

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *Harold Camping's Theology of the Church*

All of us were embarrassed by the failed prediction of Jesus' return on 21 May 2011. Far more important than the inane prophecies of Harold Camping is his theology of the church. I came across an important article published by the Christian Research Institute, written by James R. White, that focuses on Camping's theology. After reading this, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Harold Camping is a false teacher, indeed a false prophet. Let me explain.

- First, a few thoughts about Camping's role in modern Christianity—both past and present. Harold Camping is the president of Family Station, Inc., a California-based radio ministry with worldwide broadcast facilities, including more than 150 outlets in the United States. Over the years, this ministry has been a significant blessing to believers as they heard both national and local pastors preach and teach over Family Radio. However, over the last several years, White writes that “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 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.”
- Second, what is Camping's theology of the church? His ideas have not been published in a book. There is one pamphlet, entitled “Has the Church Age Come to an End?” that he published, but he has preached extensively on his radio stations on this topic. Most importantly was a 13-part series on his new doctrine during the summer of 2001. White quotes from this program and provides a succinct summary of the crux of Camping's theology: “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 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.” To Camping, 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 church is thereby an “empty shell.” There are no more elders or deacons and no more divine authority in the church. Further, the ordinances have been done away with. White shows that “Camping believes that baptism and the Lord’s Supper were ‘ceremonial laws’ that were given to the church alone. Since the church age is gone, so are the ordinances. There is to be no more baptism and celebration of the Lord’s Supper.” What are Christians therefore to do? Camping teaches that such precepts as a “Sunday Sabbath” are valid and commands that believers are not to forsake “the gathering together.” But believers are to flee the local church and “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.”

- Third, how did Camping arrive at such a bizarre set of teachings? White offers an important insight: “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 ‘spiritual’ meaning, which requires spiritual insight and knowledge.” An example of how ludicrous Camping’s allegorical interpretative scheme has become, he has used the two witnesses of Revelation 11, Jerusalem and Judea, all of the Old Testament, Hezekiah’s life, and the boat the disciples used in John 21 as “pictures” of the church. As White so correctly observes, “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 [called the literal-grammatical-historical method of interpretation] with the more-or-less relevant insights and imagination of the interpreter.” The source of Scripture’s authority—the God-breathed text [2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:19-21] is replaced by the mere thoughts of men and women!! Camping is proclaiming a false and dangerous set of teachings rooted in a provocative and treacherous interpretive scheme. I am defending the very authority of Scripture, “for a Bible that cannot communicate God’s truth consistently to each generation cannot be a solid foundation for the faith.”
- Finally, a few closing thoughts. Years ago, theologian Anthony Hoekema offered four disitinctives that can alert us to a set of false teachings: 1. An extra-scriptural source of authority. 2. The denial of justification by faith alone. 3. The devaluation of Jesus Christ and His uniqueness. 4. The group as the exclusive community of the saved. The danger of Harold Camping and his teaching is that # 1 and # 4 seem to fit. When his so-called prophecy about 21 May did not materialize, he did not apologize, nor did he concede it was false. Instead, he offered that 21 May was actually a “spiritual judgment day,” and the actual day of cataclysmic judgment will come on 21 October 2011! As theologian Albert Mohler has observed, “Harold Camping has refused all correction and all efforts to persuade him to cease his false teachings. . . He has received delegations of concerned theologians and major Christian leaders, but he has resisted all efforts and repudiated all accountability to the church. He is a classic example of a false teacher and a false prophet, about which the Bible has much to say.” He claims to have a “secret” knowledge that has arisen from his

allegorical interpretive scheme, has rejected all correction from the believing church and claims that “he and he alone is right.” Harold Camping is a very sad individual, who began well in his early radio ministry, serving many in the body of Christ. But he is now leading countless people down the road of theological bankruptcy and heretical teachings. It is God’s Word that sits in judgment of him and his false teachings.

See James R. White, “Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping’s Call to Flee the Church,” *Christian Research Journal* (25:1 [2002]); [AlbertMohler.com](http://AlbertMohler.com) (1 June 2011) and James P. Eckman, *The Truth about Worldviews*, p. 89.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### ***Dr. Jack Kevorkian and the Death with Dignity Movement***

Dr. Jack Kevorkian died last week at the age of 83. He had assisted in about 130 suicides in the 1990s and thereby symbolized the right-to-die movement that gained strength during that decade. [Doctor-assisted suicide has gained legitimacy in Oregon, Washington and Montana, but in no other states of the union.] He was a Michigan pathologist who would hook up patients to his homemade suicide machine. Some died of lethal injection, while others were strapped to a face mask that was connected to a carbon-monoxide canister. The patients would control when they killed themselves. He was stripped of his pathology license in 1991 and eluded authorities for nearly a decade, emerging from four trials unscathed. In September 1998, Kevorkian killed a patient who was too weak to do it alone. He was found guilty and sentenced to 10 to 25 years in prison. After eight years, he was released in 2007, promising to perform no more assisted suicides.

