

HAS THE CHURCH AGE ENDED?

by Joseph Jacowitz

Matthew 16:18-19

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The reason I feel compelled to address this issue is because a Bible teacher, one whom most of you know, one who is in our own back yard here in San Leandro, whose name is Harold Camping, has come up with a novel and unprecedented and very unique teaching that the Church Age has ended. That is, in bringing out his idea on this subject, he believes that the Church has become so apostate, so dead, so filled and overrun with idolatry and false teaching, that there is literally not one faithful, sound church, not just in the United States, but in the entire world. He has the audacity and presumption to claim that there is not one faithful church that is both spiritually and doctrinally sound in the entire world.

Now, he certainly believes this idea with all of his heart, to the point where he has announced that his own church is to be disbanded, and he encourages not only his own people to remain as a fellowship with no authority to exist any longer, because he says Christ has removed that authority since the Church Age has ended, he has also claimed that the office of pastor, deacon, and the idea of church membership no longer exists, and therefore there are no longer any God-called, God-ordained, God-gifted men or women in the Church, authorized to protect the Church, to feed the Church, to equip the saints for the building up of the body to the glory of God. Now I have put up with a lot of things in

terms of false teaching from false teachers over the years, but this is one issue that I cannot let slide. This is so grave a heresy that we must ask the question, is the author of it a heretic? I'm not ready to answer that question right now, but I certainly think that this teaching is moving in that direction, because all the characteristics of a heretic certainly are emerging from Mr. Camping. I can at least proclaim that this teaching is heresy as Scripture defines heresy, which we will get into in another message, God willing.

The focus of my message today is to answer the question, Has the Church Age ended? To answer that question, I can think of no other response than to teach on the doctrine of the perpetuity of the Church, which is the Scripture's teaching and belief that the Church will endure as an institution until the end of the world. Did you hear what I said? The Church will endure as an institution until Jesus Christ comes again. This is an issue that is not vague or ambiguous or cloudy. It is one that is so utterly clear and profound and coherent from the Scriptures, that you would have to put blinders on not to see it in the Bible. I want to respond to this false teaching that the Church Age has ended, and therefore the Church must close its doors and believers must scatter to the four winds of the earth and fend for themselves, by responding in three ways.

First, we will look at a response from the Scriptures. What does the Bible have to say about this false theory? Secondly, a response from the pastor, myself being one among many pastors. And thirdly, a response from the Chief Shepherd, the One who is above all and in all, the One who will hold us together as a spiritual institution until the end of the world.

A Response From the Bible

First of all, let's look at a response from the Bible. Now, there is so much Scripture, I really had to reduce the amount of texts that I will bring out to you this afternoon. I am not giving you an exhaustive list of texts which undergird, underscore, and buttress the teaching that of the perpetuity of the Church. But let me just give you several of them. Write them down, and try to follow me as closely as you can as I go through them in seeking to define their meaning and apply them to the local church. If you need more time, then later on go over the message and study these Scriptures out on your own. Look them up in commentaries if you need more light, and so forth.

The first Scripture I want to direct you to is Matthew 16:18-19, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter [or little rock], and upon this rock [that is, Big Rock, Jesus] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Before Christ's ascension into heaven, he told Peter that Peter is a little rock, and that little rock, along with the other little rocks, rest on the Lord Jesus Christ, the Big Rock, the Chief Cornerstone of the Church. He not only says that He is going to build His Church, that is the invisible church as well as the institutional church, but primarily what is in view here is the invisible church, which is the spiritual body of true believers, but also He says that the only institution in the world that has Christ's authority to make decisions, to bind and loose, to discipline, to govern, is the local church. The Lord

teaches that this is the only organization in the world that has that authority. Once this organization institutionally has been pronounced dissolved by the Lord, then and only then does the church no longer have any authority.

