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# **The Appropriation of Information and Communication Technologies by the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church**

Steve Knowles  
University of Chester  
[s.knowles@chester.ac.uk](mailto:s.knowles@chester.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** This article examines why the PBCC has adopted and adapted information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their community, given that until recently they have rejected them on theological grounds. Starting by tracing the attitudes of Brethren leaders toward emerging technologies such as the radio and television, I argue that the adoption and adaptation of technology has been necessary and fundamental in maintaining the integrity of the core belief in separation from the world, a doctrine central to the Brethren way of life. Using Silverstone et al.'s notion of the moral economy of the family in relation to how Brethren negotiate their way around ICTs, I conclude that without the reconstruction and cultural appropriation of ICTs the Brethren would not be able to maintain separation from wider society.

**Keywords:** Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs, Plymouth Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Brethren Doctrine of Separation, Computer Technology and Religion, Bruce Hales, Universal Business Team (UBT).

**Note:** In researching this paper, the author has had the opportunity to read numerous volumes of the published ministry of Brethren leaders. The copyright and the express request by senior Brethren leaders prevent this material being directly quoted in this paper. To prevent any ministry quotations being misused by others, I have respected this request out of consideration for the privacy of individuals quoted and the community-specific nature of much of the content of the ministry, which can easily be taken out of context. What is put between brackets and referenced to the *Ministry* volumes, from the tenure of James Taylor, Jr. on, is actually paraphrased.

## *Introduction*

Little is known about the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church outside the confines of their tightly bounded connexional communities. Information that does tend to filter out is usually negative in nature, and found in the form of ex-

members' experiences or focused upon what is thought to generate good copy for journalists: usually that deemed to be controversial in nature (see Bachelard 2008). Probably, one of the more well-known, yet little understood, aspects of the Brethren is their caution regarding the use of new information and communications technologies (ICTs).

Indeed, it is only relatively recently that the Brethren have started to endorse some aspects of ICTs; computers, mobile phones and other hand-held devices are now common within Brethren communities. This appears to be in contradiction to previous Brethren teaching on the prohibition of ICTs and related technologies, which from the 1920s to the early 2000s have been consistently denounced. From the banning of radios and televisions, to the initial rejection of computers and mobile phones, Brethren teaching has been unambiguous in warning against the dangers of such technology. Brethren leaders have ministered that this aspect of technology can potentially turn households into "places of degradation" (Taylor Sr. 1963, 337); destroy families (J.S. Hales 1993b, 303); be used by the Man of Sin (Symington 1982), and open up a maze of electronic evil (B.D. Hales 2009, 218).

This article first considers the key theological reasons for Brethren antipathy toward ICTs—the roots for the rejection of technology—before examining why there has been a seeming change of attitude toward it. The religious social shaping of technology (RSST) theoretical framework, developed by Heidi Campbell (2010), will be utilized to assess aspects of the history, core values, and processes of negotiation as well as wider social implications that the use of technology has on the Brethren. More importantly, I will use Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley's work on the moral economy of the family in relation to how technology is appropriated, particularly regarding "how they [ICTs] are incorporated and refined in different terms, in accordance with the household's own values and interests" (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 16) within the Brethren.

It is the specifically moral aspect that provides an additional lens through which to analyze Brethren engagement with ICTs. Morality is central to Brethren life. To live as “pure” a life as possible that shuns evil is non-negotiable, and is pivotal to why Brethren maintain a tightly bounded community separate from the “world.” I argue that the adoption and adaptation of technology, despite claims by critics that such an endorsement of ICTs is contrary to Brethren teaching, has been necessary and fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the core belief in separation from the world: to be “in the world but not of it,” as one member put it to me. The doctrine of separation—a doctrine that has been the subject of much controversy—is a central tenet of Brethren teaching based on their understanding of the Bible, along with what is termed a gradual recovery of the truth through the world leader, also known as the ‘Minister of the Lord in the Recovery’, or “Man of God”.

Understanding the importance of the doctrine of separation for the Brethren is key for the analysis of their use of ICTs, because it provides the background context when tackling the difficult and complex questions regarding current engagement with technology.

### *I. Separation as a way of life*

Item 3 in the Brethren document *Faith in Practice* states:

The principle of separation... involves drawing away from the world in a moral sense, rather than in a physical sense. It represents a commitment to those with whom we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and involves choosing to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and to eat and drink together in social fellowship only with those persons (Plymouth Brethren Christian Church n.d., 3).

