

Cults - Family Radio

Will 'Final Annihilation' Begin on May 21, 2011?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Cult leader Harold Camping says that all of mankind - and Satan himself - will be annihilated in a five-month period beginning next week. Camping's false teaching denies the Gospel itself.

May 13, 2011 - In recent weeks, Family Radio president Harold Camping has intensified his predictions that the end of the world will begin on May 21st, 2011 and reach its culmination on October 20th. Camping repeats these false prophecies endlessly on his "Open Forum" program and other teaching segments, and each day adds more details that have no basis in Scripture. At the same time, his announcers continue to solicit listeners' financial contributions to support a radio and television network that has over \$100 million cash on hand, and according to Camping will itself be destroyed beginning May 21st.

Camping predicts that earthquakes and other catastrophes will begin at 6:00 PM on May 21st at the International Dateline in the Pacific, and will spread westward beginning at 6:00 PM in each of the succeeding twenty-three world time zones. This, says Camping, will begin a five-month period in which all of mankind remaining on earth, and Satan himself, will be annihilated. They, like all unbelievers of the past, will simply cease to have conscious existence, according to Camping. On May 21st, Camping says that he and all other "believers" (which he defines as roughly 200 million people who believe his prophecy) will be raptured.

In a bold-faced denial of the plain teaching of Revelation 19 and 20, Camping says that Satan and the unbelieving will not be in the Lake of Fire for eternity. He has

decided that "hour of His judgment" in Revelation 14:7 is a literal hour in each world time zone on May 21st, but that the Lake of Fire is merely a metaphor for his predicted five months of annihilation that will follow. Camping bases all of this on the same "has God really said" hermeneutic of audacious presumption that he has used for decades to lead untold numbers of people astray from sound teaching on many points - including the Gospel itself.

Camping and the Company He Keeps

Annihilationism is not, as some would say, "a side issue on which good men may differ." As we shall see, annihilationism denies the Gospel itself by denying the meaning of Christ's atonement for sinners. Camping and his followers are not the first cult to promote annihilationism. Others such as the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses are also annihilationist. But Camping is also in agreement with other purported Evangelicals. Among recent teachers, John Stott and Clark Pinnock are also to be noted and avoided for their embrace of annihilationism, along with their other false teachings such as broad ecumenism (Stott) and open theism (Pinnock). In 2003, Pinnock was permitted to remain a member of the Evangelical Theological Society. In a vote that spoke volumes about the sad state of Evangelicalism today, a 67% majority of the ETS membership said that his annihilationist view is compatible with the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy!

New Perspective on Paul advocate N. T. Wright also rejects the doctrine of eternal punishment. The late theologian F. F. Bruce described himself as "non-committal" or "agnostic" on the issue.

Annihilationism has also long infected mainline denominations. In 1995 an Anglican Church doctrinal commission stated that "Hell is not eternal torment" but rather a state of "non-being". The doctrine of eternal punishment has also long been rejected among most mainline Presbyterians, Methodists, and the United Church of Christ.

"The End of the Discussion"?

Camping bases his annihilationist heresy on Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death..." Death, said Camping on a recent Family Radio segment, means annihilation and nothing else. That, he said, "is the end of the discussion." But is it?

In typical cult-leader fashion, Camping chose a particular passage, ignored the meaning of its words in context and in the original language, and refused careful comparison with the rest of inspired Scripture, in order to assert a doctrine that is patently false. In both method and result it is classic Camping-ism.

Like all other false teaching, Camping's annihilationism is based on a rejection of Bible-based rules of interpretation. Here are four essential reasons why Camping and all other annihilationists are wrong, and why this is not a "side issue" but an essential doctrine.

The Words for "Death" and "Die"

First, annihilationism ignores the meaning of the words translated "death" and "die" in Scripture. The word translated "death" in the New Testament is never, ever defined as "annihilation". Can the word translated "death" in Romans 6:23 mean annihilation? Yes, the Greek word *thanatos* can have that meaning. But among the 119 occurrences of that word in the New Testament, there is not a single case where the meaning of *thanatos* is clearly and unequivocally stated to be annihilation, or where this meaning can be clearly derived from the context. The same is true of the 121 occurrences of the verb *apothnesko*, "to die".

The Substitutionary Nature of Christ's Death

Second, annihilationism denies the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ suffered death (*thanatos*) in the place of believers:

Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. (Acts 2:23-24)

For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Romans 5:10)

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:8)

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight. (Colossians 1:21-22)

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9)

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

If annihilation is the punishment of the lost, then Jesus' death on the cross would not be a substitutionary death. He was not annihilated by the wildest stretch of the imagination. If annihilation is God's just punishment for sinners, then Jesus Christ did

not suffer the punishment that sinners deserve and will receive. On this basis alone, annihilationism is Biblically untenable.

What Jesus did suffer, clearly, were two things: separation from God (Matthew 27:46) and physical death, the separation of the spirit from the body (Matthew 27:50, cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7). This is precisely the twofold nature of the death that God proclaimed to our first parents as the consequence of sin in Genesis chapter 3. It was precisely this kind of death that Satan denied in his first lie to them - "You shall not surely die" (3:4).

