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Radio and the Christian Broadcaster

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There is nothing new about man's using the air waves to communicate with others. He has been sending signals, coded messages, voice messages, and pictures across the countryside for years and more recently with satellite communications even across the oceans. The intense desire to communicate via other air ways has led to a variety of inventions which have made it possible for man to circle the globe in seconds, to relay information from outer space, to watch political and athletic events in other countries while they are taking place. There is a sense of "being there," in on the action.

Christians and other religious groups have with varying degrees of success, used the media of broadcasting for years. Some with much success and others with less success. Most of the action has been in the form of using radio or television as an extension of the pulpit. Much of this type of programming is found on commercial stations and is often aired during the "ghetto hours," as Harold J. Ellens calls it in his book, Models of Religious Broadcasting. By this he means the hours when the least number of people are listening.

Christian radio stations are located on both the FM and AM band. Some of them are commercial, some non-commercial, some educational. Not all Christian radio

stations have the same goal in mind. I experienced at a recent Midwest Religious Broadcasters Convention, that their primary goal is to propagate the Gospel and to save souls for Jesus Christ in a narrow or restricted sense. This is a worthy goal but there is more to this life than preparing for the next. Reformed Christians have always been concerned not only with the salvation of sinners but also with the sanctification and edification of saints within their callings. Reformed Christians have always been concerned with "redeeming this world" for Christ and that means more than preaching the gospel. It means taking all aspects of the broadcast day and attempting to put Reformed thinking into action. Reformed Christians have always stood on the premise that God is sovereign and that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe. To translate this into day to day broadcasting activity is a challenge and a responsibility a Reformed Christian radio station should accept.

Before a Christian radio station begins to broadcast it must determine the type of audience or "market" available to it. Such areas of concern are whether the area is predominantly Christian, whether the intent of the station is to "feed the flock" or "seek the lost sheep", whether the station is interested in a teaching and preaching minis-

try or in fulfilling the "cultural mandate", whether the programming of a station is to be determined by listener preference or based on what a station thinks is best for the listeners. To arrive at decisions concerning those statements one must determine the needs and values of a given community. Does the audience feel a need for Christian radio? Are they interested in hearing church services broadcast on Sundays? Are they interested in a daily format that gives them "sacred" music and meditations throughout the day? Is there a desire to enrich their lives with good music—"sacred" and "non-sacred"—, with educational specials featuring lectures, panels, dramatic presentations and interviews? Is there a desire to have the news presented in such a way that it is evident that Christians are preparing the newscast?

To be effective in Christian radio it is necessary to keep the audience in mind, for a well-planned program without listeners profits little except possibly to inflate the ego of the producer. However, to broadcast only what the listening audience wants is an exercise in futility, for it is impossible to please everyone and even if you could the result would be bland mediocrity.

Allow me to use a few illustrations to show what can be included in a program log which reaches a predominantly Christian audience. This type of audience appreciates programming of worship services, which as Ellens indicates in his book is a type of "pulpit extension." The purpose here is not evangelism but a "feeding of the flock." This is a legitimate activity though not to be confused with missionary outreach. When churches desire to use their air time for evangelism, I think the format should be changed to attract the unbeliever.

The Christian broadcaster must also consider the use and type of music played over the air. To program a day with meaningless, I-centered "sacred" music may pacify the listener but does little to enrich his life or glorify God. On the other hand, to program an entire day with music from the great religious classics would soon diminish the listeners audience. There must

be a healthy balance, the music lyrics must be God glorifying and not man centered, the music itself must meet the standards of good musicianship, and it must be chosen with listeners in mind. For example, it could be counter-productive to play contemporary Christian rock at eight in the morning when mothers are getting their children off to school. Excedrin headaches would develop both at home and at the station, I'm sure. But at the same time a Christian station should be willing to introduce contemporary Christian music even though it may not please the ears of all the listeners. I say this for two reasons: (1) the adults should have some exposure to that type of music, and (2) the youth audience must be kept in mind as well. And if a station can program contemporary Christian music and abide by its basic philosophy of broadcasting, it has an obligation to do so.

