction of its millions of casual or chronic listeners (such as me). But however you figure it, Family Radio is a mass movement, the kind of movement that sometimes metastasizes from ordinary American ideas and institutions.

The interest of Family Radio's prophecies is doubled by the fact that it has predicted the end of the world *twice*. It did so in 1994, and it's doing so now — and if anything, the appeal of its ideas has grown. No apocalyptic messengers showed up at San Diego harbor in 1994. Now, they do.

But let's start with history.

Nothing is more American than predictions of the end of the world. One of the greatest mass movements in early American history was occasioned by William Miller (1782–1849), whose study of Bible prophecy led him to announce that Christ's second coming or "advent" would occur in 1843 or 1844. Various exact dates circulated among his followers, but when nothing happened on the last one, October 22, 1844, almost everyone gave up. This is called in American religious history the Great Disappointment.

But it was not the end. Out of Millerism grew other movements. Many people could not shake the idea that something about Miller's prophecies must, in some sense, have been true. A period of reinterpretation ensued, and from it emerged the adventist movement in its many, various, and populous forms. Chief among them are the Seventh Day Adventists, who have a mighty following throughout the world. Other adventist groups include the Worldwide Church of God and its offshoots, and the movement now called Jehovah's Witnesses, begun by the disciples of Charles Taze Russell, a major adventist reinterpreter.

One classic pattern of adventist reinterpretation is to retain an apparently falsified prophetic date and argue that something did happen then, but that it happened invisibly. The Seventh Day Adventists retained 1844 but interpreted it as a time when Christ invisibly began a process of "investigative judgment." Another group of adventists predicted a visible second coming in 1874, then decided that it had been an invisible event. Russell learned from this group about the invisible coming in 1874 and predicted that 1914 would bring the highly visible end of everything not subject to Christ's kingdom. Fortunately for his followers, World War I began in 1914, allowing them to maintain that he was astonishingly right in having predicted that year — which they interpreted as the (revised) date of Christ's still-invisible second coming. From time to time, they have assigned new dates for the end of the world. They issued predictions for 1925 and 1975, among other years, and lost large numbers of adherents thereafter. Yet their movement continued, fortified by the belief that Russell had actually predicted something true about 1914.

These are some of the shapes that prophetic disappointment can take. But the early adventist experiments, though large, were messy. The Family Radio experiment is cleaner. Family Radio's disciples are many, but they don't number in the millions, and its ideas don't leak out at irregular intervals from the depths of a Protestant Vatican. The prophecies of Family Radio issue from one man, who is on the air every day.

In his younger years, Harold Egbert Camping (born 1921) operated a construction company in northern California. His business was successful, but having made his money, he looked for something more intellectual to do. He began an earnest study of the Bible. In 1958, at a time when FM stations were not very expensive to acquire, he and some friends founded Family Radio. They started with one station, then went on to purchase others. The stations are very frugally operated, and Camping has never tried to make any money from them. There has never been a whiff of scandal about Family Radio. The salaries of its officers and directors are only about $80,000 a year, total — less than 1% of total wages and salaries. The organization ticks along with about $15 million in

contributions a year. Its net assets, in 2007, were $122 million.

Camping's current role in the organization is that of "Bible teacher." He is an active radio lecturer and conference speaker, but his primary means of teaching is his Monday–Friday call-in program "Open Forum," which began in 1961. (If you go to the Family Radio website, you can get a list of the stations that broadcast the show, as well as the texts of his recent publications.)

When you listen to "Open Forum," you will probably find it hard to conceive how Camping could ever have attracted a following. If there is such a thing as anti-charisma, Camping has it. He is the antithesis of the modern media personality. Dogmatic, repetitious, excruciatingly slow and digressive, he is also, very often, intolerably rude. When someone even hints at a disagreement or appears to introduce a term or concept that he considers erroneous, he begins shouting, "*Excuse me! Excuse me!*", until the annoying intervention ceases. "Open Forum" is neither "open" nor any kind of "forum." During the August 5 program, a hapless caller asked to be allowed to complete his comment: "Mr. Camping! May I please just finish what I was saying?" Camping replied, "Excuse me! This program is not designed to entertain just anybody and everybody's ideas!" It was a typical episode in the life of "Open Forum."