But, my friends, let me hasten to add, there is not one verse in the Bible (and I am making a powerful statement, but I believe with all my heart that it is true) that teaches directly or indirectly that the corporate institution of the church will ever be dissolved. You have to interpret the Bible in another dimension of Bible interpretation that the Lord nor the Scripture warrants or allows us to use lawfully, to come up with this monstrous idea that the Church Age has ended. You either have to interpret Scripture in a numerical way or an unjustified allegorical or spiritual way or some other crazy way to come up with the idea that the Church Age has ended. The normal, historical, grammatical way of interpreting the Scripture, the exegetical way, the contextual way of interpreting the Bible, does not warrant in the slightest bit this idea that we are to close our local church doors and walk away because the Church Age has ended. Christ said, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. He has given His authority to the Church. We can bind and loose, as long as we do it Biblically, and God will honor that decision of binding and loosing that a local church makes. He will honor it in heaven. He will support it with His power and with His will. But I must hasten to say that the enemy, Satan, will not prevail against the true Church, whether that church is universal or a true local church. I must make a distinction between a true church and a false church. Yes, there are churches that have closed their doors. There is no question about that. We look

throughout history, and there have been millions of local churches that have disbanded, closed their doors, been destroyed, and so forth. But the reason these churches have been dissolved, disbanded, and destroyed, is not because we have clear teaching from the Bible that at a point in history or in time, there is this pronouncement eschatologically or prophetically in the future, made by the Lord in the Bible, that the church must close its doors. There are many reasons, and Biblical reasons, why local churches are dissolved and destroyed, but not because we have a clear reference in prophecy that at a certain time the church is to be dissolved.

In Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus is speaking to Peter, who is a representative of the institutional church, the local church. When I say institutional church, I am talking about each independent, local church, because that is the bottom line, front line, frontier authority that God has given. He does not invest His authority to the universal church, He invests his authority to the local church, where all of the gifts and the officers and the offices are installed and function properly and govern therefore the church. So ultimately, the authority of Christ is invested in the local institutional church, which alone has the authority of Christ to conduct and oversee the government and discipline of the body.

Now this word *prevail* in verse 18, "the gates of hell shall not *prevail* against the church," means *overpower*. Hell will not overpower a true individual believer or a true spiritual, faithful local church. Hell will overpower those who are not true, and in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus warns those seven churches, "Watch out, repent, get things right!" And those churches who are lukewarm and have slowly responded to that command to repent, the

Lord already says that Satan is in their midst, seated in their church, and hell was prevailing and overpowering in that situation. But to those who are faithful and true local churches or individuals, hell cannot overpower. Hell cannot overpower anything that has God's seed of life in it. Greater is He that is within you (the Holy Spirit) than he that is in the world (Satan and his forces).

The true saints have always been the objects of Satan's attack. But our Lord has said, like I mentioned, the gates of hell will not prevail against them. If you look at church history, the institutional church has always been infested by the enemy. This idea of the institutional church closing its doors is therefore not new, because if you look at the church between 500 and 1500 A.D., Satan reigned within the institutional church, generally speaking, with rare exception. Rome, through its political power, was ruling the Roman Church worldwide. And Satan is always active in the church. You see, he doesn't have to spend much time in the world. He fights to overcome the life of God wherever it exists, either in an individual or in a local church. And so, the focus of the enemy is not really on the institutional church. The focus of the enemy is on those believers or those local churches that are seeking to be faithful to God spiritually. Those individuals and those churches can do the most damage to Satan and his kingdom. But wherever the structure of a local church is working hand-in-hand with a body of believers that are filled with the life of God, that are living and breathing the love and the life and the truth of Jesus, that minimal structure of that local church can be a great tool in the hands of God for edification, for strengthening the foundation and the superstructure of that

church. Why would the enemy, therefore, attack the structure, when it is the people inside the structure, inside the institution, that are doing the most damage to his work?

Now let me take you to the second text, in Matthew 13. People may ask you about this, since Mr. Camping has a world-wide platform in which he could potentially influence hundreds of thousands of Christians to leave their churches and forsake the responsibility God has given them and us to function in the full-orbed, well-developed way God has called us to, by using our gifts and abilities and talents and callings of the Lord in the local church. Matthew 13:24-30 is the parable of the wheat and the tares. Beginning at verse 24, we read, "Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."

Now, the Lord clearly has no other institution in view in which this parable, this earthly story with a heavenly meaning, is able to give it definition and context. There is no way we can understand this parable without viewing it as overall, God is talking about the

organizational church. And certainly, the kingdom of heaven the Lord is speaking of here is the element of the kingdom that is defined in the institutional church. It pictures both the wheat and the chaff, both growing together. That is a picture of saved and unsaved, both in the church and in the world. Spurgeon believes it is a picture of both, as I referred to his commentary on Matthew. He had a tremendous point on this, and I agree with him. This is a picture of the wheat and the chaff growing together in the church in particular, where the Lord would prematurely, that is, before the end of the world - there is a premature point of reaping spoken of here, right? And there is a proper time of reaping. The proper time of reaping is when the Master comes back. That is a clear picture of the second coming of Christ. And so both the wheat and the tares will grow together in its normal environment, which is the institutional church.

