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Harold Camping and William Miller: Soul Mates?
Paul V.M. Flesher

As most people expected, Harold Camping's prediction of the Rapture did not come to pass on May 21. Based on his interpretation of the Bible, Camping had calculated that true Christians would be taken up to heaven on that date. When this did not happen, most of his followers were disappointed.

Camping himself found the failure of the predicted event surprising, to say the least. On May 22, Camping's wife let it be known that he was "confused," and Camping himself later confessed, "When May 21 came and went, it was a very difficult time for me, a very difficult time. I really, really was praying and praying and praying, 'Oh Lord, what happened?'"

Since May 21, Camping has come out with a new interpretation. While May 21 was a key date, the events took place in a spiritual realm, not in the physical realm of this world. It was an "invisible judgment day," but not the Rapture. Instead, Camping now claims, God is saving the main event for Oct. 21, 2011. On that day, the entire Earth will be destroyed in a massive fireball.

History is repeating itself. More than 150 years ago, William Miller went through a similar set of predictions and disappointments which he handled in a similar way, namely by spiritualizing the events.

Miller began by predicting "Jesus Christ will come again to this Earth, to cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all the saints, sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844." When nothing happened on March 21, 1844, Miller's followers saw it as a mere miscalculation. A new predicted date was given: April 18. When this date passed without event, Millerites, as his followers were known, decided this was a spiritual "tarrying time" when Jesus "the bridegroom" delayed, as in the parable opening Matthew 25.

A couple months later, Samuel Snow, a staunch believer in Miller's prophecies, predicted that Christ would return for his believing saints on Oct. 22, 1844. (Is Camping's similar date just a coincidence? Probably.) When nothing took place on that day, the Millerites suffered their "Great Disappointment." Many people left the movement. Those who stayed believed that Jesus had come to the door of the world, where he was "tarrying" so that more people could believe and be saved before the "advent" of Jesus' appearance.

The general notion of Jesus' imminent arrival became so widespread among the Millerites, they became known as "Adventists." Of course, there were several different versions of this belief, which led to the formation of different groups.

Ellen White became a leader of the largest group of Adventists. She and her followers withdrew to Battle Creek, Mich., where in 1863 they formally organized the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. From there, successive generations of members have fanned out across the world to evangelize. In 2007, they were listed as the world's 12th largest religious organization, with 16 million members (www.Adherents.com).

Seventh-Day Adventists became interested in healthy living and emphasized vegetarianism. As an alternative to the breakfasts of bacon or sausage, then common in America, John Harvey Kellogg developed a grain-based breakfast cereal. His brother, W. K. Kellogg, in 1906 formed a company to market such food. Its first product? Kellogg's corn flakes.

The activities surrounding Camping's predictions have similarities to Millerism beyond the spiritualization of failed prophecies. Both the Millerites and Camping promoted their beliefs widely. The Millerites used newspapers, beginning with established publications and moving on to their own broadsheets. Millions were published and distributed. Camping has used his radio network, the Internet and billboards.

Miller's followers came from a variety of Protestant denominations, or none at all. This is similar to Camping's followers. Neither man worked through an organized church structure. Most people could believe and follow their predictions without disruption to religious beliefs already held.

If the historical parallels between Camping's and Miller's followers continue, then we can expect a Great Disappointment among the "Campingites" after nothing happens on Oct. 21. Many people will abandon the belief, but some will retain it and give it a spiritual interpretation. In the following years, a new denomination will be organized that interweaves Camping's beliefs with elements of evangelical Protestantism.