Separation is a core principle that dominates the Brethren way of life: it is in the DNA of the Brethren (Grass 2012; Shuff 2005; Webster 2018). The Brethren were founded by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), an Anglican clergyman, who deplored the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church and what he thought

were numerous departures from basic biblical principles. He expounded, along with others, separation from it in what became known as the Brethren movement, to get back to what he perceived to be biblical truth. As Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) notes,

The early Brethren believed that, by separating from what they regarded as the unwarranted and unlegitimated system that was represented by the organisation of churches, they possessed an adequate basis for unity of all properly motivated Christians (Wilson 1990, 89).

Ironically, despite its sectarian nature, Darby never intended to start a sect (Darby 2011, 354). Although seeking to develop new doctrinal and ecclesiological ideas, he did not purposely set out to establish what ultimately become a new group. Moreover, the Brethren did not consider themselves as a breakaway sect. Rather, they were a group of believers wanting to both restore the truth for the Church and depart from evil.

However, the nature of sectarian religion is that it generally demands more from its members, at least in its infancy. “Sectarian religion is serious religion: it determines an entire way of life” (Wilson 1990, 87). Darby’s Brethren were no exception, and central to it was the core principle that all members should maintain separation from evil. As Darby developed his ecclesiology, separation became more of a dominant concern. In a pamphlet entitled *Separation from Evil God’s Principle of Unity* (1834), he wrote “Separation...from evil, becomes the necessary and sole basis and principle...of unity” (Darby 2011, 356). Separation was not only necessary from corrupt ecclesiological institutions, it became increasingly necessary to maintain a pure and godly life. Thus, Darby encouraged Brethren to separate themselves from wider society.

The ensuing years saw the move toward stricter separation gather pace. In 1848, a serious disagreement caused a permanent schism resulting in the two streams that have since become known as the “Open” Brethren and “Exclusive”

Brethren. The dispute concerned a dispute between Darby and another key leader of the movement, Benjamin Wills Newton (1807-1899), over the latter's views on Christology (Burnham 2004; Grass 2012; see Gardiner 1951 for the Brethren's own perspective). Darby interpreted Newton's teaching as erroneous and ultimately contaminating the fledgling group with the kind of heresy that infected Christendom; the very thing Darby wanted to depart from. Darby's intervention produced the "Bethesda Circular", in which he wrote:

If this [Newton's teaching] be admitted by receiving persons from Bethesda, those doing so are morally identified with the evil, for the body so acting is corporately responsible for the evil they admit. If brethren think they can admit those who subvert the person and glory of Christ, and principles which have led to so much untruth and dishonesty, it is well they should say so, that those who cannot may know what to do (Darby 2010, 164).

The notion of evil, and separation from it, was now central to Darby's ecclesiological vision (Shuff 1997). His reaction to the Bethesda situation was a direct result of his deep concern with evil, and his fear that the new movement might be contaminated just as it was starting to flourish (Shuff 2005, 11). This was exacerbated by the apocalyptic fervor of the day, which prompted speculation that some events taking place were evidence that the "end times" were close at hand. The apostasy of the Church was believed to be such a sign, and understood to be unfolding before them, hence Darby's insistence on separation from it (Darby 2011, 244–47).

Following Darby's death, his successors continued to make separation a key doctrine. The American James Taylor Sr. (1870–1953), leader of the Brethren from 1908 until his death, stated:

Separation from the world is a basic administrative principle.... He [God] has carried the principle of separation right down to our time. We have it in 2 *Timothy*, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity," chapter 2: 19. It is

the principle of separation. I will never understand what God is at if I do not start there (Taylor Sr. 1963, 287–88).

His son, James Taylor Jr. (1899–1970), who became leader in 1959 following a leadership hiatus, further developed what his father had started, taking the doctrine of separation to a new level. Indeed, his emergence as the next world leader was very much based upon what he regarded as the truth of separation (Shuff 2005, 127). Leading the Brethren through the tumultuous cultural and political changes of the 1960s, through his ministry, Taylor Jr. introduced an unprecedented number of additional directives that would help to ensure separation was entrenched in virtually every aspect of the lives of the Brethren community.

The introduction of rules to which Brethren had to conform was considerable, and controversially included Brethren not being able to eat with those not in fellowship; no socializing with those not in fellowship; the prohibition of membership of professional societies or trade unions; and the banning of attending university. They were also expected not to use public hotels and restaurants. Moreover, Brethren were continually encouraged to develop their own businesses and employ fellow Brethren who were not self-employed.