Alright, let's move on. We see a picture in Matthew 13 that the institutional church will not end until the reapers are allowed to do their job. First, the chaff, that is false believers, counterfeit Christians, and only God knows who they are, will be separated from the true believers. The counterfeit Christians will be burned up. They will be cast into hell, the lake of fire.

Now turn to Revelation 3. This passage is probably the most profound, because here we get a picture of the institutional church functioning in its normal milieu, its normal setting. In Revelation 3, some of the strongest arguments from Scripture are found to clearly indicate the church, that is, the institutional church, will exist until the end of the world. In Revelation 3:1-6, we read, "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write;

These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." Now, Mr. Camping has said, using this very text to justify his teaching that the church age has ended, that God says here that the church has a name, but they are actually dead. And he imposes upon this passage the subjective time, that now is the time that the church age has ended. He has taken a message that Jesus has given to a local church here in Sardis, and he has transferred that to apply to every church without exception, including us, and he has imposed upon it a prophetic application to these last days. That is, because this verse says the church is dead, this is a prophecy that in the last days, the whole church throughout the world will become spiritually dead, and therefore we must leave. Well, I don't know where you get all of that out of this verse. I know he has other verses in mind, but we don't have time to go to those right now, which seek to justify that we are to leave our local churches. But, you see, God is not here prophesying the future end of the Church Age.

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 teach that God deals with each local church on their own merits. He addresses each church individually - the church at Sardis, the church at Thyatira, the church at Philadelphia, the church at Ephesus. His focal point is on the institution of the local church. He holds the church accountable in its local church context. Do you see that? He doesn't hold the universal church accountable. He holds each local church accountable. He doesn't hold us, for example, accountable for some other church down the road. We are not experiencing his chastisement for some sins that

another church commits. He holds each local church accountable, pro and con, based on their own merits. And we see that here in Revelation 2 and 3.

Also, these local churches here would still be in existence if they obeyed Christ's command to maintain certain practices that He commands them to maintain. Christ is telling His churches that His desire and preference is for their preservation, not for their ultimate destruction or dissolution. There is no secret prophecy in Revelation 3:1-6 which teaches that he desires His individual members to leave the local church. Actually, if you read further on down in the context, his desire and preference is just the opposite. Look at verse 2, "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God." Now look at verse 3, "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard." If His desire prophetically is for the local church, especially in these last days, for the individual members to leave their churches, why would He show one desire for these churches in Revelation 2 and 3 and then have some other desire for the last day's church? No, you cannot read some prophetic indirect implication in this verse, which has an application for the last days. All Bible teachers admit that Revelation 2 and 3 are a blueprint and pattern for every local church of every age, and God's desire is for us to remain together, to stay together. And when the forces that tear away at our spiritual foundation do their dirty work, God doesn't want us to throw up our hands and walk away, He wants us to be watchful and to strengthen the things which remain. He wants us to go back and remember how we received and heard at the beginning, when we were spiritually faithful. Look at the next phrase in verse 3,

"Hold fast." What does hold fast mean? It means hold fast. It means stay. "And repent." That is, repent of the weaknesses and sins that are being committed or that are occurring. "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." When He says that He will come upon us as a thief, and we will not know what hour He will come upon us, that is language of the second coming. This is a statement, certainly, that is a clear reference to the second coming of Christ, and therefore is an exhortation addressed to the church. He says, You need to be so watchful and so faithful because you never know what time I am going to come. I am going to come as a thief of the night. And when He comes as a thief in the night, when is that? The end of the world. That is, the church needs to be watchful, needs to hold fast, needs to strengthen the things which remain, until the end of the world. Because He is coming as a thief in the night. Is that not what we clearly have taught here? That is, we are to be doctrinally and spiritually faithful and watchful unto the very end, and when things weaken our foundation, if sin breaks out on the left or the right, we are not to throw up our hands, because either we or other churches may be going apostate. We are to look within and deal with that disease or cancer which is spreading throughout the church, and repent of it, and hold fast to what we have until the end, because He is coming as a thief in the night.

