

How Talk Radio Hurts Christians

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Talk Radio is a big deal. More and more stations give large chunks of time to discussions of political and social issues from a single ideological viewpoint, right or left.

Discussion is good. Democracy thrives on the free exchange of ideas and an informed public. But programs that push just one side of an argument become more and more shrill. Since people usually tune to their favorite talker, they hear only one side.

For Christians, this is troubling. Jesus warns about our words and language; how we hear (Matt. 5:37, 12:35-37). He calls us to pay attention to the ways our minds and attitudes are shaped.

As kingdom Christians, we want an informed worldview as part of holistic discipleship. Are we however more influenced by our favorite radio talker than by Scripture, Christian reading, or small-group interaction?

Careful How You Listen!

Jesus said, “Consider carefully how you listen” (Luke 8:18). This applies to radio as well as to other listening. If we consider talk radio from the angle of Christian discipleship, we see that it raises several red flags.

First, *talk radio preaches a political ideology that twists the gospel*. Whether right or left, most talk shows promote narrow and sometimes extreme views. The hosts say what they do because they see the world through red or blue colored glasses. If you know the radio talkers’ political views, you already know what they will say on any issue. The same arguments and slogans repeat over and over. Talk radio hosts are totally predictable because they are *ideologically committed*.

Christians are committed, too—to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. This means we never fully accept *any* political ideology. The gospel judges all political theories. This is part of the wonder of our ever-relevant Master.

In today’s environment, talk radio feeds a misinformed public, not an informed one. Listeners often do not know—or don’t care—that they hear only one side, thus reinforcing their prejudices rather than challenging them.

The harm of one-sided bias is even bigger if the talker claims to be a Christian. “Christian” radio hosts really think their political ideology is biblical, so they easily confuse politics with the gospel. Scripture is twisted to support a political theory rather than judging it.

Pastor Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg Church near Dayton, Ohio, finds that so-called “Christian” talk radio alienates non-Christians, hurting the church’s evangelism. “The ‘Christian’ extreme radio pundits of the airwaves proclaim God’s anointed and defame the

heretical,” says Slaughter. “This spirit of disdain and exclusion prevents many outsiders from experiencing the resurrected Christ and drives some seeking people” away.

Christian talk radio often links revival with political ideology. A real revival, it is claimed, will mean the triumph of one’s pet politics. This is confusing and misleading, if not idolatrous. When God sends deep revival it judges all our biases, idols, and ideologies. It gives us new lenses that help us see through one-sided arguments.

Narrow political bias sometimes colors news reporting, as well. Sampling Christian stations, I often find the news slanted toward the political views of the stations’ owners.

Beyond Either/Or

A second problem: *Talk radio uses misleading either-or categories*. Generally it sees the world in stark black and white, pitting the unquestioned “truth” of one’s opinions against all others. The lens is not the biblical one of God’s truth versus evil, but a political one of left versus right—“free-market capitalism” versus “socialism” or “the nanny state,” for example.

Christians fed a high-fat diet of talk radio risk becoming ideologically one-sided, spiritually callous, and intellectually lazy. Kingdom Christians see beyond the rhetoric of “knee-jerk conservatives” and “wooly-headed liberals.” They see through ideological bias because they stand in a different place—not right or left, and not just in the middle. They stand, as it were, on the mountain of Jesus’ key kingdom teachings, as in Matthew 5-7. They look through the lens of kingdom hope, grounded in the full biblical revelation and promise.

The Mind of Christ?

Third, *talk radio often uses abusive language contrary to the spirit of Jesus*. This undermines understanding and compassion. Name-calling inoculates listeners against hearing what others are saying. It feeds prejudice against people rather than clarifying issues.

Radio talkers often use sarcasm and even defamatory language against political figures. This is condemned in Scripture and has no place in Christian discourse. I once heard a “Christian” radio host sarcastically ridicule the U.S. First Lady, claiming she was mainly interested in clothes.

Such language feeds an unbiblical view of public figures. Public service is hard. It is full of temptations and may attract people for the wrong reasons. Yet many in public positions are conscientious and hardworking, with a passion for justice—true “public servants.” They dedicate their lives to the good of society, not just themselves. Such people merit encouragement, recognition, and prayer.

The Bible says: Speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling, be gentle, show every courtesy to everyone (paraphrasing Titus 3:2). Pray and intercede “for everyone,” especially for “all who are in high positions,” we are told (1 Tim. 2:1-2). “Pay to all what is due them—taxes

to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (Rom. 13:7).

Leaders must be held accountable and may be criticized when they are dishonest or fail to “maintain justice” (Isa. 56:1). But this rules out ridicule, slander, and name-calling.

Sarcasm is easy, but lazy. It is the opposite of reflective thought, compassion, and careful listening, which requires concentration and self-denial. Christians should be a force for civility, courtesy, and kindness, promoting civil discourse. This does three things: It facilitates understanding, it helps us grow in grace, and it is a witness for Jesus.

Putting Others First

Fourth, *most talk radio promotes a me-first attitude, blinding us to the rest of the world*. The gospel calls us to compassion and concern for the whole earth, especially the poor and oppressed. Yet the big issue in talk radio is: How is this touching *me*? How am *I* being hurt or burdened or taxed?

Talk radio says: You are the victim. You should be outraged. This shrinks the world to me and my concerns. The gospel expands our circle to embrace all peoples and nations, and the church worldwide. Jesus calls us to look to *others* who are victims—the suffering and oppressed of the world. The mind of Christ means looking “not to [our] own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

Finally, *talk radio fills us with ideas and attitudes that draw us away from Christ* rather than closer to him. It often stirs up anger, self-pity, arrogance, or even hate, not compassion, humility, patience, gentleness—fruit of the Spirit.

Talk radio can harden our hearts toward people we dislike or are different. All the more when the views are filtered through a political bias that distorts others’ views, or presents them only in part, or out of context.

Questions for Christian Conscience

How then shall we listen? Here are three key questions for Christian conscience:

1. Does my listening encourage me to have more love toward those I disagree with?
2. Does it help me see both sides of complex issues?
3. Does it help me understand the concerns and views of people who live in other lands and cultures?

Every area of our lives—our hearing, thoughts, attitudes, *without exception*—are part of Christian discipleship.

How then can we live in the public square?

As an antidote to the world's ways, we can cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in Christian community. We can build relationships with people of differing social and political views, and with Christians in other cultures. We can make an effort to get news and opinion from relatively unbiased sources, or from a variety of sources, as an ideological check and balance.*

I have said nothing about TV, where the same issues apply. In some ways radio is the greater problem, though, because we can listen while we drive, work around the house, or perhaps do our jobs. In this sense, radio is more pervasive.

Jesus said, "Consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18). ###

* To my mind, the most objective news reporting currently available in the U.S. is the *PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. Usually at least two sides of major issues are discussed. Lehrer, though not a Christian, is the grandson of J. B. Chapman, a Church of the Nazarene founder and general superintendent.