Taylor Sr. and Taylor Jr. ensured more than any of the previous leaders that the doctrine of separation was to be applied to every detail of Brethren lives. Such acute separation, of course, did not come without controversy. The Brethren historian F. Roy Coad (1925–2011) argued that the exclusive and introversionist direction the Brethren were taking led them to teachings that were mystical in nature (Coad 1968, 210).

Despite the controversy that some of these changes attracted, they effectively served the purpose of providing tight boundaries between themselves and the outside world. That said, it did (and does) not mean that Brethren were forbidden to have contact with the outside world. Although encouraged to

fraternize as little as possible with outsiders, and instead only mix socially with those “in fellowship” (i.e., who attended the Lord’s Supper), Brethren often had contact with “worldly” people. This was for business reasons, including, for example, employing non-Brethren in their own businesses, and recruiting teachers from outside their own community for their private schools. Today the Brethren mostly live next door to non-members and not in isolation, generally having good relationships with neighbors.

## *II. Separation and the Role of the Family*

In terms of protecting and maintaining the new levels of separation introduced by the Taylors, the role and importance of the family became increasingly pivotal. If the preaching, teaching, and general counsel delivered by the world leader was to be properly implemented, then the responsibility lay not only with the leadership at local assembly level but with each and every Brethren family to make sure this was realized. That is not to say that the family was not held in high regard or that it lacked responsibility prior to this: the family always held a pre-eminent place in Brethren communities both theologically and ecclesiologically (this is in common with other introversionist sects such as the Amish: see Hurst and McConnel 2010).

In conversations with Brethren, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the family is regarded as a God-given and almost sacred entity. It is the place where living a holy life is put into practice, and where the codes of separation are imparted. The home is where safeguarding is provided, and the evils of the world can be avoided; where the moral economy of the Brethren is nurtured and developed. Moreover, the wider (global) assembly of Brethren is understood to be part of this family: an extended family. In a sense, the Brethren is one large family that protects and teaches “godly living” to its members from the cradle to



the grave. As Wilson rightly states, “The Brethren conceive of their assembly as a model for the individual household, and see their entire community as an extended family” (Wilson 2000, 6).

If the family unit is an example of the micro-social, then the assembly is the macro-social extended family. The family (micro and macro) is all the more important as it constitutes the focus of their social world. As the Brethren do not mix socially with non-members, family life and interaction with other Brethren families is actively encouraged. Rotations are designed to ensure that all Brethren participate in social activities together and avoid friendship cliques, with the focal point for such occasions often being around a shared meal. Such regular interactions facilitate the space to provide consistency in terms of informally working through practical aspects of Brethren life. This includes discussions about issues pertaining to separation that impinge upon or provide opportunities for immorality and evil to infiltrate their communities.

As noted above, one of the products of separation is that the Brethren community is tightly-bounded, with the importance of family absolutely paramount and a reflection of the wider community. Shuff notes,

The goal of isolating Brethren from cultural encroachment involved a progressive modification of the traditional gospel in such a way that separation from an evil world outside, rather than salvation from personal sins, became an increasingly dominant motif... (Shuff 2005, 176).

This should come as no surprise when one considers how seriously Brethren take the idea of evil. Evil is perceived as a real threat within Brethren communities and it is incumbent upon every member to both remove any possible threat of evil and to maintain what they regard as a pure and godly way of life. Ultimately, this can only be achieved by being separate from the world as much as practically possible.

With an understanding of the importance of separation for the Brethren in terms of the historical development and the status it has as a seminal and distinctive doctrine, attention will now turn specifically toward Brethren attitudes to developments in ICTs. Technology in general and specifically ICTs provide opportunities for separation to be breached. As Silverstone et al. note: ICTs “make the project of creating [or maintaining] ontological security particularly problematic...” (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 20). This, we shall see, is evident in analysis of key statements made by Brethren leaders on ICTs since their emergence in the early twentieth century.

Silverstone et al. outline four non-discrete transactional elements or phases at play in the moral economy of the household: appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley, 1992, 21). Appropriation refers to the way an object is appropriated at the point of sale and becomes a thing which is owned and authenticated; the passing over the boundary from the external to the internal in terms of use by the community/family. Objectification reveals itself in how the technology impacts the internal social environment. Incorporation refers to the way technologies are used, and how they function within the moral economy of the household/community. Finally, conversion refers to the relationship between the community/household and the outside world, and the changes that take place regarding the meaning of the technology as it is molded and converted by them. In the analysis of Brethren use of ICTs, these categories will help provide theoretical apparatus for understanding the shift in attitude toward ICTs.