Look at Revelation 2:25, for example. He gives a clear command to this local church in Thyatira, this corporate assembly. He says, "But that which ye have already hold fast till I come." He tells this church to hold fast also. But He uses another phrase to describe how

long they are to hold fast - until I come. Until the second coming. In Revelation chapter 3:10-11, He says this to the church at Philadelphia, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." Behold, I come quickly, is a reference to His second coming, is it not? Hold fast until when, church at Philadelphia? Well, He said previously that He is coming quickly. Hold fast until His coming. Now that coming quickly could be 2,000 years or 2 years or 2 seconds, because we have been in the last days for a couple thousand years. And to God, 2,000 years is very quick.

In 1 Corinthians 11:26, we read, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." Pastor Owen mentioned that in Communion this morning. This is clearly a command, not merely an option, for the Church to observe the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, however frequently we may observe it, whether it is weekly or monthly or yearly, the focus is not so much on the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, as it is on faithfully observing it until the Lord comes. Because the Lord's Supper is a picture of sanctification. And how long does sanctification last? It lasts our whole lives. It is an ongoing, progressive work of the Lord in our hearts until Jesus comes again. When we are at that time perfected, when we are at that time putting off mortality and putting on immortality. This verse clearly teaches that the ordinance of the Lord's Supper must be observed until the coming of the Lord Jesus, no matter what kind of exegetical gymnastics you try to make this verse say otherwise. For example, Camping

interprets this verse to mean that we would not necessarily be obligated to observe the Lord's Supper after the Church Age has ended. I heard him give that interpretation when someone asked him a question at an open forum at his church. Obviously, he had not done his homework beforehand, so he gave a quick answer and rationalized the whole thing. He said, "Well, yeah, the Lord says to do this until He comes, but if the Church Age is going to end, certainly the Lord wouldn't expect you to observe the Lord's Supper until He comes."

Well, my question is, why would the Lord command us to do something until the end, and not forewarn us of a change in the command, as he has done in other places? For example, in the Old Testament He says to Israel that the animal sacrifices were a perpetual ordinance unto the end of the world, but then that ceremonial law obviously was changed, because there are many prophetic verses which teach that Christ is our Passover. Christ is our sacrifice. But we have no statement in all of Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, forewarning us that the ordinance of the Lord's Supper will incur a change or a modification or a cessation of observance. Why give a permanent command if the Lord knew it would only be temporary anyway? The Lord would be contradicting Himself.

Well, the last verse I want to give you, and I trust we will have more in other messages on this subject, is in Ephesians 3:21. "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." Christ will receive glory in His Church in every generation to the end. I think it is clear from the Scriptures that the Church Age

will not end, and the Church is not commanded to close its doors, disband, dissolve, and cancel out its officers and its activities and its function in the world to be a light and salt as a corporate institution.

A Response From a Pastor

Now let me give you a response from a pastor - Pastor Joe. If I am to take Camping's statement seriously, to leave the flock of God and to close the doors of the church and remove the authority Christ as the Head of the church has given me to oversee the flock, I would be committing the greatest sin possible against my calling and my responsibility.

The Holy Spirit has not told me, Mr. Camping, to lay down my staff and my pen and my Bible and stop feeding and teaching and shepherding and counseling and discipling and equipping the saints. I don't know of very many other pastors, if this is such an important last-days doctrine and theology, I don't know of a rapidly growing number of pastors whom the Holy Spirit is opening their eyes and unsealing this truth to them, so that they feel compelled to leave their flocks.

On the contrary, my Bible tells me in Titus 1 that I am going to do this, by God's grace, with every breath remaining in this aging body. In Titus 1, I am commanded by God to do this in your midst, in verses 9-11, "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." Insubordination is one of the most

important traits of a heretic. Someone who goes off and does their own thing. Someone who is independent. Someone who is outside the general consensus of orthodox doctrine and theology. Someone who considers themselves to be a spiritual maverick, receiving special and secret revelation from the Bible, and knows just the exact timing to bring that revelation out for the church.

Well, we are to use the Word, as pastors, to exhort and convict those who contradict, "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses [in this case, whole churches! and in the case of his own church, households, which are being subverted and scattered], teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." In his case, I don't see it as dishonest gain. I think there are other motivations involved.

