

Is Social Media Our Ministry's Friend?

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I wrote last week about my enthusiasm for online ministry, and my view that one good result of the current crisis is that it has forced us to sharpen our online presence—while it has also given us the opportunity to do so.

This is not to say, however, that there is nothing worrisome about the current approach that many are taking to online ministry.

One trend that has been very striking to me is how churches have relied on posting their messages and services on Facebook and YouTube.

I am an enthusiastic supporter of this concept in terms of making the content available and interacting with the unbelieving world. I definitely think that we should make use of these outlets for as long as we can—“redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16).

However, I am severely skeptical of depending upon these websites as trustworthy channels for Biblical communication for much further into the future.

Why you ask? To answer with another question from the pen of Isaac Watts:

“Is this vile world a friend to grace,
to help me on to God?”

The cautions against taking such an approach can be seen all around us, like flashing yellow (or even red) lights.

I confess that I am not an expert in technology or the trends on social media, but it does not take too much foresight to see which way the cultural winds are blowing. Just recently there have been two chilling examples.

One relates to Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, who announced casually that the website would be pulling down announcements of rallies against state shutdowns, labeling them as “harmful misinformation.”

Zuckerberg did not challenge the accuracy of the details supplied. He also did not offer his credentials to evaluate public policy during a pandemic. But in our current state of dystopia, labeling such posts as “harmful misinformation” and removing them from public view just seemed like a good idea for the world's most influential website.

Facebook later clarified that only illegal rallies would be banned.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the case of YouTube repeatedly removing a video of California Drs. Dan Erickson and Artin Massihi speaking at a press conference—providing alternate views regarding a proper response to the coronavirus pandemic. Here were licensed physicians holding a formal discussion—which was censored by the

operators of the world's most significant video-sharing website “for violating YouTube’s Community Guidelines.”

So, apparently, such social media sites are in the business of arbitrating truth (not simply judging facts) and deciding what we will be allowed to watch, hear and read based on their operators’ worldviews. Keep in mind that these are matters of legitimate opinion—not of vulgarity or obscenity. And these two illustrations only scratch the surface. We have all heard of people being forbidden from posting to Facebook for a variety of reasons.

In fact, on Wednesday of this week, Facebook sent me three notifications telling me frantically—as if I would be relieved to know—that a story I passed along last week from the Christian legal organization Liberty Counsel was “rated partly false.” Space does not allow a complete rehearsal of the details but, needless to say, I was unimpressed with the sanctioned critique of the article—and never asked for their opinion to begin with!

Do we truly expect these kinds of websites to continue as our primary vehicles for the proclamation of Biblical truth? If physicians can be censored, how long before such standards will be routinely applied to pastors?

We in the Christian community must seek or create more reliable means of broadcasting truth through the Internet.

Personally, I have found SermonAudio.com to be an incredible blessing, and I recently launched my own page there (SermonAudio.com/pscharf).

I was first introduced to this amazing resource by Dr. David Brown of First Baptist Church in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, when I served as his pastoral assistant. He was an early adopter of online ministry in general and of SermonAudio in particular, joining it in 2003—three years after it launched.

That connection led me to recommend it to Dr. John Whitcomb later that year, and I have overseen the Whitcomb Ministries page on SermonAudio ever since. We are now nearing one million sermon downloads there.

In addition to having a distinctively Christian focus, SermonAudio connects your content to a built-in audience that is searching for new material and offers a wide range of easy-to-use resources. It is amazing to see how the site has grown over the years that I have been involved with it.

There are other alternatives for accomplishing the same goals, and it is time that we begin to investigate them.

If something like the current shutdowns are initiated again—which many believe we may reasonably anticipate—we have no guarantee that communicating through secular social media will continue to be an option.

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