

Two Years Later: Where Are We Now?

(Part 2)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

“Two weeks to flatten the curve.”

If that infamous line from 2020 still makes you grit your teeth, you’re not the only one.

But here’s the real issue that we as church leaders should be focused on: How have our churches and ministries handled the last two years’ worth of unprecedented opportunities?

Yes, granted, these years have also been fraught with peril, and none of us had ever “passed *this way before*” (Josh. 3:4). We might even well be shown grace for mistakes made, or decisions that we regret, from two years ago at this time. If we are still in the same holding pattern 24 months later, however, there may be a serious problem. In fact, I would submit that our focus ought to be on the *next* crisis, not the *last* one. From my humble view of the world, it is not a matter of *if* such a thing is going to happen again, but *when* it is going to happen.

I don’t know what form that crisis will take and, granted, it may be of such a nature that will be outside or beyond any preparations we endeavor to make. However, all of us should be using this time to allow for “iron (to sharpen) iron” (Prov. 27:17). We should want to be in the best position possible to minister to hurting and confused people—and even to address the substance of any forthcoming crises head-on.

I left off last time by sharing a few things of which I am firmly convinced. Here is another one: I am firmly convinced that over the last two years the nature of ministry has changed a great deal—likely forever.

Now, don’t get me wrong. The fundamental, Biblical requirements for the church have not, and will never, change. But some of the means by which we may effectively reach our communities with the eternal truths of Scripture have changed, and probably never will return to *the way things used to be*. So, the question is, How are we adapting to these changes?

Many of us have made real changes—sometimes drastic changes—to our ministries in response to the pandemic. But have we taken the time to evaluate the results of these changes—or have they simply become a new rut which now catches all available energy? Have we asked ourselves if the things we attempted in response to COVID-19 are still needed, or if they were ever even effective at all? Even more importantly, do they have us poised to meet the challenge of future crises?

I mentioned last time that, in our own service with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, we used the initial phase of the pandemic, when we could not be in churches for several

weeks, to strengthen our ministry in the areas of communications and technology. This, in essence, gave us the opportunity—born out of necessity—to do things we really should have been doing all along anyway.

I don't think that our experience was uncommon in this regard. Technology is the area where I have noticed the biggest difference in the churches in which we minister. Pre-pandemic, probably most churches recorded my messages on audio. A handful recorded them on video, and quite a few did no recording at all.

These days, I have to assume that I will be recorded on video almost every time I speak—and very often it is by live stream.

Now, that has an impact upon my preaching and teaching because every word that I say, and every multi-media slide that I show, is immediately and forever released in public, and can never be edited or retrieved.

I wonder, however, if I may ask a few questions about this practice. First of all, is this really wise? Is it effective? For some, the answer is surely yes. In fact, they were doing this long before the shutdowns of 2020. Others, however, may want to reevaluate their situations.

I want to ask this gently, but clearly: Is a grainy phone video of a church service, with muffled sound recorded off the loud speaker, a really good testimony for the gospel? Do we really want these productions bouncing around cyberspace until kingdom come? Are popular social media sites really the best place on which to post them?

When I had the opportunity to teach online several years ago, it forced me to develop a philosophy for my use of technology. These principles govern what I do now, for instance, on my page at SermonAudio.com/pscharf:

- Good written communications are better than poor-quality audio.
- Good-quality audio is better than poor-quality video.
- A good audio slideshow is better than a poor-quality preaching video.
- Finally, a good-quality audio is better than a good-quality video—with bad audio.

This simple paradigm gives me hope that I can be effective in my use of media— at virtually no cost—in today's world. Maybe I will never be the next Dr. D. James Kennedy, and do not have access to a professional recording studio, but I certainly can write columns!

Fundamentalists have argued for years that the means by which we communicate truth is of utmost importance. We need to apply these standards now to the methods we are using—in the wake of the pandemic, and in preparation for future contingencies. If your ministry is still stuck in March of 2020, it's time for some reevaluation. The goal should be to minister creatively, with excellence, especially in times of crisis.

If you need help, you may want to look around—in your church, or even outside of it—for a talented young person with an interest in technology, perhaps even as a career. You may be amazed at who you find!

I hope that this column will serve to encourage, not discourage, those who need it most. Next time, we will continue along the lines of examining our communications since the last crisis began.

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