### *III. Brethren and the Rejection of Information and Communication Technologies*

Suspicion of technology within the Brethren has been consistent throughout their relatively short history. A product of modernity, the Brethren have continually fought against the influence of that same modernity; this is probably best exemplified in their distrust and often rejection of various forms of ICTs. The early twentieth century saw the development and commercialization of the radio. The rapid proliferation of commercial radio stations in the 1920s, particularly in the United States of America, and the Royal Charter that established the British Broadcasting Company in 1927, ensured a bright future for public radio broadcasting. However, it became a focal point of criticism for Brethren leaders as it emerged as a significant communication technology during the early twentieth century.

Popular music and other unwanted influences could be heard through radio transmissions, and these were all thought to be detrimental to the spiritual development of the Brethren. Indeed, if such things were allowed in the household spiritual growth would be severely hindered (Taylor Sr. 1959, 154). This, of course, compromised the doctrine of separation, as it allowed the possibility of outside influences that were beyond the control of Brethren leaders to enter into the household, and therefore the wider assembly. There was no way to safeguard or filter radio content, and so it represented a grave threat to Brethren purity and separation from evil, and this could have a catastrophic impact on the moral standards of the wider Brethren community.

In 1925, James Taylor Sr. pronounced that the radio was antichristian:

Things are coming into believers' houses that are destructive to spiritual growth. Radio connections, for instance, letting the filth of the world into the house... (Taylor Sr. 1959, 154).

In 1932 he confirmed,

Well, the radio, I think, is an antichristian vehicle; it builds up what is antichristian. I have no doubt that it makes for the power of antichrist; it is that sort of thing, seeming to be inscrutable (Taylor Sr. 1966, 224).

The upshot of such a view was that the Brethren were not allowed to own or listen to the radio. The radio was a facilitator and conduit of filth that could enter the household; this would contaminate the home and was particularly detrimental to younger members who were more vulnerable to its influence. Vulnerability of the young is something that is keenly felt among Brethren. with directives and teaching delivered by the world leader periodically aimed at them (for example, B.D. Hales 2003a, 24–7).

Taylor Sr.'s pronouncements were some of the first definitive statements by a leader on ICTs as they emerged in the twentieth century. Moreover, they highlight two things: first, the importance of separation from the secular world as an integral part of Brethren ecclesiology and the danger ICTs present in threatening this; second, they also demonstrate how such technology is understood to be a vehicle for the Antichrist. In other words, ICTs can be manipulated by demonic agencies and have eschatological ramifications, which are a threat to the lives of those living within the Brethren community. More will be said on the eschatological aspect in due course.

Given the imperative to be separate from the world, it was no surprise that when the television arrived it too was banned. James Harvey Symington (1913–1987), world leader from 1970–1987, ministered that the TV was the lust of the eye and the flesh, and TV programs belonged to the world (Symington 1981, 169). In 1990, Symington's successor John Stephen Hales (1922–2002) claimed that the television was an extension of the radio, connecting it with what was antichristian (J.S. Hales 1990, 123).

If Taylor Sr.'s statements on the radio served as the first benchmark for Brethren attitudes toward emerging ICTs, then the other significant influence is that of Symington. A farmer, Symington was raised in North Dakota, USA, where the pace of life was far removed from the metropolitan bustle of large cities and the latest in scientific and technological innovation. However, his tenure as world leader coincided with the first mass production of computers in 1976–77. The rapid development of technology, and computers in particular, was heralded by *Time* magazine, which on the front cover of the first issue of 1983 declared the computer “machine of the year” (*Time* 1983). Some Brethren had started to use computers for their own businesses, and questions were being asked regarding boundaries: how far, if at all, should Brethren engage with such technological and scientific developments?

In the midst of these technological advances, Symington made recommendations that have become benchmarks as significant as Taylor Sr.'s comments on the dangers of the radio 50 years previously. In June 1982, at a series of meetings in Winnipeg, Canada, Symington expounded on the increasing danger of scientific progress, and related it directly to the activities of the “Man of Sin,” a term synonymous with the Antichrist. Talking in general terms about technological developments, and positioning them as contrary to godly living, Symington thought that scientific developments were not according to the teaching linked with piety (that of previous Brethren leaders), and referred to Taylor Sr.'s stance against the radio, appealing to Brethren not to depart from previous teaching (Symington 1982, 51).