In 2 Timothy 2, God commands me, Pastor Owen, and every true shepherd, undershepherd and pastor, in verses 1 and 2, "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." That's my job - committing these doctrines and these truths to others who will teach others also. In chapter 4:1-8, Paul invokes the strongest possible language and authority that Christ the Head of the church has delegated to him as an apostle. He charges Pastor Timothy, and ultimately every God-called pastor, in verse 1, "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove,

rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine."

Now what are we to do when that time when the church will become more and more apostate, when its doctrine will become more and more watered down and diluted of its power and truth and orthodoxy? What are we to do as pastors, leave the church? No! That is the time, more than ever, that the church needs its faithful pastors to stand firm, to stand up and to preach, and to convince, and to rebuke, and to exhort, and to teach!

Because the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine. And the context, brethren, is the last days, because look at chapter 3 and verse 1, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come." And chapter 4 verses 3 and 4 says, "but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." Oh, are we seeing that occur on whole-sale fashion and scale in the church today? Do you want a teacher who will tell you that you need to be rich and prosperous and this is a godly thing? Well, these health, wealth, and prosperity preachers are a dime a dozen. You can hire one and he can beat you to death with that thing and tell you what you want to hear. But it does also say that in the last days, they will consider gain to be godliness.

But what are we to do? 2 Timothy 4:5, "But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry." I am to fulfill my ministry. I don't know about any other pastor, but I speak for me, and this man up front right here, we are to fulfill our ministry. And if any of you leave this church because you are caught

up by the blindness and deception of false teaching which tells you that you have got to leave the church and huddle by your radio and listen to the false prognostications of a man who has already been proven wrong as a date-setter, then go ahead and do it. But it won't be because we will hold back from leading and begging you to stay faithful to Christ and His church. I have got to fulfill my ministry.

In verse 6 he says, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand." Paul is talking about his soon death. He didn't know that the Lord would not be coming for almost 2000 years or more. As far as he knew, the Lord was soon to come, but Paul saw himself as one who needed to fulfill his ministry. He says, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

I am commanded in 1 Timothy 4:6, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained." Can any of you, my brethren, imagine our precious Lord commanding in His Word, for His faithful undershepherds to spend 10, 20, 30, or 50 years forging a spiritual bond and relationship with His sheep whom He has died for, giving these pastors the gifts and the graces to be able to nurture and help the saints cultivate their faith and develop this sheep-shepherd relationship with them for all these years, and then suddenly, radically, and abruptly cut that relationship off, tell his undershepherds to leave the sheep, tell the sheep to leave them? Can you

envision such a command, such a heinous doctrine coming from the mind, mouth, or heart of our Lord Jesus Christ?

True pastors are to emulate the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said in his view of His relationship with the church in Ephesians 5, that He loved the church and gave Himself for her. It is an example that husbands ought to emulate with their wives. They are to sacrificially love their wives to the point where if it means that they have to die for their wife or their family, so be it. And it is the same in a shepherd-sheep relationship. It is the height of presumption and arrogance for someone to tell me to leave the flock of Christ, whom the Holy Spirit has given me a burden for, a love for, and a bond with. How dare such a presumptuous, blind, pedantic, dictatorial edict come from someone like this? I don't know. God have mercy upon his soul.

In verses 13-16, the apostle tells Elder Timothy, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." How long, Elder Timothy, are you to shepherd the flock in this way? Look at verse 13. Paul is speaking, of course. He says, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them." Except when the Church Age has ended? No. Give yourself entirely to them for the rest of your life. "That thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them [it is open-ended]: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

So, the elder, the pastor, must be faithful in the Word, teaching, preaching, exhorting, etc., the Word of God before the flock. He must also shepherd the flock, as we read in 1 Peter 5. "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ [again invoking strong language], and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:" This is a reference to the longevity of this commission. He is to do it until he receives that glory. "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." How long are you to do this, Elder Timothy? How long? Until the chief Shepherd appears. If you die before that, well, then you will get your crown beforehand. But if you don't die before that, you are to do it until the chief Shepherd appears. The implication is that when He appears, you are going to get your crown because you have been faithful in shepherding the flock until the end.

In Galatians 4:19, Paul says he labors among the flock. "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you." That is a life-long labor, for Christ is not formed in the sheep overnight. Then in Colossians 1:28-29, "Whom we preach [that is, we preach Christ], warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." We have a picture of an open-ended labor, in which Paul and other ministers of the Gospel are involved in, in a life-

long way. Christ is seen as being formed and growing and being perfected in the saints little by little during that life-long ministry among the flock.

