

Text: I Corinthians 7: 25-31  
Title: Recalibrate  
Date: 01.22.12  
Roger Allen Nelson

Harold Egbert Camping grew up in a Christian Reformed Church in California and was part of the CRC until he was in his late sixties. He was a civil engineer by training but he is made his mark in radio.

In the late 1950s Camping and few friends bought a radio station and began to build a network of over 150 radio stations all across North America. Camping hosted a live weeknight program. Listeners would call in with questions about life, marriage, sexual morality, etc, or to inquire about the meaning of particular passages of scripture. Camping gave the answers. Camping became a kind of Bible-answer-man.

Using unique principles of interpretation and a particular literal reading of scripture Camping eventually affixed dates to certain events and he developed a calendar of biblical history. He became so convinced of the veracity of that calendar that he also claimed clarity about the coming end of human history.

At one point he predicted that the curtain would fall on May 21, 1988.

At another point he claimed the bell would toll on September 6, 1994.

But, wrong on both accounts, Camping recalibrated and announced that the end world of would begin on May 21, 2011.

So, to listeners all over the world Camping broadcast that on that fateful spring day the righteous would be whisked away to heaven, the earth would be engulfed in flames, plagues would claim millions of those left behind, and all this hellfire fury would reach a crescendo on October 21 when life on earth would be snuffed out. But.....

But, May 21 came and went with barely a flutter of the rapture or the earthquakes Camping had predicted, so he revised his interpretation and asserted that since mankind shook with fear and the book of Genesis describes man as made from dirt ~ that there had been “man-quakes.” Camping recalibrated again and said that May 21 had been a spiritual reality but that the real end of time would still be on October 21, 2011.

And, we’re still here.....

Camping caught the attention of popular culture and was low hanging fruit for late night comedians. He was just one more religious nut bar, just one more lunatic on the fringe, just one more misguided fool. In early November Camping, now in his nineties, admitted that his calculations were wrong and told his followers that:

*...we should be very patient about this matter. At least in a minimal way we are learning to walk more and more humble before God.*

Poking fun at Harold Camping is like shooting fish in a barrel, but what’s lost in that easy humor is the underlying assumption that the world will end by the hand of God.

Harold Egbert Camping believed that day was imminent.  
The Apostle Paul believed the same thing.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was probably written in response to a letter that they sent to him while he was in Ephesus. The end of First Corinthians includes the names of three men that scholars believe were the letter carriers. That letter included all sorts of questions about life, marriage, and sexual morality, etc.

So, chapter 7 begins with this transition: "Now for the matters you wrote about...."

It is probably helpful, therefore, to keep in mind that in chapter 7 Paul is not writing a treatise on marriage but responding to their particular issues and questions. This is a first century call in show. Paul was a kind of Bible-answer-man.

What follows in chapter 7 is an odd heavy handed series of answers. Paul's first century counsel sounds foreign and blunt to a twenty first century sensibility. For example:

*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman, but since sexual immorality is occurring each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her husband...*

*Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you can devote yourselves to prayer.*

*Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried as I do. But if they cannot control themselves.....*

You get the idea.

If you are looking to I Corinthians chapter 7 for guidance about marriage brace yourself for hard answers. Most of us turn radio dial down a few stations to I Corinthians 13 ~ Love radio, lite rock, less talk.....

But, this morning we've got this text and it seems crucial to remember that Paul's advice is shaped, conditioned, informed by his belief that the end of days was coming soon and very soon. The language that he uses has the sense that the time is compressed. Paul's underlying premise was that God in Christ was going to come back to wrap things up and the best you could do was not rock the boat. Don't be distracted or diluted by these matters of the heart, but remain focused on Christ and his return. As one theologian puts it:

*Paul's basic advice to the married, the unmarried, the "virgins," and the widows is to prioritize pure and undistracted devotion to the Lord, which, in most cases, Paul suggests would be best served by not experiencing major changes in one's life situation, certainly not in a time of crisis. Thus, believers are discouraged from seeking change in life status....*

For Paul, being married, or single, or a widow, or a virgin, or a slave, or circumcised or uncircumcised was in some ways incidental. What matters is not

your relational identity,  
or your sexual identity,  
or your social identity,  
but your identity in Christ.

In fact, it might even be best to endure a bad situation rather than make a change because for Paul the prospect of a new heaven and new earth would take the edge off the prevailing troubles on this earth. That hope may even enable a believer to endure a bad marriage or a bad boss or....

He couldn't be much clearer than this:

*You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, all of you, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation in which God called you...*

Gulp! Historically the use and abuse of this passage is staggering. And, again I am not sure that it should be read as a the guiding statement of the will of God with regard to marriage, remarriage, divorce, widows, singles, slaves, etc... My guess is that Paul would be stunned that 2000 some years later we're still waiting. My guess, my hope, is that Paul would recalibrate.

So, how then should we read this text?

Theodore Parker was a Unitarian preacher and abolitionist in the mid 1800s. His flair for a well turned phrase may have caught the eye and shaped some of Abraham Lincoln's speeches. It certainly influenced Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Theodore Park wrote:

*I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.*

In the 1967 speech "Where Do We Go From Here?" Dr. King recast it this way:

*Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future. ... When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.*

Now, you've heard me quote that last line and play with it in a variety of ways because an essential hope of the gospel is that this good earth and these good bodies do not get tossed aside into some cosmic trash bin or carted away to some pillowed heaven. The essential hope of the gospel is that while this world in its present form is passing away, someday the very hand of God will wipe away the last tear,  
and justice and mercy will reign,  
and love will be the last word,  
and the dwelling of God will be with people.

Now, that reading of scripture seems essential to this preacher, because unless creation ultimately someday-somehow-someway culminates in justice and mercy, no matter how long the bend....

unless this whole drama ends in God....  
then all of this is meaningless chatter,  
and love and kindness are temporary salves,  
and at best life is a passing fancy.

If this is all that there is, if creation has no culmination in justice and mercy, then all that Jesus offers is moral encouragement and an inspiring ethic, and then Jesus is little more than a cheerleader.

If this is all that there is, if creation is incidental, little more than a launching pad for those who believe the right things in order to get their ticket punched to heaven, while the rest burn up in brimstone, then Jesus is little more than an escape hatch.

But! But if Harold Egbert Camping and Paul are right, if we live in a compressed time between cross and culmination then somehow all of this matters, and to use the words of "Our World Belongs to God" (that shaped our liturgy this morning.)

*...then we will see the Lord face to face. He will heal our hurts, end our wars, and make the crooked the straight. Then we will join in a new song to the Lamb without blemish who made us a kingdom of priests. God will be all in all, righteousness and peace will flourish, everything will be made new, and every eye will see at last that our world belongs to God.*

Now I have no idea if that day is coming sooner or later, but our only calibration is that every status, every relationship, every change, every effort be lived in the light of that coming glory. Not to maintain the status quo, but to seek after that which is bent toward justice, mercy, and righteousness. To grab hold, wherever you are, and help bend until Christ comes.

Amen.