Camping has the annoying habit of preaching abject humility, while claiming that "we" (that is, he) have been favored by God with an understanding of Bible truth that was never vouchsafed to anyone before. Indeed, he constantly insists that the Bible was written *not* to be understood, until these latter days — that is, until a time when God enabled "us" to divine its meanings. It's a classic adventist idea — the idea that, as Russell put it in "The Time Is at Hand" (1889), "all these things have been *hidden* by the Lord" until the right Bible teacher is available to discover them.

Camping's theology is far from intuitive. He began life as a member of a Calvinist church — the Christian Reformed denomination, ordinarily a heritage church for the descendants of Dutch immigrants — and received from it a basic set of Calvinist doctrines to which he still assents. In his view, God decreed, before the foundation of the world, who would be saved and who would be damned, making his decision arbitrarily, not on the basis of the goodness or badness of the deeds that he foresaw his children would do. To believe anything else, Calvin thought, was to doubt God's supremacy, his freedom from all constraint. But Camping carries this theology to further extremes.

On June 13, 2010, in his "Bible Class of the Air" (part 92[!] in a series called "To God Be the Glory"), he asserted that "eternal life is a lottery prize." He then listed all the places in the Bible that refer to "lots" or "casting lots," as if that proved his point. On many occasions during 2010 he has maintained that only 200 million people will be saved (see Revelation 9:16, patently misinterpreted). He states, with great satisfaction in his numerology, that this number represents one-seventieth of the people who have ever lived on earth.

The inherent cruelty of such ideas must repel many potential converts, while bringing out the latent elitism in many others. But most of Camping's distinctive ideas are stranger still. His emphasis on what happened "from the foundation of the world" has led him to propose that Christ's redemptive sacrifice was not merely *foreseen* by God before the world began; it actually *took place* before the world began. (The poetic phrase comes from Revelation 13:8; the interpretation is confuted by Hebrews 9:26). Thus, Christ's death on the cross was merely a theatrical "demonstration" of the torture and death that had somehow happened before time began. I have never discovered anyone else who came up with this idea.

Most listeners probably become confused by doctrines like that and blank out on them. But Camping won't allow anyone to blank out on his prophecies about 2011: Christ will manifest himself on May 21, 2011; the last judgment will begin; the elect, "the true believers," will be "raptured" or caught up to heaven; the graves will cast out the dead, and birds of prey will feed on them. During the following five months, billions of the non-elect will live on, amid scenes of increasing violence and distress, repenting of their failure to believe Harold Camping. Then, on October 21, 2011, the entire physical universe will be destroyed.

How did Camping decide on these dates?

His ideas are extraordinarily hard to summarize logically. Camping is a man who is capable of arguing that the number 1,000 (in Revelation 20:2) symbolizes the 1,955 years from A.D. 33 to 1988 A.D. — one number "symbolizing" another number. Without trying to fill in the details, I'll sketch two lines of thought that have led him to 2011.

One begins with his interpretation of Daniel 8:13–14. There the question is asked, "How long shall . . . the sanctuary . . . be trodden under foot?", and the answer is given: "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." I'll come back to that. Remember the number 2,300.

Another line of thought starts from Camping's unique understanding of the age of the world. A bizarre recalculation of the ages of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis leads him to the conclusion that the world was created in 11,013 B.C., not 4004 B.C., the traditional Old Testament date. Add 13,000 years to 11,013 B.C., and you get 1988 A.D. (keep in mind that there's no year 0), an important date for Camping's prophecies.

It isn't clear why 13,000 should be significant; 13 is by no means an important biblical number. It is clear, however, that the year 2011 is 7,000 years from Camping's date for Noah's flood (4990 B.C.). So what? Well, 7 is frequently emphasized in the Bible, and so (rarely) is 1,000. Further, it is 23 years from May 21, 1988 to May 21, 2011, and 2,300 days from May 21, 1988, to September 6, 1994. You recall the figure 2,300 from Daniel 8:13–14. According to Camping, 23 signifies "God's wrath or judgment," as illustrated by the presence of 23 in two exceptionally obscure places in the Bible, as well as by the 2,300 days in Daniel 8 — which brings us back to where we started.

Nothing is more American than predictions of the end of the world. From time to time, new dates are assigned.

Are you lost? I wouldn't be surprised. But I'll proceed.

What, if anything, happened in 1988? In 1988, Harold Camping left his Christian Reformed church in Alameda, California, because it intended to oust him from his job as Bible teacher. And what happened in 1994? Camping says now that 1994 was when the "horror" of the churches began, because God then started to save "multitudes" of people without the churches' help. This was another of the invisible events well known in adventist circles. The visible and relevant event, however, was the failure of Camping's first prophecy about the end of the world. He had identified the date as September 6, 1994, and estimated the probability as 99.9%.

