

Radios

The Exclusive Brethren attitude to radios tells us much about their culture, about 'brethren speak' and about their thinking patterns.

When radios came onto the market in the 1920s as something that every home should have, some of the brethren would have made a purchase and given pride of place in their homes to this wonderful new testimony to humanity's mastery over the laws of nature. The leader of the time, James Taylor Snr of New York city was in almost all respects a modern man. A highly successful merchant, trading mainly in Irish linen, he frequently travelled the Atlantic and to a lesser extent other countries where there were Exclusive Brethren meetings. He used long distance communications such as the telegraph, then telephone, recognising all these things as God's provision to be used for furtherance of the Church in its final days of testimony on this earth. The Church was "heavenly in calling and destiny" and the 'provisional' things of this earth existed to be of service in this greatest of all God's works. The discovery of steam power, then petroleum power, the development of steamships, railroad, and air travel were all in view of enabling this great work to be completed.

Those to whom it was granted in God's sovereignty to be chosen for this destiny were 'the elect', (limited to the Exclusive Brethren in their practice). Those who seemed unable to grasp or embrace these great truths, or who were not prepared for the sacrifice, were viewed with a respectful condescension. The analogy was used (by J.T. snr) of Joseph and his family maintained in Egypt during the great famine. The whole of Egypt existed for the express purpose of maintaining, through Joseph, the chosen family of Israel. So when the aged patriarch Jacob finally died in Egypt, Joseph commanded "his servants the Egyptians" to embalm Jacob. As the Egyptians were servants to the chosen tribe of Israel, so in our day did all the things and peoples of the modern world exist to provide all that was needed for the material needs of God's elect (the Exclusive Brethren) in our day. This is the meaning of their curious expression "spoiling the Egyptians".

So, here we are with this wonderful new invention, the radio. One sales slogan was "it brings the world into your home". But, Christians are "in the world not of it". It was a fundamental doctrine of the Exclusive Brethren that we were a people delivered from the world (symbolized by Israel being delivered from the

bondage of Egypt). The world was a spiritual entity which existed for the unenlightened masses, a system having its own music, sport, entertainment, stories and advertising. The radio was identified as a channel for all these things. Clearly the home radio was an instrument of the Devil, a brazen attempt to lure unestablished souls back to the bondage from which they had been delivered. J.T. Snr evaluated the situation and ministered about the radio and its true character - a channel of worldliness straight into the home. At the same time he acknowledged the scientific instrument of radio as yet another "creature of God" used by men and serving to achieve greater travel safety, better communications, etc. The radio, along with worldly entertainments and politics, become one more thing which established a line of demarcation between the Exclusive Brethren and the rest of the world.

For years following, the radio issue was one of the tests of fellowship – any household with a radio was not a clean house. One couldn't be in fellowship if one had a radio. Occasionally, one would hear of someone who had one in his work shed which no one was supposed to know about. Sooner or later some questions as to conduct or attitude would result in peering behind curtains and the dreaded discovery and disclosure would be an occasion of shame or even being withdrawn from.

It was when radios became used more widely in society that the radio question took some very interesting turns. Many brethren availed themselves of new technology to help run their businesses, farms, etc. So, the 'walkie talkie' radio, the short-wave car telephone radio, radio operated garage doors etc. all were used, at first tentatively but later without question by whoever felt they would benefit. This was done freely and I think with the background knowledge that the radio itself was not an inherent evil, but the evil was in the popular broadcasting systems. J.T. snr died in 1953 and was superseded by his son J.T. jnr who did not assert full leadership until 1959. His attitude to practical issues was generally logical and pragmatic. If he had any concerns as to the growing use of radio instrumentation then he didn't minister as to this. Had he done so, brethren would have complied immediately.

J.T. jnr died in 1970 and the passing of leadership to J.H. Symington brought changes the brethren were not prepared for. J.T. jnr had established the idea of the 'elect vessel' (himself) who was the 'Lord's representative' and the ultimate authority for 'The Church', as the Exclusive Brethren now saw themselves. He had exercised leadership in a rather colourful personal style – a mixture of arbitrary rigidity, tolerance, grace, fear and unpredictability that frequently characterises absolute

dictators. Symington was a different personality altogether. He was a North Dakota grain and hog farmer, disciplined, hard working, strong and with an extraordinarily capable mind, which had been spared from university education. Symington took life quite seriously. Almost everything one did or said had moral significance. Ignorance was not an excuse and an explanation was of little value. To be found wanting as to any conduct or words was to have doubt cast on your entire spiritual integrity. The only safe conduct for one so exposed was unsparing self rejection until such time as the priest in whose hands you were placed felt safe enough to bring your case before J.H.Symington or at times, his regional appointee for an expression of confidence, which would restore your privileges but not your former status.

Symington was not given to changing anything laid down by leaders who had gone before, rather, he tended to enforce rigidly, rather arbitrarily and without thought as to the conditions which prompted the original ruling. To be more lenient, to relax, to become less rigorous, would be to open floodgates. Any new situation which called for a direction would usually result in direction which augmented rather than loosened application of the previous ruling.

