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Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due

Avoiding Plagiarism in Christian Writing and Speaking[1]

Gregory A. Smith

I once heard a missionary refer to a message he had preached at a supporting church while on furlough. As he was preaching, he noticed that the congregation was not responding as it should have; in fact, it was somewhat dumbfounded. Following the service he learned the reason why: He had chosen to preach an outline prepared by a well-known Christian speaker and author, and the church's pastor had preached the exact same message, point for point, the previous week.

Some might see this story as an example of God's providence. The congregation needed to hear the same message twice, and both preachers were sensitive to the Holy Spirit's direction. Perhaps this was the case, but I am skeptical. I suspect that the congregation may have felt somewhat cheated—not simply because they heard the same sermon twice, but because the speakers presumably failed to acknowledge the sermon's original author. In my judgment, the preacher and missionary leaned dangerously in the direction of plagiarism.

Understanding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of intellectual dishonesty. The word *plagiarism* comes from the Latin *plagiarius*, meaning "kidnapper." In *Plagiarism and Originality*, Alexander Lindey defined *plagiarism* as "the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person's mind, and presenting it as one's own" (qtd. in Gibaldi 151). To plagiarize, then, is to pass off someone else's ideas or words as one's own.

Unfortunately, the religious world is not immune to plagiarism. Respected Christian leaders have been accused of failing to credit the sources of their written work ("King's Plagiarism"; "Plagiarism Discovered"). Christian publishers have negotiated settlements for unauthorized use of source material (Kennedy). And ministers face an additional challenge: how much to credit their sources, and how to do so, when preaching and teaching (Buckingham; Lowry; Younger).

While plagiarism is not a crime, it constitutes a serious breach of ethics. Writers who plagiarize, even unintentionally, can be held liable in civil courts or face sanctions from academic institutions and professional organizations. Of course, some instances of plagiarism also constitute a violation of copyright, for which there are severe legal penalties. Fortunately, you can protect the credibility of your ministry and avoid legal liability by developing methodical research habits.

Plagiarism has received significant attention in academic circles in recent years. Both professional organizations and government agencies have struggled to define and control the problem. Some, such as the American Historical Association, have issued formal statements on the subject:

> The expropriation of another author's text, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism and is a serious violation of the ethics of scholarship. It undermines the credibility of historical inquiry. [. . .]
>
> The misuse of the writings of another author, even when one does not borrow the exact wording, can be as unfair, as unethical, and as unprofessional as plagiarism. Such misuse includes the limited borrowing, without attribution, of another historian's distinctive and significant research findings, hypotheses, theories, rhetorical strategies, or interpretations, or an extended borrowing even with attribution. (Statement on Standards)

While defining plagiarism in strict terms, this statement also condemns those who manipulate texts and ideas without giving credit to those who are responsible for them.

In 1994 the Office of Research Integrity of the Department of Health & Human Services drafted a "working definition" of plagiarism for the scientific community. This policy denounces any behavior that

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[1] An earlier version of this article appeared in The Baptist Preacher Jan.-Feb. 2002: 7-8.

involves the misappropriation of others' intellectual property. Nevertheless, it distinguishes between verbiage that is commonly used in a given field and the unique contributions of a specific author.

> As a general working definition, ORI considers plagiarism to include both the theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and the substantial unattributed textual copying of another's work. [. . .]
>
> Substantial unattributed textual copying of another's work means the unattributed verbatim or nearly verbatim copying of sentences and paragraphs which materially mislead the ordinary reader regarding the contributions of the author. (ORI Policy)

According to Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, bibliographic references "distinguish a 'work of scholarship' from a 'popular work.' They give us confidence in the book that displays them by announcing to the world that the 'report' is open to anyone's verification" (359). Plagiarism strikes at the heart of the bibliographic system by portraying borrowed material as an author's original work. In the process, it violates three principles held sacred by the research community: intellectual property, integrity, and originality.

Acknowledging Your Sources

Plagiarism is obviously a serious matter. You can avoid it by conscientiously applying accepted bibliographic standards, such as those prescribed by the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Psychological Association, or the University of Chicago Press (see inset). This article illustrates how to cite sources in MLA style.[2]

In order to cite sources properly, you must understand the different ways that you can use them. *Quotations* are direct transcriptions of phrases, sentences, or paragraphs written by someone else. You should identify them as such by enclosing them in quotes or indenting them in blocks. When citing a quotation, you should specify the exact page number(s) where the borrowed statement appeared.