This elder, this pastor, cannot forsake the sheep. As we learn in John 10, there are hirelings. In verses 13, "The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." Mr. Camping, I say to you, How can you leave your flock? How can you so smugly talk about disbanding the church and leaving the flock, but be so enthusiastic to add that we will still maintain our incorporation status so that you can receive a tax receipt from your donations? He would be very zealous and enthusiastic when it comes to that, but then talk very smugly about leaving the flock. I don't know how we can talk about such a thing without breaking down in tears. We have been profusely having to leave the flock of God. You say, You're pretty strong, Pastor Joe. That's right, I'm strong. And I need to be strong. I need to explain for you so that you understand how great an evil and false doctrine this is that is being put forth and suggested to the church of Christ worldwide, for God's people to leave their churches. "The hireling fleeth because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep." One of the signs of a shepherd is that he can't leave very quickly because he cares for them. He loves them.

I'm sure Mr. Camping has some kind of love for the sheep under his care, but what kind of love is it to be so blinded by false doctrine that that false doctrine would convince him to leave the sheep that God has or has not appointed him an overseer.

A Response From the Chief Shepherd

Thirdly, let me give you a response from the Chief Shepherd. In Romans 11:29, it says, "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." He uses this phrase in conjunction with a bringing out teaching on the restoration of Israel. He indicates in chapter 11 of Romans that Israel has been chastised, punished, and cast away from God as his representative people in the world, but some day God is going to bring Israel back. He is going to have a special relationship with them again, as He did before. But this time, they will be part of the whole Church of Christ fabric, made up of Jews and Gentiles. The language the Lord uses in bringing out this argument is that if God cuts away the natural branch and is able to graft in the unnatural branch, which is the Gentiles, can't He graft back in the natural branch? That is, the branch which was once natural to the tree? And then he says, "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance." In other words, once God chooses a people or an individual, that choice is irrevocable. Though that nation (in the case of Israel) has suffered a very long period of chastisement, 2,000 years, on the national level they have been chastised for a long time, but they will be brought back to have some kind of national relationship with God again, but in the framework of the whole Church. If that's the case, if God is faithful to bring Israel back as a nation, how much more will He be faithful to maintain His relationship with faithful local churches? Because the gifts and calling of God are without repentance

Let me just remind you that when Jesus cried out in Matthew 23:37-39, He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto

thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" Christ here desires to gather His corporate people, as represented by Jerusalem. He is viewing His people in one of those rare corporate sights that He views His people with in the Scriptures. He sees His people in a corporate way. He says, "O Jerusalem." There is nobody named Jerusalem that He is referring to in that phrase. He is talking about His corporate people. He says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I desired to see you together, to gather you as my faithful, spiritual people, but you would not!" We get a rare glimpse of the heart attitude of God towards His corporate people. He wants to keep them together. He does not want to scatter them. If He does so, it is a last resort, only after much pleading through the prophets and through the pastors. To destroy any local church, or in the Old Testament, the national people of God, that is the last resort! That does not reflect the desire of God for His corporate people to stay together.

And this is so powerfully taught in Revelation 2 and 3. We see in chapter 2 and verse 5, the following, speaking to the church at Ephesus, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." Now we are talking about a response in the Bible from the Lord Jesus on how He feels about His corporate people. In this case, we are talking about the local church. Now remember, God said concerning Israel that He does not delight in the death of the wicked. But here in Revelation 2:5, we see the Church's life represented by a lampstand. This is very

pertinent and applicable to us. Let's make a personal application to this church here.

Christ Himself is the one here in Ephesus who puts out the lampstand. But only if this individual church, in this case, Ephesus, is spiritually unfaithful. He says, "Look, remember from where you have fallen, and repent. Do the first works." He is saying, "I don't want to put out the lampstand." We see a reluctant Christ to move against His own Church, to inflict harm against His own body! For whoever hated his own flesh? And that is language taken right out of Ephesians 5, as He describes His relationship with His Church. Whoever hated his own flesh? Therefore, we see the Lord's attitude of love and patience for and great longsuffering for His church in giving Ephesus here warnings to repent. Remember from where they have fallen. Do the first works. He is pleading with them. This church is on shaky ground. He gives warning, "Or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." A second plea to repent. What is the response from the chief Shepherd? It is a response of tremendous reluctance to back away from a local church. But even when He warns the church to repent, even when He threatens to remove their lampstand, He gives them space to repent. He gives them time, another indication of His attitude for preferring them to stay together rather than be scattered.

