

Is May 21 to be Judgment Day?

Fresno Bee, The (CA) - May 14, 2011

- Author/Byline: Ron Orozco The Fresno Bee
- Edition: FINAL
- Section: LIFE
- Page: D1
- Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1110)

If you believe the latest in end-times predictions, time is running out on your life. Just a week to go before everything crashes.

A loosely organized group of Christians led by Family Radio Worldwide founder Harold Camping is predicting the Rapture and Judgment Day will take place May 21. Some members passed out flyers in Fresno in February as part of the group's nationwide sweep of cities to get the word out. Valley billboards proclaiming end times also went up.

The belief that Christ will return to Earth and bring an end to history has been a tenet of Christian belief since the first century. The Book of Revelation, which comes last in the New Testament, describes this conclusion in very descriptive language.

Camping says he believes the Bible essentially functions as a cosmic calendar explaining exactly when various prophecies will be fulfilled. He also predicted the end of the world in 1994.

Andrew Fiala, chairman of the philosophy department at California State University, Fresno, and author of "What Would Jesus Really Do?: The Power and Limits of Jesus' Moral Teachings," says predictions about end times have existed for a long time, perhaps since the beginning of Christianity.

He believes people have long searched for moral clarity to issues, particularly when world events are difficult to explain.

"There is this feeling that when there's a crisis in the world, we look to some sort of judgment," Fiala says. "We're hoping to have some separation of the good and the evil. A lot of this Rapture and end-times discussion is because there's a final judgment connected with it, especially when we feel things are out of control. There's hope for moral clarity that can be provided by some sort of final hope, or fear, for the end. It could happen any day -- Christ's coming."

Many local religious leaders are skeptical about the May 21 prediction.

"That is lunacy -- to predict a day when Jesus will return," says Northwest Church's senior pastor, the Rev. Will Stoll.

Stoll says he teaches on the Rapture and Judgment Day based on Matthew 24:36, when Jesus says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Sadly, Stoll says, many pastors and evangelists have failed for a long time with their predictions.

"It's really, really bizarre," he says. "Anybody who sees theology coming out of the next day's newspaper doesn't have a clue."

Stoll says New Testament writings are clear that Jesus' return is imminent.

"He can return at any time," he says. "We talk about it quite a bit, but that we don't know the day or the hour."

Officials at Fresno Central Seventh-day Adventist Church believe the May 21 prediction is unnecessarily frightening people.

Associate pastor Gary Jensen calls Camping a "false prophet" who is making the mistake of mixing literal and symbolic passages in the Bible to reach conclusions and predictions.

Stephen Bohr, senior pastor of Fresno Central Seventh-day Adventist Church, is giving a special talk on "Will the World End on May 21, 2011?" at the 11 a.m. service May 21 at the church, 2980 E. Yale Ave.

"Many, many people have bought into this; we thought it would serve well to speak to this issue so people could hear the other side," Jensen says.

A newly formed Central Valley Coalition of Reason, a collection of three Valley atheist and skeptics groups, also is weighing in on the May 21 prediction.

The coalition paid for a billboard -- "Don't believe in God? Join the club" -- at Blackstone and Saginaw avenues, where it went up May 3 and will remain on display on May 21.

David Costa, vice-president of the group, says he doesn't believe in the prediction.

"To believe anything like that, you would have to take the Bible literally, specifically the Book of Revelation," says Costa, adding he believes the Book of Revelation is allegory. "Most Christians don't necessarily believe everything in the Book of Revelation will happen. I'm even one more step removed from it."

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- Caption: SPECIAL TO THE BEEA billboard photo on familyradio.com points to the May 21 Judgment Day.

- Record: *FRS_0416336035*

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