Columnist Ross Douthat adds a needed perspective to Kevorkian’s methodology and passion for doctor-assisted suicide. Kevorkian did not just provide death to the dying; he aided anyone whose suffering seemed sufficient to warrant his kind of assistance. “When The Detroit Free Press investigated his ‘practice’ in 1997, it found that 60% of those he assisted weren’t actually terminally ill. In several cases, autopsies revealed ‘no anatomical evidence of disease.’ This record was ignored or glossed over by his admirers. . . . After his release from prison in 2007, he was treated like a civil rights revolutionary rather than a killer—with fawning interviews on ‘60 Minutes,’ \$50,000 speaking engagements, and a hagiographic HBO biopic starring Al Pacino.” By God’s grace, America has not embraced Kevorkian’s perverse vision of a dignified death. But consider the suicide clinics that have sprung up in Switzerland. One such clinic is run by a man named Ludwig Minelli, which charges about \$6,000 for this service. A recent study has shown that 21% of those whom Minelli helps are not terminally ill. In the last 15 years, more than 1,000 people have been assisted by Minelli in their desire to die. Is this really the kind of civilization we desire to build? Is there really a right to die in this manner? Is this really what is meant by death with dignity?

In my book, *Christian Ethics in a Postmodern World*, I offer several insights on how we should think about euthanasia. A believer in Jesus Christ has a very different view of death. Death in Scripture is clearly the judgment of God upon sin. God told Adam that if he ate of the tree in the garden, he would die. When he and Eve ate, they both experienced the separation from God that

resulted from sin and eventual physical death (see narrative in Genesis 2 and 3). Sin gains authority over humans, therefore, and results in separation from God--death. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ dealt the death-blow to sin and rendered death inoperative in the believer's life. Because Jesus conquered death through His resurrection, the believer need not fear death. Although that person may die physically (the soul separated from the body), it is not permanent because of the promised resurrection. Hence, Paul can write in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The believer in Jesus Christ therefore faces death with tension. Paul gives us a window into this tension when he writes, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Death means to be with Jesus and to have all the daily struggles, both physical and spiritual, over. Although inexplicable, death is the door Christians go through to be with Christ. There is no other way, barring Christ's return for his church, for the believer to be with Christ. There is, therefore, the constant pull of heaven matched by the constant pull to remain and serve the Lord on earth. Death remains in the sovereign hand of God and when it comes the believer, although anxious and perhaps frightened, trusts the words of Scripture, "To be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord" (1 Corinthians 5:3).

At the same time, the Bible teaches that every person, believer and unbeliever, is inherently dignified and worthy of respect. It is always proper and ethically right to fight for life. That is because men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Human life is sacred (Genesis 9:1-6) and no one should be demeaned or cursed (James 3:9-10). To treat a human, who bears God's image, in an undignified manner, to wantonly destroy life or to assume the position of authority over life and death of another human, is to step outside of God's revelation. The Bible affirms the intrinsic worth and equal value of every human life regardless of its stage or condition. In a word, this is the Judeo-Christian view of life. What are some implications of this high view of life? First, it seems logical that life is so valuable it should be terminated only when highly unusual considerations dictate an exception. In the Netherlands, for example, the Parliament has empowered doctors to help individuals commit suicide if they are suffering from terminal illnesses and even if they are struggling with certain emotional/mental disorders. Dr. Jack Kevorkian had helped 130 people commit suicide, some of whom were suffering from clinical depression. It is difficult to justify such actions from Scripture. Such practices cheapen life, treat a human as of little value and with no dignity. In short, to allow widespread euthanasia is to foster a culture of death. Another implication of the Judeo-Christian view of life is that personhood is defined in biological terms. A human is a person whose life begins at conception, not at birth. "Personhood" is not defined according to I.Q., a sense of the future, a capacity to relate to other humans or any other such criteria. The point is that God creates the life, defines its beginning as conception and sustains the life. Humans who believe His Word will maintain the same view and always fight for life. To end life in a pre-meditated manner, as did Dr. Kevorkian or as is legitimized in doctor-assisted suicide, violates the Bible's high view of life.

**ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE: THE CHRISTIAN HOSPICE:** This *Perspective* has rejected the propensity of present culture to re-define "personhood" and justify euthanasia. However, what does a Christian do when a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal disease? What does one do if someone dear develops Alzheimer's disease or Huntington's disease? What if extremely painful cancer develops and the only promise is months or years of pain only to be followed by death?

There is no easy answer but the Christian hospice movement is offering a powerful alternative for Christians today. Sometimes in a facility like a home or sometimes by providing care within the patient's own home, care for the dying patient is provided. It involves managing pain with drugs, giving loving comfort and providing daily service to meet all human needs, whatever the specific situation. The care is complemented by spiritual encouragement from God's Word, mixed with prayer and edifying opportunities as reminders of God's goodness and of eternal life. Death is not easy but the Christian approaches death differently than the unbeliever. The loving, empathetic, nail-scarred hands of Jesus are outstretched to welcome His child home to heaven. Hospice care provides the dignified alternative that honors God's creation--life--all the while preparing the dying saint for the promise that awaits them. It preserves the dignity of life that the mercy killers and Dr. Kevorkians promise but cannot deliver.

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (6 June 2011); Tim Devaney in the *Washington Times* (5 June 2011); and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics in a Postmodern World*, pp. 29-33.