In verse 8, this is the church at Smyrna, He says, "And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." We have the church at Smyrna here, and they are known as the persecuted church. That is, God chose in His wisdom for many of these saints to be persecuted for the glory of Christ. But here, persecution is not an indication of His displeasure or an indication of the church's unfaithfulness. They were persecuted because they were very privileged to suffer in a very special way, for God's purposes, persecution. But even when we are persecuted, it is not a sign that a church is unfaithful.

We are told in Revelation 13:7 that even the end times church will be persecuted. Turn with me there. As we just read about in Revelation 2 concerning the Ephesus church, which was persecuted 2,000 years ago. In Revelation 13:7, which Mr. Camping likes to quote a lot as justification why the church is dead and therefore we need to close our doors, he says, "And it was given unto him [that is, the devil] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations." Now just because Satan made war with the saints and overcame them, this does not justify this false doctrine that the Church Age has ended. We see here in Revelation 13:7, the same thing that happened in Revelation 2:8 and following. We see a picture of God's people suffering, and we don't have any indication whether this is a bunch of local churches or a worldwide persecution on the part of the church (I would prefer the latter), that saints everywhere will be overcome, many of them martyred and perhaps destroyed

by the enemy. But persecution is not a sign that a church is unfaithful, let alone justifying this false teaching that the Church Age has ended.

In Revelation 2 and verses 13-16, Jesus says to the church at Pergamos, "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." That is the third time Satan is referred to as being in the church. A very unusual reference. Verses 14-15, "I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate." Now, we see here that this certainly is a church that is being chastised. It is a church that has Satan's throne in it. Satan has had freedom to be able to come in and set up a throne or a dominion or a stronghold in the church. But this church, God says, is doing some things right. He says, "I know your works and where you dwell, but I have a few things against you." And he names two false doctrines - the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes. But still, Satan is in there working in the church. He has set up a stronghold there. He says Satan's throne is there in verse 13. At the end of verse 13, He says that Satan is dwelling there. But even if a church has been so overrun, and a local church as in the case of Pergamos here has been so unfaithful to the point where their lampstand is being put out right now as God speaks here in Revelation 2:12 and following, what is the Lord's attitude towards a Satanically overrun church that

is just barely existing spiritually? He says in verse 16, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

Verse 17 says, "To him that overcomes." Even when this church in Pergamos, which, for all practical purposes, has become apostate, the Lord still desires for them to repent.

What's my point? My point is, the attitude and desire of the Chief Shepherd. Even when a local church has gone so far towards apostasy and spiritual idolatry, is that they repent.

And when they repent, their lampstand will come back on.

In Revelation 2: 24-25, he says to the church at Thyatira, "But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan." This is the fourth picture of Satan, and his depth being at work in the church. "As they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come." In other words, in this church at Thyatira, some were sinning in the church on such a level that they knew the depths of Satan. Their sin was such that it was described as the depths of Satan, but He still tells them to hold fast until He comes. He says to the rest of them, the ones who are not sinning, hold fast and be faithful. In other words, He doesn't put the whole church's lampstand out because of the sin of a portion of it. His desire was for them to hold fast, even to repent and be restored.

Let me close with one passage of Scripture. In John 17, our Lord is praying for His sheep, for His saints, for His people. In verse 20, He says to the Father in His High Priestly prayer, Neither pray I for these alone [that is, those believers that are present with Him], but for them also which shall believe [that is, in the future] on me through their word;

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Here is an open-ended prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ for believers, all believers in the future. Not just believers up until the Church Age, but all believers. And His prayer is for believers to the very end, that they would be unified. He prays that they would be one, as Jesus is one with the Father. And the best context to bring about unity is in the local church, which has specific commands and exhortations as a corporate body, to be unified. Endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. We are corporately and individually commanded to be unified, and Jesus is praying to the Father for both here, for all believers in the future to be corporately and individually one, as He is one with the Father. That unity should be preserved right up until the end. That is the heart attitude and response of the Chief Shepherd towards His church.