With the utterance of these comments, Symington was both affirming the “recovery of the truth” that Taylor Sr. had expressed, and connecting them to contemporary forms of technological advances. Symington saw these latest developments as part of the same lineage as that of the radio. They possessed the same flaws; however, in essence, just as the radio was both antichristian and

a tool for the Antichrist (in Taylor Sr.'s words), so, according to Symington, was the gradual proliferation of technological advances that would increase rapidly prior to the Rapture (Symington 1982, 52). Radios and computers were specifically cited as examples.

Symington was convinced that the world was in the last days, and that what he believed to be the current dispensation was coming to an end (Symington 1982, 55). There were signs to affirm this, not least the advance of ICTs, which will be utilized by demonic powers. For Symington, the Man of Sin would be coordinating scientific developments and using them to both corrupt humanity and usher in the Great Tribulation (Symington 1982, 56–7). One of the ways he thought that technology would have a corrupting effect was through the freeing up of time due to the computerization of everyday tasks in business, which for him, can only produce idleness. With excess free time, Symington was worried that the Brethren would be distracted from serving God.

And if Brethren were not serving God, they would be serving the Devil, who introduces such seemingly harmless things that are actually counter to God (Symington 1982, 170). His response to ICTs was an unambiguous rejection of them. Throughout his tenure as leader, he repeatedly proclaimed the rejection of scientific developments (particularly computers), which epitomized the determination of humanity to reject God (Symington 1982, 110).

Symington's successor John Stephen Hales followed suit, reiterating and affirming the connection between the Man of Sin and ICTs, and the dangers that they posed to Brethren separation from the world and evil. On numerous occasions, he acknowledged Symington's intervention on scientific developments in 1982 (see J.S. Hales 1989, 126; 1990, 230; 1991, 19; 1993a, 24). At a meeting in 1989, he noted that he had not experienced the effect computers had in terms of the way they seemed to dominate everyday life (J.S. Hales 1989, 29). For J.S. Hales, recalling Taylor Sr., the computer was an

antichristian implement, which was also affirmed in the ministry of Symington in 1982. Indeed, for J.S. Hales, this was the final pronouncement on the subject (J.S. Hales 1989, 131).

However, this was not the final word on ICTs, as we shall see. Moreover, it is also true to say that under J.S. Hales' leadership the limited use of computers for business had been allowed, as he saw how rapidly the business world was evolving as to ICT use. Since his death, his son Bruce Hales has spoken about how his father oversaw the introduction of computers in his own business (B.D. Hales 2011, 19).

To this point, it is clear that the core belief of separation is the bedrock upon which decisions are made regarding ICTs. The doctrine of separation has both theological and ecclesiological consequences in the way the Brethren live their lives and relate to the world around them. In terms of Campbell's RSST framework, these are part of the history and tradition and core beliefs categories, which underpin attitudes toward emerging ICTs within the Brethren (Campbell 2010, 64–111). They demonstrate what is a consistent stance, at least in terms of proclamations by Brethren world leaders, against ICTs, from the radio through to the early iterations of the computer. However, things were to change when the current world leader Bruce Hales succeeded his father.

#### *IV. ICTs: A Means to an End*

When the son of J.S. Hales, Bruce David Hales (b.1953), succeeded his father as world leader of the Brethren in 2002, it was a very different world to that which James Symington had ministered to regarding technology 30 years previously. ICTs had become integral to business and education, as well as leisure. Many households in wider society had computers with access to the internet, and mobile phone technology had rapidly developed. With the first

mobile phone commercially available from 1992, and the subsequent exponential consumption of them, along with the ability to access the internet and take digital photographs, technological advances were putting pressure on the Brethren's ability to stay separate from the world.

Initially, Bruce Hales maintained the stance of previous leaders in terms of rejecting technology, stating that Symington's ministry in Winnipeg (1982) was an example of prophecy of the highest standing (B.D. Hales 2002, 355). As the current leader, Bruce Hales affirmed previous ministry and initially demonstrated little sign of departing from it. The television and radio remained banned, as were mobile phones and any device that had internet access. For Bruce Hales, mobiles are simply radios which he correlated with being a pipeline of filth, in the same sense that Taylor Sr. spoke about (B.D. Hales 2003b, 99); however, as we have already seen under the leadership of J.S. Hales, the use of computers for business was gradually being accepted, albeit in limited fashion. Bruce Hales had even suggested that it would be acceptable for Brethren businesses to use the computers of secular companies, so as to avoid owning them (B.D. Hales 2003b, 250).

It soon became clear, as some of the Brethren struggled to remain competitive in business, that utilizing ICTs would become essential if they were to remain separate from the world. Without being able to support themselves through their own independent businesses Brethren would be in danger of having to "go into the world" to find employment; thus, being reliant on the "world" for support. As such, the doctrine of separation would be compromised, undermining their ability to maintain purity and separation from evil as they saw it.

