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Are We Still Here?
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Harold Camping has preached that May 21, 2011, would be the turning point of human history. This is the day that the radio broadcaster has predicted the Rapture takes place and "all the believers who have ever lived will be instantly transformed into glorified spiritual bodies to be forever with God."

At the same time, a massive earthquake will wreak havoc across the earth, followed by five months of tribulation. Then on Oct. 21, 2011, the world will end. Camping's organization "Family Radio" has been broadcasting warnings on the airwaves and the Internet, posting announcements on billboards around the country, and sending out believers in RVs to carry the message directly to people.

Camping's message is not new, only the specific dates he identifies. It is a form of Premillennial Dispensationalism (PD), a theology common among Evangelical Christians and developed in the early 1800s by John Darby, an Anglo-Irish Protestant. He popularized his views during several evangelizing tours in the United States in the 1860s and the 1870s.

Darby divided the history of the world (all 7,000 years!) into seven ages (dispensations). The theology arranges events and "prophecies" described in the Bible into these ages. Events and prophecies that do not fit into a theologian's knowledge of the past become the basis for predicting the future-a future that entails doom and destruction for the world. (Note: PD theologians are not known for their broad historical knowledge.)

Jesus' resurrection in 33 A.D. began the Church Age, the Sixth Age, in which Christianity proclaims God's salvation to all people and the number of believers will increase. At the end of the Church Age, according to PD, Jesus will briefly appear to take all believers to heaven in the Rapture, and the Seventh Age will begin, leading quickly to the end of the world.

Since Darby's time, followers of PD have taught that the Rapture could happen at any moment and that believers should remain ready. There is a caveat, however. Darby taught that the exact time was unknowable because biblical prophecies referred to the Jews and not to the Church.

Darby's caveat gave his views a big boost after 1844, when William Miller led a nationwide movement of hundreds of thousands of people to believe that what he called the "Second Advent" would happen on Oct. 22, 1844. It did not. In the wake of this failure, PD preachers and theologians emphasized Darby's caveat as indicating that biblical prophecies were not about the current Church Age.

Although a PD theologian, Camping has given a set of specific dates. This is because he believes that the Church Age has ended and we are in the last Age. The prophecies now apply to world events and can be used to calculate the events of the end times.

The problem with PD theology, which its proponents do not seem to have noticed, is that it assumes Christianity has failed in its mission of salvation. Camping's Family Radio is working hard to save a few more people-in the middle of one of the world's most Christian nations!

Premillennial Dispensationalism holds that the world has been going morally downhill. The Church Age, despite the Gospel's preaching, has been a time during which humanity has become more and more depraved, committing wickedness and evil on an ever-increasing scale. The Rapture will take place just before the most morally corrupt low-point ever. Does that indicate Christianity has had a positive influence?

Even in the countries where Christianity is strongest, most Premillennial Dispensationalists think that few people who call themselves Christians will be raptured. The rest delude themselves. So out of the 2.2 billion Christians, only a few million will be claimed. Can Christianity be called successful if so few reach the goal of salvation at the time of rapture?

And, according to this theology, just how successful has God been in bringing salvation to all humanity? Not very.

If May 21, 2011 is a day of Rapture, then it demonstrates the failure of God's all-encompassing plan for the salvation of humankind. It is a rescue mission for the few, not a graduation party for the many.