Camping's book, "1994?", appeared in 1992 and became a bestseller in the religious field. For two years thereafter broadcasts on Family Radio insisted that 1994 would see Christ's second coming, and the end of the world.

September 6, 1994, came and went. Nothing happened to the universe, and nothing happened to Family Radio, either — although that was wonderful enough in its own way. "Open Forum" continued; all the other programs continued. The prophetic failure was not acknowledged. Camping experimented with other dates in the neighborhood of September 6, and these also failed. Months later, he began to entertain questions about what might conceivably have gone wrong. He answered, without a hint of repentance or self-doubt, that the question mark after "1994" in the title of his book showed that he hadn't been sure, that he had merely introduced a possibility.

Family Radio was damaged by 1994, but it survived. Obviously, it had a core constituency that cared a lot about prophecy but not very much about prophetic failure, at least in the first instance. There was probably an additional reason for its survival. Nineteen ninety-four was a little early for most people to be masters of the internet, and for the internet to have entries on almost every conceivable subject. Today, it's easy to find Christian websites that combat Camping's views; but if you were going to leave the Family Radio movement in 1994, your first thought would probably not be, "I'm going to start a website and expose this man's heresies!" You'd just leave, without broadcasting your opinions, and the way would be clear for Camping to offer his prophecies to people who had never heard of 1994.

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There is a law, called Cox's Law of Institutional Fitness, that helps explain why churches and other voluntary organizations often survive ridiculous failures. The Law states: "Every preacher is good enough for the church he's in." In other words, the people who can't stand the preacher go away, and the people who remain keep filling out surveys saying that he's doing a terrific job. So the church (or the community center, or the libertarian caucus, or any other voluntary organization) continues as it is, no matter how ridiculous it makes itself. Of course, this allows crazy things to get crazier still. That process is richly exemplified by the recent history of Family Radio.

Camping appears to have taken several years to process the failure of 1994, but in 2001 he began to announce radical new teachings. One was a revised date for the end of the world: 2011. About this date, as he frequently proclaims, he is even more certain than he was about 1994. In fact, he is totally certain. As he said on his June 29 broadcast, "It is absolutely going to happen."

Another new teaching was the idea that in 1988 "the Church Age" had ended: God had withdrawn his authority from the churches and given them up to Satan. He did that on May 21, 1988; afterward, for 2,300 days, few or no souls were saved. Then, in 1994, a fresh harvest of souls began, under the exclusive auspices of Family Radio.

Camping never discusses the fact that 1988 was the date of his trouble with his local church, and 1994 was the date of his failed prophecy of the End. Obviously, however, visible failure was now being converted into invisible but glorious victory. Camping has said (in a talk broadcast on May 2, 2009, but recorded some years before) that he was in the hospital, "not knowing whether I was gonna live or die" (here he chuckled), when it suddenly occurred to him that the Church Age was over and there would be 23 years from its end till the end of the world. For him, "everything" then "locked into place."

From that curious inspiration, his movement received new life and energy.

For three centuries, free religious speculation has been a hallmark of American life. That is one reason why Americans have invented so many denominations, and why the current views of any given denomination are impossible to predict from the premises with which it started. The fact that every fanciful new interpretation represents itself as orthodoxy merely reflects Americans' invincible confidence in themselves.

This is not, in itself, an unattractive quality, although it often leads people to arrive at places that are quite different from those they aimed at, without understanding the significance of their journey.

There is nothing that Harold Camping more detests than the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses and other eccentric adventists. Yet, like the two warring brothers in Swift's "Tale of a Tub," he has adopted some of their crucial views: he denies the existence of a literal hell and embraces the idea that there is no "soul" that survives one's physical death — if God intends to resurrect you, then he will give you a brand-new existence; if not, as Camping puts it, you're just "dead, dead, dead!"