The widespread use of email as the default means of communication in the world of industry and business, as well as the necessity for all businesses to have a presence on the internet, were some of the reasons that ultimately forced Brethren leaders to reassess the situation regarding the use of this technology.



That said, throughout this period of negotiation Bruce Hales remained against the use of emails from a personal perspective (B.D. Hales 2010, 109). Thus, Brethren undertook the complex process of investigating ICTs to ascertain what might be acceptable within the parameters of their community norms and traditions.

In 2006, Bruce Hales with other leading brethren commissioned the setting up of National Office Assist—a company designed to both oversee the procurement and implementation of office computer hardware and software for the Brethren and the adaptation of it as necessary. This provided a way of not only making sure that Brethren used only computers and mobile phones that had been adapted and approved for use within the parameters of Brethren values, it also ensured that economically, Brethren money stayed within the community. National Office Assist changed to Onefocus, which was then subsumed into Universal Business Team (UBT) in September 2011. UBT has since developed its role as the mediator between the Brethren and a host of “providers” or “partners,” from car hire to financial services, as well as ICT companies that include Blackberry, Lenovo, and Ricoh, to name but a few. UBT is presented as a cutting-edge “blue-chip” company on its state-of-the-art website. It is interesting to note that there is no explicit mention of any connection to the Brethren.

What has prompted such a *seeming* reversal? During this period of commercial expansion, Bruce Hales was still ministering against the dangers that ICTs presented to the Brethren community world-wide, whilst also showing signs of what could be interpreted as compromise. In 2004, he suggested that there was a way to conduct business without having to rely on computers. He confirmed Symington’s stance from 22 years earlier, that God had shown that this was a significant matter and involved the Man of Sin (B.D. Hales 2004, 227). In other words, there were demonic influences behind the emergence of ICTs.

Four years later, however, Bruce Hales seemed to be offering some concessions on the possible use of computers, when he indicated that the Brethren could use them in order to be more efficient in their businesses (B.D. Hales 2009, 152). Bruce Hales was also keen to safeguard young people from the threat posed by ICTs. and spoke frequently of the need to protect them from their influence (2009, 321).

As highlighted earlier during the tenure of J.S. Hales, the reality of a shift toward the use of ICTs was already evident in Brethren communities. In private correspondence sent out to members in November 2005, that the author was privileged to have access to, the Brethren leadership agreed to allow the use of mobile car phones. The letter, signed by Brethren leaders, including Bruce Hales, stated the increasing difficulty in locating public pay telephones as the principal reason. These signals elements of the transactional system that Silverstone et al. suggest takes place in the negotiation of how technology produced in the “public world” might be considered by, in this case, the private moral economy of the Brethren community: appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 21).

Significant discussions and negotiations took place between senior Brethren leaders and advisors within Office Assist (a Brethren business) for a decision to be made that would enable the appropriation and adaptation of ICTs. In the eventual appropriation of what are essentially commodities as well as media technologies, the Brethren undertook a process of domestication in order that they could be *owned* and authenticated by the community in ways that they did not think compromise their morality.

From this perspective appropriation stands for the whole process of consumption as well as for that moment at which an object crosses the threshold between the formal and the moral economies (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley, 1992, 22).

To cross the threshold from wider society to the private moral economy of the Brethren, ICTs required careful consideration in consultation with previous teaching and, accordingly, the conversion of ICTs so to be suitable for consumption within the community (see examples below). Thus, this was not a passive process, but an intentional one that had at its core the safeguarding of the community. Conversion and appropriation highlight the dynamic and intentional processes that take place between the external world and the internal social sphere of the Brethren community.

After considerable deliberation, personal computers were first made available to Brethren in 2008, with Lenovo being the preferred brand of choice. The selection of both hardware and software was undertaken after extensive research by National Office Assist, thereby enabling them to be more easily domesticated. That same year saw the introduction of mobile phones; however, several caveats applied: SMS text messaging was disabled along with digital cameras and the ability to use the internet, a clear case of adaptation and conversion. The emergence of this technology had radically altered social conditions forcing the Brethren leadership to reconsider the use of ICTs.

Campbell notes,

If the technology is viewed as valuable by the religious community but has some highly problematic aspects, it may require the technology's reconstruction, where innovation takes place to make the technology more in line with community beliefs and accepted practices (Campbell 2011b, 61).