There is much hope here for us, because we as a local body have this living, dynamic, growing, changing, transitioning. Like a baby in gestation all of these things are taking place at once. The bones are growing, the brain is growing, and the baby is going to be born and keep on growing unto full maturity, and all these changes are taking place and these hormones are kicking in, as that child reaches the higher levels of maturity. The Lord Jesus wants to see that full maturity. He wants to see the local church fitly joined together. He wants to see us as a local body filled out. And He, with all the patience and longsuffering and forbearance that Christ the Groom, the Bridegroom of the Bride, can possibly endure, even to the point where the church has become apostate. His desire and

attitude and will is for the church to repent and come back from the farthest distances of apostasy, because He loves His church, and He cannot forget them. He cannot forget His local churches, as those in Revelations 2 and 3, that were at one time very faithful to Him. He cannot forget them. He cannot disregard them. They are not an afterthought, just being a vehicle to transition into some stage of prophecy. The local church is a gathering of called-out ones, who have hearts and minds and spirits that Christ gave. We are not a vehicle for some decreed higher purpose. We are people whom God loves, and for whom Christ died, and the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. Having loved His own, He loves them to the end, individually and corporately. Though He must chastise and punish and all the rest, and He has His purposes when they are afflicted and persecuted (which are mysteries), yet I know He loves them. He wants them to stay intact. He wants them to hold fast. He desires to help them and strengthen them and provide everything for them that Christ died for. He wants them to fulfill their ministry. He wants them to bring forth the hundred fold fruit that they have been called and gifted to produce. Only as a last resort, He puts out the lampstand.

Therefore, do you think, after seeing this heart attitude of Christ concerning His desire for His church to endure to the end, that He is going to create some monstrous doctrine which is going to command His sheep to flee the very means that He has created and ordained to the end for their sanctification, for their preservation, for their purification? No, that is not the Jesus I know. That is not the Jesus of the Bible. That is not the Jesus who brought me back from a thousand pitfalls and a thousand backslidings. That is not

the One who loves me with an everlasting love that lasts through my lifetime and all eternity future. There is no distinction in His love between an individual and a local church.

What a loving Jesus we have! Nothing will separate us from that love - not height, nor depth, nor the teachings of Mr. Camping or the teachings of some other well-meaning, but false teacher. We can be well-meaning, but well-meaningly false. It is so sad and tragic that someone would throw away a lifetime of credibility and stature and a ministry with people under it, because of being misguided and blinded because of a lack of balance and a self-created hermeneutic or principle of interpretation which puts forth numerology and spiritualizing as the main prism through which He looks at the Bible in his Bible study. If you approach the Scriptures with that frame of mind and those tools for Bible study, you will come up with monstrous doctrines.

Let's pray for him and for his church, many of whom I have spoken with over the last couple of weeks. I was at the meeting at Family Radio when he announced to all of the Family Radio staff that the programming on Family Radio will now begin to reflect his view that the Church Age has ended. So, no title of "pastor" will be given, not that pastors are looking for that, but they cannot deny their calling. There will be no references to the church. Hey, brother, every parachurch organization ultimately derives its authority from the local church! And if a parachurch organization does not voluntarily make itself accountable to the local church, then it can do anything it wants to. If the local church does not rise up and send representatives there to hold men like this

accountable, then the subverting of not only whole households, but whole regions or nations of people can occur because of the platform that men like Harold Camping have to spew out their pernicious doctrines. Let us pray.

Lord, have mercy on this man, who has done so much good for Your church, but now in his last days, being 80 years old, he is forsaking this doctrine that he once held dear, and is tearing down the very sheep that he has worked so hard, by Your grace, to build up.

We do pray for him, that You would open his eyes that he might see. But more importantly, Lord, this message is for our people, for Christ Bible Church, that we would be knowledgeable and not deceived, that our eyes would be opened, and that we would know the truth and be convicted about it and hold fast to it. We pray that Your Spirit would give us grace to be faithful in the Word, with the truth, and in the Spirit, in holy living, being unspotted from the world, and be faithful to Your church, not for the church's sake, but in obedience to Your command to be a house of praying people. To be those who love the church because You love the church, Lord. To be those who love the brethren and honor all men. Help us, oh God, to be that church You want us to be, and to hold fast to the truth and to the life of God, which You have so graciously given to us. Help us to examine ourselves, and to repent of any false teaching, false doctrine, or any unconfessed sin that might exist within us. Help us, oh God, to stand firmly upon Your Word, in close connection with the church, submissive and accountable to it, which is the pillar and ground of truth, Your church, that we might remain blameless and have our

heads held high at the glorious appearing and second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.