

Two Years Later: Where Are We Now?

(Part 4)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I began this series this past March, in which I set out to look back at how we have responded to the events of 2020.

I am not going to focus on the medical or political aspects of the pandemic or the shutdowns. Rather, I am concentrating on local church ministry—zeroing in on how this has affected their outreach, both locally and online. Certainly, coronavirus and all that surrounded it has left a lasting mark on numerous aspects of our ministries.

I am also persuaded that we need to look back at this past crisis only long enough to learn from it and prepare for the next similar crisis. I do not believe that it is a matter of if—but, rather, when—that will occur. Specifically, are we poised to handle another catastrophe, and to take advantage of the spiritual opportunities that it will doubtless bring to those who have organized themselves in advance?

We need to be in the best position possible to minister to hurting and confused people—and, ultimately, to address the substance of any forthcoming crises head-on. There will simply be no excuse to be caught off guard, at least by the onslaught of the next calamity—whether it is real or artificially produced.

We are blessed to live at a time, however, when ministry can continue to be multiplied, even in times of crisis, through the use of technology.

So, for help with these issues, I turned to Steven Lee, the founder of SermonAudio.com.

From its website, SermonAudio describes itself as, “The largest and most trusted library of audio sermons from conservative churches and ministries worldwide”—with more than 41,000 speakers, 2.2 million sermons, 416 million sermon downloads and an average of 2.8 million sermon downloads each month.

To conclude this series, I will base several columns off of an interview that I conducted with Steven in which we discussed four areas:

- SermonAudio's Vault project—which involves building technological infrastructure on the campus of, and in partnership with, Bob Jones University
- cybersecurity, and an attack which SermonAudio suffered earlier this year
- the expansion of online ministry since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic
- the threats posed by censorship and cancel culture.

Lee is a graduate of Bob Jones, where he majored in computer science. He began SermonAudio in 2000. Originally, the goal was to distribute the sermons of Dr. Alan

Cairns, then pastor of Faith Free Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C., more proficiently.

But Lee quickly saw an opportunity to broaden that same avenue in a way that would also allow other—especially smaller—churches “to reach the multitudes.”

“Back then, streaming audio was a novelty—it was rather new,” Lee said.

The Vault is the greatest project, by far, that SermonAudio has ever attempted since its founding. SermonAudio is currently remodeling a secure space on the second floor of Bob Jones’ Mack Library to house its new machinery and equipment. Lee’s vision involves mentoring computer science students as they participate in future projects.

“Our technology has grown and advanced to such a stage—like everybody else who is in the tech business—where we are depending on what are called ‘cloud services,’” Lee said. “These are services that are run by big organizations. They just make life easier for people in my line of work, where you don’t have to mess with hard drives and physical machines—like we were doing for the first decade-and-a-half of our existence.”

“It is no secret that they are left-leaning companies,” Lee stated. “They have a very progressive mindset. They are not neutral.”

Hence, the danger to online ministry is apparent. Jesus, in fact, predicted that in the days preceding His return, “Many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another” (Matt. 24:10).

“The only answer—and it is not something that we are particularly excited about—is to create our own infrastructure. We have spent a lot of years relying on these big players to do it for us, and so it is really hard to build from scratch. But I feel like there is a need for us to take a step. And that is what we are doing with The Vault.”

“It’s also about perpetuity,” said Lee. “How do we keep this thing going beyond me, beyond our team? How do we plant ourselves alongside a stream of new talent all the time? To me that is an academic institution.”

“If we can mentor them, then maybe there will be more that we can do than just having this physical space,” he explained. “We can influence lives.”

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