Jesus' Own Statement

Third, the death of the wicked that is spoken of in Scripture is clearly of an unending nature. The Greek word *aionos*, everlasting, is repeatedly used. We have, as the foremost evidence against annihilationism, the statement of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 25:46 - "These [the lost] shall go away into everlasting (*aionios*) punishment, but the righteous into eternal (*aionios*) life." It is inconceivable that God made flesh would use the same word in the same sentence to describe two different states. It would mean that Jesus actually said, "The lost shall go away into punishment that has an immediate and abrupt end, but the righteous into a life that has no end."

The 19th century English theologian E. B. Pusey, though he was later part of the liberalizing movement in the Anglican church, was spot-on in his commentary on this verse:

The argument [against an annihilationist interpretation of Matthew 25:46] is not merely from language. It has a moral and religious aspect. Any ordinary writer who drew a contrast between two things, would, if he wished to be understood, use the self-same word in the self-same sense. He would avoid ambiguity. If he did not, we should count him ignorant of language - or if it were intentional, dishonest... [W]ould you trust one who in any matter of this world, should use the

self-same word in two distinct senses in the self-same sentence, without giving any hint that he was so doing? In none. Find any case in which you would trust a man who did so in the things of men, and then ascribe it to your God in the things of God. I could not trust [such a] man. I could not believe it of my God.¹

Additional Uses of the Word for "Everlasting"

The late Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest² brings forth additional refutations of the doctrine of annihilationism from the pages of Scripture:

In Matthew 18:8 the phrase "everlasting fire" is in the Greek "the fire which is everlasting [*aiionios*]." The use of the definite article shows that this passage does not refer to fire in general but to a particular fire (Revelation 20:10). This fire will burn forever and is unquenchable (Mark 9:43). Matthew 25:41 tells us that this everlasting fire is prepared for the devil and his angels. The word "prepared" in the Greek is in the perfect tense, which tense speaks of a past complete action that has present results. The Lake of Fire had been prepared before our Lord spoke these words, and is now in existence. The fires of this lake are not purifying but punitive. That is, their purpose is not to purify the wicked dead in order that they might be brought to repentance and faith with the result that they will all be finally saved, as those teach who advocate the universal restoration of the entire human race. They are for the punishment of Satan and his fallen angels, and for those of the human race who enter eternity in a lost condition...

As to Mark 3:29 ["in danger of eternal damnation"]...The words "in danger of" are from a Greek word which refers to anyone "held in anything so that he cannot escape." Thus the one who committed the sin referred to in this passage is in the grasp of an eternal sin, the sin being eternal, not in the sense of

eternally repeating itself, but in that it is eternal in its guilt. Such a sin demands eternal punishment.

In II Thessalonians 1:9 we have "everlasting destruction." The Greek word translated "destruction" does not mean "annihilation"... The word comes from the verb meaning "to destroy." But [in first century Greek] to destroy something does not mean to put it out of existence, but to ruin it, to reduce it to such form that it loses all that gave worth to its existence. One may burn down a beautiful mansion. The materials which composed it are still in existence, a heap of ashes, but it is destroyed in that it cannot be used as a home any more. It is in such form that it has lost all that gave worth to its existence as a mansion. The eternal condition of the lost will be one of utter ruin, a condition in which the soul lives forever in a state devoid of all that makes existence worthwhile.

In Hebrews 6:2 we have "eternal judgment." The word "judgment" here is from a Greek word that refers to a condemnatory sentence, *aiōnios* being used to teach that this sentence is eternal in that the punishment it prescribes is unending.

In Jude 7 we have lost human beings condemned to the same everlasting fire which has been prepared for Satan and the fallen angels, the latter in verse 6 being reserved for the Great White Throne judgment and the fire prepared for them (Matthew 25:41)....

We come to Revelation 14:9-11 where the unsaved who worship the...Beast...during the Great Tribulation, are said to be tormented, and where it is asserted that the smoke of their torment, that is, the smoke that issues from the cause of their torment, will ascend forever and forever, which means that their torment will be forever and forever. The Greek word translated "torment" was used in a secular document of the examination of slaves in the

phrase "they under torture said." Thayer defines the word as follows, "to question by applying torture, to torture, to vex with grievous pains (of body and mind), in the passive sense, to be harassed, distressed." In Revelation 20:10, the eternal torment of Satan is spoken of. Thus, God's Word clearly teaches that the sufferings of the lost will be unending.

Why This is Not a "Side Issue"

Why must believers reject annihilationism? Why is this a vital doctrinal issue, and not merely one on which "good men may differ"? In concluding his article on the subject, Wuest says this:

How this fact speaks to us of the infinite holiness, righteousness, and justice of God, and of the awfulness of sin. But how it points us also to that Lonely Sufferer on Calvary's Cross, and brings to our ears the dreadful pathos of that cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" What was it all for? The Lord Jesus suffered and died in order that by satisfying the righteous demands of the law which we violated, God might be able to offer us mercy on the basis of justice satisfied. That mercy He offers you now, unsaved reader, if you will accept it by faith in the atoning work of His Son on the Cross. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, the only begotten one, that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish but have everlasting life." Put your trust in Him now, for tomorrow may be too late.

References:

1. E. B. Pusey, "What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment?" as cited in Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids. Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), page 40.
2. Wuest, pages 38-43.

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