In some respects, Camping's ideas are also mirror images of atheism. Many atheists read the Bible as if it were all of a piece, disregarding the various approaches of its various authors and the various periods and genres in which it was written. So if you find something brutal in Jeremiah or something antilibertarian in Leviticus, so much for the rest of the Bible, too. Camping agrees with the premise, while denying the implication. For him, the Bible is "one work, one meaning, and one author" ("To God Be the Glory," part 98). Defending his right to take some Bible numbers literally and some symbolically, he has said that they may be literal or symbolic, "depending on the context, which is the whole Bible" ("Open Forum," July 13). Of course, that's a prescription for interpreting any individual passage in exactly the way you choose, since there are millions of things in "the whole Bible" that can provide a "context." Thus he justifies another common atheist assumption: the Bible is an old fiddle, on which one can play any old tune.

But the oddest mirror effect is Camping's treatment of the conditions of salvation. The Calvinist doctrine with which he began is that there are no conditions: God saves whomever he wills to save. Accordingly, Camping fanatically opposes the plausible idea, which he thinks all churches are preaching, that people can do *something* to indicate that they want to be saved, and thereby help, at least, to procure their salvation. He is so concerned with the falseness of this idea as to insist that if you are sitting in a church that preaches it, you have no possibility of being saved. Last year, he declared that you can be saved in a mosque, but you cannot be saved in a church.

Be that as it may — as he stated in his June 7 broadcast, "If anyone thinks that he's accepted Christ as savior and that this means he's saved, he is automatically *not* saved." Filling out this logic: you cannot influence your own salvation — *except* if you believe you can influence your own salvation; then you'll find that there are limits to God's power to save you — which is precisely the point that Calvin denied, and Camping believes that he himself denies.

Camping's antichurch theology has had major institutional effects. In 2001, he started exhorting his followers to "depart out" of the churches, abandoning even the primary rituals of baptism and communion. For many years, his stations had told prospective donors, "First take care of your local church; then give to Family Radio" — which, besides "Open Forum," broadcast many sermons and other features by conservative Christian clergy. Now, Family Radio's listeners fled their churches, and the network cancelled a good share of its programming simply because it was sponsored by a pastor or a church, or even mentioned a pastor or a church.

The vacant air time was filled with new forms of ritual — incessant replays of Camping's lectures and comments; frequent, often arbitrarily selected, recitations of Scripture; program notes, pleas for funds, and music introductions gruesomely expanded into sermons about the End. Meanwhile, Family Radio put a great deal of effort into organizing local conferences and missionary campaigns, obvious surrogates for the work of local churches. Family Radio is evolving into the image of all it hates, a church — a particularly dry and boring church, but nevertheless a church.

This also is truly American. It's hard to imagine that in America you can have a distinctive Christian belief and not expect some kind of church to grow out of it. In this country, voluntary belief leads to voluntary organization. There is nothing to prevent it; it's just what happens.

In 1993, an anonymous Family Radio insider reported, "The majority of staff members here at Family Radio fear that the end just might be near . . . not for the world, but for Family Radio." Their fears were not realized. Since the failure of prediction in 1994, the institution has added many more stations, listeners, and activists. But the Depart Out message caused large internal disruptions. Prominent personalities, well known to the radio audience, departed out of Family Radio, some of them issuing public statements about how unreasonable and pigheaded Camping was. One claimed that his teachings were "an embarrassment to almost all FR employees," with "only a small percentage of staff hanging on every word he says."

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Most dissenters appear to have remained, but they have learned to lie low. They have stopped talking with the press, even anonymously, although occasionally echoes of their feelings are heard on anti-Camping websites. They are said to be waiting it out till Camping dies.

If you tune in today, you will find a strange mix of programs — not only Campingite propaganda but standard Christian music and a variety of daily features about common human problems. Some of the most attractive radio personalities continue in their niches, never mentioning the end of the world. Their thoughts are a mystery. But it's a remarkable commentary on the audience of Family Radio that the network's overriding theme — the End comes next year! — is balanced by programs about child-rearing, preserving your health, reducing your weight, and dealing with the lifelong problems of marriage.

Apocalyptic sects often grow large in absolute numbers, but none has ever become the dominant religion in any considerable geographical area. Yet at least in America, their following does not consist of socially marginal people. The nice, reasonably dressed, well-disciplined people who attend Camping's conferences and pass out his literature are in every outward sense just normal Americans. Camping's movement developed out of a radio service that until recently billed itself

as "a conservative ministry."

I believe that many of the psychological mechanisms at work among Camping's followers are characteristic of enormous numbers of other Americans as well. Four of these mechanisms seem to me especially worth noticing.