For the Brethren, the technology was valuable in the sense that it improved business practice, helping to not only provide the potential of efficiency savings but also, more importantly, maintain a competitive edge with secular businesses. It was also utilized for pragmatic purposes as can be seen with the reasons given for why mobile car phones were introduced: an increasing

scarcity of public pay phones. But the dangers remained, thus conversion and adaption of the technology was necessary.

In appropriating this technology within the community, it was objectified in its usage. That is to say, in the prescribed use of the technology for business and education, ICTs became an integrated part of the life of the community: technologies essential to the running of businesses and schools. As it is gradually incorporated, the functions of it become apparent.

To become functional a technology has to find a place within the moral economy of the [Brethren] household, specifically in terms of its incorporation into the routines of daily life (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 24).

The ability to be able to scrutinize the technology, and negotiate how it might be used and adapted for use among the Brethren, has been vital for the appropriation, adoption, and approval of ICTs. Most significantly this has applied to the internet, considered the biggest danger in terms of potentially undermining Brethren morality and purity. Essentially the issue lay in the Janus-faced quality of the internet. On the one hand, Brethren quickly came to see the value of being able to utilize it for business and education purposes; on the other hand, unfiltered, the internet presented a vast range of immoral material that could seriously undermine Brethren purity. Unchecked, the internet (as with many scientific developments) was seen as a catastrophic media utilized by the Man of Sin for evil purposes. Bruce Hales condemned it, alluding to the words of Taylor Sr. about the radio to drive home his point that the Internet was a torrent of filth that is far more pervasive than anything before it. Indeed, it could be likened to a labyrinth characterized by evil (B.D. Hales 2011, 128).

That said, whilst Bruce Hales has consistently ministered restraint and caution regarding IT, under his jurisdiction, he has allowed the introduction of the internet in Brethren communities. Indeed, the Brethren even have their own website (Plymouth Brethren Christian Church 2021).

#### *V. Compromise, or Safeguarding the Community?*

Under Bruce Hales' tenure, the Brethren have gradually implemented ICTs to the point that they are a part of everyday life for the Brethren community. Most Brethren over the age of 18 have a mobile phone, computers are widely used in the home, in business, and in Brethren schools. Of course, safeguarding is carefully implemented with the use of web filtering software, the latest addition being Streamline3, to try to ensure that members of the community are not exposed to what are deemed to be immoral influences. Streamline3 is the name of internet filtering software designed by UBT that offers a number of extra levels of protection. One of them is the ability to take random screenshots of computers that are then recorded in a central database, and to which gatekeepers are able to scrutinize for breaches of community norms.

On the face of it, this would seem that the Brethren have surrendered the values, ministry and, indeed, the "truth" revealed by previous Ministers of the Lord in the Recovery: the Taylors and Symington in particular. Given the seeming about turn in the appropriation of ICTs does this mean that Bruce Hales and the Brethren leadership are in direct contradiction with previous directives that have been recognized as "prophecy at the highest level" and something that Brethren "cannot return to?"

I would argue that this is a simplistic question that fails to appreciate the complexities that the rapid advance of technology has brought. It also fails to take into consideration the ability to shape technology in a way that makes it

acceptable to particular religious groups the facility for which was unavailable, or at least, primitive in application previously. When Taylor Sr. made his pronouncements on the radio, a blanket ban was the most pragmatic way to deal with the threats it presented, as radios could not be filtered for content. It made most sense to simply prohibit the use of them. This still applies today. Specific radio stations deemed to be unacceptable could be blocked; however, there is still no ability to filter out programs on a particular station. The same applies to the television; hence, both remain prohibited. This is not the case with the latest ICTs and specifically the internet. In recent years, sophisticated software has been developed that provides censorship of undesirable content on the internet.

Since 2011 UBT has been the first line of defense in gatekeeping and safeguarding in terms of initially approving and appropriating technology at the moment it “crosses the threshold between the formal and the moral economies” (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 22). Prior to the procurement of any product UBT vet and decide which ones are suitable in terms of appropriation and conversion so as to provide a service for Brethren communities that offers minimal danger from the world and reducing possible breaches to their community.

The fact that it is reasonably straightforward to filter information and make safe the internet for Brethren users still does not address the issue regarding the break with the previous tradition laid down in the benchmark directives given by the Taylors and Symington. Nor does it resolve the comments made about these statements being “prophecy at the highest level,” or “something we cannot return to.” However, it is contended that the embracing of ICTs by the Brethren under Bruce Hales does not necessarily represent an undermining of previous ministry. Bruce Hales is consistent in his denouncement of ICTs and particularly the internet. There may be some concessions as highlighted above, but essentially Bruce Hales is damning it, believing it to be a tool of Satan. For

him, and the Brethren, Satan is behind what is described as the “electronic age,” which in turn, directly links to the “Man of Sin” that Symington ministered about (2004d, 252).

