

A fire and brimstone church leader is preaching that technology is the instrument of the devil, while actually making profits off it on the side.

Bruce David Hales is an accountant, furniture salesman and Exclusive Brethren boss. The elusive Brethren leader jetted into Melbourne to preach to his converted, pulling out all stops to avoid being seen by prying eyes and camera lenses.

What Hales actually says within windowless meeting halls defies belief. A recent ministry from Hales shocked the ex-Brethren community worldwide - the sermon addressing Hales hatred of the internet.

“Look how the world has degraded itself,” he said. “It's now a torrent, isn't it? Just a torrent of filth, a torrent, unstoppable torrent. Why cater, to the riches of these men who are going to hell? Why subscribe, why in any way, let yourself come under the power of wicked men who are making their billions, and they're going to hell?”

Hales actually rejoiced the tragic passing of Apple founder Steve Jobs, slamming the computers he created and calling them instruments of hell.

“A brilliant man, but he's devoted his brilliance to creating instruments of hell. And god takes him away, I've got no doubt god took him away in his wrath. So we rejoice in that, we rejoice in that, when god acts against evil men.”

But here's where the duplicity kicks in - this revered world leader is actually selling these so-called ‘instruments of hell’. The Hales family company UBT - Universal Business Team - sells phones, laptop computers and tablets. Some of the price tags rival even what the manufacturers charge, and yes the Hales hellish instruments come with access, albeit restricted, to that torrent of filth - the internet.

Like many former Brethren around the world, Peter Flynn is shocked and devastated. “It’s total hypocrisy. The comments that he made about what everybody believes to be Steve Jobs, who died tragically of cancer, to say that god took him away in his wrath because he sold or invented ‘instruments of hell’. The three words that come to my mind is arrogance, cruelty, and hypocrisy,” Flynn said. “You know it’s appalling to me. This man is completely out of control, and he's doing an enormous amount of damage, not only to his own flock, if you like, but to his own reputation. I just don’t know where it’s going to end.” The website is New Zealand-based, selling to Australian congregations.

The high end Sony Vaio laptop sells for NZ\$4715 on Hales’s website. At Sony NZ the same computer is \$1215 cheaper at \$3499.95.

Hales’s HP ProBook 6560B sells for \$2175 - a 70 per cent mark-up on the same unit available for around NZ\$1279 - \$900 cheaper. Hales offers an Iconia Tablet PC for a princely \$1545, while the manufacturer's recommended retail price is just \$1199 - a \$346 saving. Flynn says he is ripping off his own flock. The greed is one thing, but for Flynn, and for many former Brethren families, the hurt runs much deeper.

“The thing that really upsets me is that only a few years ago if somebody, a member of the Brethren, had a mobile phone, or a personal computer of some sort, even something that had only the fraction of the power that it has today, they would have been kicked out. And they were (kicked out) and people’s lives have been ruined by being thrown out for having something like that.”

Ex member Craig Hoyle was excommunicated for being gay - cut off from his entire family, thrown out of his home, and dismissed from his job.

The Brethren can be brutal in the extreme towards those who don't follow its rules of the day. The banned list is long and strange and edicts include no eating with outsiders, no university, no shorts, no TV, no radio, no voting. Ex Brethren like Flynn sympathise with those still in the 'cult', forced to listen to Hales's heartless rants.

“To me it is a tragedy that someone who purports to be the leader of a Christian church is in fact telling his flock and talking to his flock in anything but Christian terms. He seems to have no ability to even have any human empathy, let alone Christianity. In talking about Steve Jobs, or anybody else that he doesn't like, he asserts that God has taken this man away in his wrath - what an arrogant thing to say. What a uncaring thing to say for the leader of a Christian church,” he said.

“The Brethren have always been a very strict and a closed group, but over the years there have been some very genuine Christian people among them, and I really wonder what some of those people think when they hear Bruce Hales talk like that. I would like to think that they too would be horrified.”

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