

1994: THE YEAR OF CHRIST'S RETURN?

Tremper Longman III

In the decade before the year 1000, speculation about the end times wreaked havoc in the church and society. After all, the end of a millennium was at hand (Revelation 20!), so what could be a more opportune time for the end of the world?

As we approach the year 2000, self-proclaimed prophets and interpreters of ancient prophecy are appearing with increasing frequency. Although they are occasionally violent (David Koresh in Waco, Texas), more often their damage is psychological and spiritual.

Notable among recent claimants to the key to biblical prophecies of the end is Harold Camping, the founder of Christian Family Radio. In his book *1994?* (published by Vantage Press in 1992), Camping claims to have finally solved the riddles of the Bible's prophecies of the end. As the title indicates, he lays out an argument that Jesus Christ will return in the year 1994, more exactly in October of that year.

I confess that when I first heard of this book, I laughed and said, "Oh no, not again!" I did not worry too much about it, because it sounded so ridiculous that I wasn't even going to bother to read it, even though my late colleague Ray Dillard and I taught a lay seminar on prophecy in churches.

When I became a Christian around 1970, everyone was reading Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It asserted that the end would come in the next five years. Obviously, that did not happen. Since umpteen such predictions have gone unfulfilled, I figured that the church would have matured to the point that Christians would ignore this book.

I was deeply surprised to discover how wrong I was. A number of people, many in Reformed churches, embraced this book and put their hope in Christ's immediate coming, sometimes to their great pain. As a case in point, I have received a letter from one man who, upon reading Camping's book, immediately dropped out of seminary in order to put his affairs in order before Christ returned. He now realizes his mistake and regrets the damage that it has done to his life.

I then decided to read the book carefully. This was not easy, because it is massive (551 pages) and difficult to follow. Nevertheless, I will try to give an impression of Camping's means of argumentation, before pointing out what I think are the major errors that render his book not only wrong but dangerous.

In the first place, Camping must justify his attempt to discover the time of the second coming. After all, Jesus said: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn" (Mark 13:32-35). In summary, Jesus says that Christians must always be ready for Christ's return at any moment, because we will not know about the timing of it until it happens.

To this Camping flippantly replies that, although Christ says we cannot know the day or the hour, we can know the year and the month. He makes the ridiculous claim that the Bible contains "hidden" prophecies that only become clear in the last few years before the second coming. Then he makes the arrogant claim that he is the only one in the whole world at any time in church history to figure out the secret answer. We should be suspicious of him from the very start.

Most of the book, it should be observed, is not about the end-time prophecies. Rather, it shows how the prophecies of

Christ's first coming were fulfilled—something that rightly builds our confidence in God's prophetic word. Camping also spends a lot of time describing his chronology of Bible history—something which probably confuses and overwhelms most of his readers. His chronology is described with such certainty that most readers are left unaware of the fact that no biblical scholar would agree with him about many of his most significant dates. Most notably, he tells us that Adam and Eve were born in the year 11,013 B.C. Suffice it to say that to my knowledge no other scholar would accept that date. Indeed, most Old Testament scholars agree that Genesis does not give us any indication of when creation took place at all.

Camping's dependence on all details of his chronology is of vital importance to him since he states that "had the dates in the Biblical calendar of history been even one year different than that shown, it would have invalidated all of the dates used as a basis for the conclusions of this study" (p. xxi). A look at any history of ancient Israel will show that all of his dates before Abraham are quite speculative and that after that time some are just plain wrong. For example, he dates the destruction of the northern kingdom to 710 B.C. rather than 722 B.C.

Although much of the book is devoted to these matters, there are a number of texts which are pressed into service to prove his contention that Jesus Christ will bring history to a close in 1994. Space does not permit a full listing or treatment of these passages, but we will give brief accounts of his treatment of some key texts to illustrate his interpretive method.

On pages 226-30 he treats Acts 27, the account of Paul's shipwreck. His interpretation is illustrative of how he treats numbers throughout the Bible. It also demonstrates his rather bizarre and unexplained mixture of literal and figurative interpretation.

Acts 27 recounts the shipwreck of the boat carrying Paul to Rome. A storm causes the boat to sink, but the amazing thing is that all 276 people on board are saved.

Camping asserts that this is a "historical parable." The storm represents Satan's attack on the church, but miraculously none of the 276 sailors, soldiers, and prisoners (who apparently represent believers) are lost. At this point, Camping begins to work his magic on the numbers. Most readers assume that the number 276 is given simply because that is how many people were actually on board, but not according to Camping. He tells us that 276 is a "very special" number (p. 229). Since 276 is the result of multiplying 12 by 23 or of adding together all the numbers from 1 to 23, it is really pointing us to the number 23. This leads him to the conclusion that the final tribulation will last 23 years. Of course, nothing in the biblical text gives us even an inkling that this has anything to do with chronology, not to speak of a connection with the tribulation.

In another place, Camping cites the life span of Jacob as a prophecy of the time of the Second Coming. We must remember that he dates the creation to 11,013 B.C. He then remarks that Jacob died when he was 130 years old. This is a prophecy of the 13,000-year period of biblical history, which, according to his calculations, brings us to A.D. 1988. This is the year when Satan was unbound (p. 512) and which is followed by the 23-year tribulation. Of course, this would put the second coming in the year 2011, but God decided to cut the tribulation short. Other indications lead him to 1994.

Confused? I certainly was as I read this book. Camping is totally arbitrary in his treatment of texts. There is no basis for his assertion that the end will come in 1994. We must listen to Jesus when he says that we must always be prepared for the end because it might happen at any moment—though it could also take place in the distant future.

I will conclude this review with a prophecy of my own. Of course, this is not a divine revelation; rather, it is a simple insight based on the content of the book. My prophecy is that we have not heard the last of Mr. Camping on this subject. He has the book all set up to claim that he only made a simple error in assuming that the tribulation would be shorted from 23 years. He has intimidated that the end might take place in 2011. My advice to those of us who spent good money on *1994?* is to pass when *2011?* (pp. 494-95) hits the bookstores.

Dr. Longman is professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary (in Philadelphia). Reprinted from New Horizons, December 1993.

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