It is the Man of Sin who is malevolently employing the internet for his own evil purposes. There are serious eschatological reasons for being suspicious of technology, and Bruce Hales has not changed his view on this: if anything, it has strengthened it. But what Bruce Hales has had to deal with is the threat to separation and the infiltration of evil into Brethren communities, as well as the economic pressures. Examining Bruce Hales’ written ministry, it seems reasonable to conclude that he has cautiously accepted the use of ICTs within the Brethren as essential to protecting the doctrine of separation. To compromise on this is to undermine the very foundations of Brethren ecclesiology and theology.

For some, particularly ex-members, this is deemed to be a compromise on previous ministry. However, this is a straw man argument that fails to see the bigger picture regarding the sustainability of Brethren community, life, and culture. Furthermore, Bruce Hales would not deny that Symington’s words were of the highest level of prophecy. For Bruce Hales, Symington’s utterances have stood the test of time (see vols 3, 15, 21, 22, 28, 29, 30 in his printed ministry). ICTs are the tool of the Man of Sin and the internet certainly can be a “pipeline of filth” if handled without caution. Instead, reasonable steps should be taken to safeguard against such filth.

The internet, in this sense, is understood as “a mode of knowing,” as Campbell notes citing Ferre’s typology of media. That is, for the Brethren, it is not a neutral media (2010, 41–63; Ferre 2003). It has an immoral disposition that is manipulated by Satan. Unchecked, it opens up that which is morally antithetical to Brethren values. The internet is not to be used for leisure but only business and education. It is a means to an end: that end being the maintenance of the

doctrine of separation through which moral purity can be nurtured and maintained, whilst evil is kept at bay.

### *Conclusion*

This article has demonstrated that the Brethren appropriation of ICTs is not simply a case of re-writing or ignoring previous teaching that jettison the ministry of former leaders. Under the tenure of Bruce Hales, the Brethren have sought to carefully meet the demands of a rapidly changing society driven by technological advances. The social conditions have changed to such an extent that the very foundations and principles upon which the Brethren exist are directly under threat. The key doctrine of separation is at risk due to the economic pressures exerted from the wider world.

As a “community of resistance” (Castells 1997, 65), the Brethren have attempted to minimize the intrusion of evil, and sought to maintain strict community boundaries. As a moral economy the Brethren resist, reconstruct, and culturally appropriate ICTs in the macro and micro familial context. The assembly worldwide is the macro household with the leadership delineating behavioral boundaries that are to be respected by the family unit, thus ensuring standards, at least in theory, are met. Technology undergoes a conversion (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 25) as it is culturally appropriated into the Brethren “family” through the removal of morally alienating capabilities. The alignment of ICTs with moral boundaries alleviates ontological insecurity by providing protection against the Man of Sin and associated existential angst brought about through the Brethren’s dispensational eschatology.

Brethren culture is dependent on separation, and without adherence to this doctrine their culture is fatally undermined. Bruce Hales is aware that, paradoxically, Brethren have to engage with ICTs to remain separate. To



suggest that Bruce Hales has contradicted previous ministry prohibiting ICTs, although reasonable, is too simplistic. The risk of resisting ICTs would prove to be catastrophic: Bruce Hales has found a way to accommodate previous teaching. In an ideal world, judging from his consistent view opposing technology, Bruce Hales would rather preserve the prohibition of ICTs; however, there is the need, for pragmatic reasons and economic expedience, to compromise and carefully allow censured use of ICTs.

Bruce Hales admits that the pace with which technology has advanced could not have been predicted (B.D. Hales 2011, 247); but despite its rapid advancement Brethren must not allow it to damage or desecrate the household. For Bruce Hales, maintaining purity is of paramount importance and Brethren are to keep assessing themselves in terms of making sure that influences that could lead to defilement are rigorously kept in check (B.D. Hales 2011, 247).

The pace of change may have surprised Bruce Hales, however, and along with it have come numerous positive possibilities to “take measures” in controlling it, hitherto unavailable, which alleviate against the defilement of the household and thus the family. ICTs pose a complex set of problems for Brethren, in terms of how to regulate them—culturally appropriate and (re-)construct them—in order to protect community boundaries (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992, 20). This non-negotiable compromise is essential for the continued life and culture of the Brethren.

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