Thus, when someone put a question to Symington about whether brethren should use radio telephones (perhaps they had been using the set to pick up radio broadcast as well, who knows) his response was, “it’s a radio! Short wave – long wave, same thing”. The message was clear to the brethren – though it wouldn’t have been to anyone else – that no use of radio by any one in the fellowship was acceptable.

I don’t know whether he had any idea of the ramifications worldwide of this pronouncement. Probably not, but consequences were of little concern to him. The truth was the truth and if the Lord made His mind clear on any matter then the only thing to do was to follow and not question. Nobody, it seemed, had the temerity to ask about J.T. snr’s attitude to radio. To do so would not result in an answer but in the enquirer risking immediate disfellowship. Many had lost their lives (right of fellowship) by attempting to set past ministry against what is being said currently. Questioning the authority of ‘The Lord’s Representative’ was a sin for which there might be no forgiveness.

All round the world; brethren who had hand held and vehicle based radio communication systems would disconnect and dump their sets. Some would grumble to an ear that was known to be sympathetic, but all knew that any indiscrete utterance

might at a later time come back to haunt them. Their now useless hardware could not be sold since one could not sell a thing one would not be free to use oneself. So, they would be simply dumped. To be found with any radio equipment of any kind after that point would be deemed an act of contempt. Radio of any kind was evil even if it was switched off, disconnected, lying in a corner or hidden under the floorboards.

What about a crane operator who needs radio telephone to keep in touch with the men on the ground? Answer – Why is that different from anything else? Radio is radio, no matter what the circumstances. The crane operator had the option of operating unsafely without radio, quitting his business, or coming to some arrangement like hiring out any work which involved radio, to a non Exclusive Brethren team of operators. They could use his cranes and use radio, provided the radio was not owned nor touched by the Exclusive Brethren crane owner and the crane crew were working on a contract arrangement so that they were not in any way in a direct employment relationship to the crane owner. This kind of arrangement was considered acceptable because the person in fellowship had only a contract arrangement with the crane operator and his use of the radio was his business.

A number of brethren had licenses to fly aeroplanes. Radio communication is an integral part of any flying today. ‘If you can’t pilot a plane without using a radio, then you can’t pilot a plane – that’s quite simple.’ But, we travel all round the world to meetings – all the time – and these planes all rely on radio – they wouldn’t be safe without them. Yes, well we are thankful for that, but we are grateful too that it is them who operate the radios – we wouldn’t do it ourselves.

In a New Zealand meeting, there was a young man, married with three young children. He was an automotive panel beater and made extra money by buying crashed cars which he then straightened out and sold for a worthwhile profit. Not long after the ruling was made on radios, this young man was found to have invested in a wrecked car which had a radio in it. In other words, he had purchased a radio. I can’t recall whether he was ‘found out’, or if he simply mentioned the matter to some ‘responsible’ brother because some other ‘cases’ made him uneasy about his action which common sense told him was not an issue. The upshot is that he was put out of fellowship, separated from his wife and family, and was left dangling for three years while his repentance deepened and the darkness that allowed him to act in this way was felt through his innermost being. Having gained the confidence of the local priesthood and finally of the ‘Man of God’, he was restored to the fellowship and to

his wife and three children. In such cases, there is no room to feel 'I have had a raw deal'. The feeling of a deepening of the work of God in ones soul, the dealing with rebellious self, and the euphoria of restoration to privileges and relationships, all combine overwhelmingly to make the whole event worthwhile. Like Job, the repentant sinner justifies God for all His ways.

There are some things you just don't ask about in any investigative kind of way. In any matter that has been pronounced on by the 'Man of God', you might ask a question for clarity or application, but any question which reflects on the rationale of a ruling from the 'Man of God', is a foolish, fatal, unforgivable Sin. There must have been many who realised that every phone call to Symington from countries other than the U.S.A., involved a radio/satellite link. This was the kind of question which you might discuss with someone you trusted, but would not ask publicly. You hoped that someone else might do so. I have a feeling that the question had been asked, but Symington has a way of saying that when something was done for the Lord's work, there would be a difference. The whole matter depended in the end, on what he would say about a particular situation. There was no place for rational discussion.

An outsider will wonder how it is possible for intelligent, mature adults, capable of running highly successful businesses, can meekly accept rulings so lacking in either logic or consistency. The rift between logic and religion is as old as history, but in my own view, this is something quite unnecessary. The conflict has its own peculiar manifestation in each system. Spirituality is not something which can be subject to logical analysis, they should compliment each other like parallel railway lines. The Exclusive Brethren got themselves into a position where logical or scientific analysis had no place, and because of the emergent inconsistencies, logic eventually ceased to have any respectability in the spiritual arena. No one any longer expected 'the Lord's word' to be logical or to make sense.

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