Another area of concern to the Christian broadcaster is the reporting of news. Because Christian radio stations are often so limited in funds that a full-time news staff cannot be put on the payroll, it is necessary to employ other means of getting the news, and the easiest method is to hook up to a teletype wire service. This source, however, leaves the news broadcaster with out a prepared point of view. His only substantial method of control is to edit a story by deletion. Non-Christian and particularly commercial news services often thrive on sensationalism in writing the news. The use of descriptive, colorful adjectives may be avoided in rewriting a story without damage to the content. Good taste and sensitivity to the listener's ear are essential. It may be necessary to rewrite the story so that the negative "bad," side is toned down. A commercial news story might also be given a different tone with a substituted lead-in. An illustration to point up such an incident might be that rather than reporting an accident in the following manner: "The mangled body of a local man was found in the cockpit of his crashed plane..." could read as follows "The life of a local man was taken in a light

plane crash...." If we believe that Christ is sovereign over all, then our news reporting must be more than "rip and read." It must reflect an honest attempt to put the news within a Christian perspective and in keeping with the Biblical teaching of the Lordship of Christ.

Improvements in the station programming often require changes in the format and/or content of the daily log. These changes must be carefully considered, for there is risk involved. An educational station has certain restrictions placed on it. Because a station is assigned an educational frequency, a certain percentage of the programming must be educational. However, a station also has an obligation to the FCC to abide by the original or amended intent of programming. This "intent of program" is determined by the station at the time of license application and determination is made by ascertaining the needs and interests of the public being served by the station. When a station wishes to change the programming, care should be taken not to violate the original intent. If the intent of programming is to change, the FCC should be notified and permission received before such changes are made. A case in point is that of a station in the East which filed an original intent to broadcast primarily a classical music format. After several years of service to the community the station decided to change to a rock music format. Because the station neglected to survey the community and did not file a change of intent with the FCC, community action groups challenged the renewal of the station license. This kind of risk borders on foolishness.

Let's assume that the basic intent of program is not changed but that the station wishes to program material that may offend some of the listeners. This is risk of a different sort. Presumably a Christian station will not program to offend its listeners but listeners may be offended anyway. At this point the station must determine whether it intends to program only for the satisfaction of its listeners or whether it has the courage to program material which is

thought provoking and may even be controversial.

Allow me to illustrate. It is possible that within the greater Reformed circle of listeners, not everyone will agree on all points of doctrine. So, a speaker comes along with a different view or perspective, though still Reformed. Though it may bother some listeners, I think the station should present his point of view.

Another illustration could be drawn from the area of music. There are few general audiences that appreciate opera. Though it may be fool-hardy for a young radio station to program an hour a day of operatic music, that station should introduce operative numbers into its programming to broaden the musical appreciation of its listening audience.

To further illustrate the point. Several years ago, such musicals as Tell It Like It Is, Godspell, etc. were "verboden" in much of the Christian community. Today many works such as these are used by stations and they are filling a need of the audience. I think stations should be willing to take a risk and air such material providing the contents are compatible with the station's policy and principles. It may be a sad commentary on a station which waits until all music is accepted by the community before daring to air it. Stations should attempt to lead the community as well as provide for its needs and interests. A Christian radio station has an obligation to its basic premise, to its original or amended intent of programming, and to its community of listeners; however, a Christian, educational station also has an obligation to provide programs which are thought-provoking and stimulating, programs which will call for at least a mental and/or emotional response if not a verbal one.

A Reformed Christian broadcaster and station are concerned with the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ, which implies also a developing listening audience. Whether it be in programming, broadcasting, or management, these truths are the underlying pillars upon which the day to day affairs of a station must be structured.