1. Invincible Pessimism

How many times have you entered a conversation about some secular forecast of disaster — global warming, nuclear terrorism, the collapse of the world economy — and watched the participants become enraged when evidence was presented that things might turn out all right, after all? Often, I suspect. There is a sizable part of the population that wants to believe the worst.

I don't know why this is. Perhaps it has something to do with the desire to be different, to distinguish oneself from other citizens of a nation ideologically committed to the expectation of progress. (What does the Great Seal say? "Novus ordo seclorum" — a new order of the ages. New, and better.) That's a speculation. But notice: these invincibly pessimistic people don't really want to experience poverty, war, or the destruction of their friends and family by a vengeful God. They can believe in it; they can get angry when their belief is contradicted; but they don't actually want to see it. If they did, they would burn all their money and alienate all their friends right now. They have no more trouble planning for the future than anyone else. Like almost everyone else, they want the best from the future. You can call this:

2. Not Letting Your Left Brain Know What Your Right Brain Is Doing

It's a form of the self-entitlement to which Americans are now addicted. They want to believe that they know what other people don't — the economy is about to crash; the Lord is about to destroy the universe — but they also want to retire to a beautiful home in Hawaii after their children (now three and five years old) graduate from Princeton. So they believe in destruction and plan for success. This is what you see in the two types of programming, apocalyptic and domestic, on Family Radio, which is far from the only place where you can witness doublethink in contemporary America. Festinger thought that people try to dispel "cognitive dissonance." It might better be said that Americans cherish their cognitive dissonance; they keep it and guard it and try to make it bear fruit to them.

3. The Egotism of Expertise

I am not referring to the egotism of experts (a topic that can never be exhausted) but to the hand-me-down egotism of people who trust the experts — experts whom, for the most part, they don't have enough expertise to select, calmly and rationally, on their own. They know it, too. Nothing is more frequent among people who call into Family Radio or are interviewed at its conferences than statements to this effect: "I wanted to understand the Bible, but I couldn't make any headway. Then I stumbled on 'Open Forum,' and now I'm making so much progress, it's unbelievable." They're right; it's literally unbelievable. Figuring out the Bible is much easier than figuring out the discourse of Harold Camping. What people learn from him is chiefly pride in their association with a man so expert that nobody — including them — can understand what he says. Here is another tendency that isn't limited to adherents of the Depart Out movement. Popular economics and environmentalism would be nothing without it.

4. Boredom

The other thing that respondents to Family Radio constantly say is, "I used to go from one church to another, and somehow, none of them really spoke to me. It was all just, I don't know, just a lot of ceremonies and rituals. But I discovered Family Radio, and now I'm learning so much about the truth." People are bored, and boredom is for them the proof of falsehood. I would think that a few minutes of church ritual would bore them much less than a radio teacher droning by the hour about the churches' refusal to listen to his message, but I'm just recording another subjective preference. The point is: the common assumption that truth is known when it "speaks to me," when it keeps me awake, when it alleviates my chronic boredom, isn't just a problem for the traditional churches; it's a problem for us all. It's the operative principle of much of American life, including virtually all of America's political campaigns.

Those are four reasons why one should view the Depart Out movement as something more than a weird, irrational, and therefore unimportant episode. In many respects the movement is an accurate, though very unfortunate, reflection of the Americans with whom we live.

What will happen next?

One thing is certain: the Rapture will not take place on May 21. Nor will the total destruction of the physical universe occur on the following October 21. But what will happen to Family Radio?

Will the Depart Out movement collapse, like the Millerites? Will the Campingites try to reinterpret their message, as they did after the disappointment of 1994? Will they succeed? Or will there be a palace revolution?

I believe that the last is likeliest. People who have invested their careers in an organization are reluctant to part from it, no matter what happens, and in this instance there has been good reason for dissenters to stay and bide their time. Camping is the sole source of the sect's peculiar theology, and he is 89 years old. (Not that he is senile — he isn't. His method of argument is the same that it was 25 years ago, when I first found him on the dial.) It is difficult to imagine that Family Radio's internal proletariat hasn't made plans for what happens after his death — or even before it, when May 21 fails to justify his teachings. I look for a battle at Family Radio; and with luck, the battle will be public.

In any case, we are unlikely to see a more informative experiment in what happens when prophecy — definite, ceaselessly emphasized, widely disseminated prophecy — unmistakably and climactically fails. Every student of American civilization should plan to tune in to Family Radio on May 21 — not with the possibility of being caught up to heaven, but with the certainty of being caught up in a fascinating event. ❑