A second approach to using sources is *paraphrasing*. Paraphrasing involves translating the ideas of a source into your own words. This is admittedly a delicate process. Legitimate paraphrases convey the concepts expressed in another source without retaining the phrases of the original. If you find that your "paraphrase" reproduces sequences of words from your source, you should modify it further or revert to a direct quote. Citations for paraphrases should direct your readers or listeners to the specific sources, including page number(s), from which you derived your ideas.

Occasionally you may wish to *refer to* or *summarize* a source as a whole. In such cases you should cite the source without reference to specific pages. This implies that you have appropriated no specific verbiage or concepts from the source to which you are alluding. This kind of source reference is valuable in that it assures your audience that you have researched your topic thoroughly.

Major Style Guides

APA Style

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. 5th ed. Washington, DC: APA, 2001. 439 pp.

MLA Style

Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Assn. of America, 2003. 361 pp.

---. MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing. 2nd ed. New York: Modern Language Assn. of America, 1998. 343 pp.

Chicago/Turabian Style

The Chicago Manual of Style. 15th ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. 956 pp.

Turabian, Kate L. A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations. Rev. John Grossman and Alice Bennett. 6th ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. 308 pp.

Giving Credit in Lessons and Sermons

Discussions of plagiarism often assume the context of written documents. However, the principles of source recognition are more difficult to apply in public speaking. In fact, according to

[2] For more details on how to cite sources, see <http://www.liberty.edu/library/?PID=1221>, a Web resource maintained by the Integrated Learning Resource Center at Liberty University.

Raymond Bailey, "The special purpose of Christian proclamation and the nature of Christian theology [. . .] frustrate the performer who seeks to be pure and original. The church's fidelity to a tradition has never promoted originality; its ideal of the common life in the body of Christ has never offered special protection to the ownership of ideas" ("Plagiarism" 374).

These caveats notwithstanding, it is dishonest to invent "illustrations" and present them as events that have really happened (Edwards); to "borrow" others' experiences and present them as our own (Bailey, "Ethics" 535); or to publish a slightly edited version of another preacher's material without attribution or permission (Willimon 14-15). However, even if we agree in condemning blatant forms of plagiarism, there are plenty of gray areas that merit discussion. My study of the issue has led me to the following conclusions on the use of sources in preaching and teaching.

First, *oral communication requires less source acknowledgement than written communication*. Your congregation does not expect you to "footnote" every illustration or joke you use in a sermon. Nevertheless, you should make a habit of acknowledging your sources in your sermon manuscripts or outlines. Doing so frees you to provide a copy to a church member, fellow preacher, or publisher without reservation. It can also prevent you from mistaking the material for your own if you revise it for a different use in the future.

A sermon's authority resides largely in the preacher's personal credibility. A lesson, by contrast, establishes its authority through evidence of methodical study, including logical coherence and some reference to sources. Therefore, in my judgment, teaching calls for more verbal source references than preaching.

Second, *the principles of MLA style can be adapted for use in public speaking*. The text of a written document should provide clues that a source has been consulted and point to a full reference in the Works Cited. Bailey explains how to apply this in preaching: "The typical congregation is quickly bored with attribution to unknown sources or labored technical identification. One can, however, with little distraction, note that a 'biblical scholar has written' or 'the story is told' or 'a minister has noted.' Care should be taken that originality is not claimed for the work or experience of another" ("Plagiarism" 375).

Third, *the nature and purpose of a source determines, to a large extent, the limits of appropriate use*. Homiletical helps (illustration books, commentaries, collections of outlines, etc.) are designed to support the preparation and delivery of sermons. A preacher may freely use such works provided that he is neither deceptive nor hypocritical. Saint Augustine's exhortation assures us that the ethical use of source material in preaching is a time-honored tradition:

> There are, indeed, some men who have a good delivery, but cannot compose anything to deliver. Now, if such men take what has been written with wisdom and eloquence by others, and commit it to memory, and deliver it to the people, they cannot be blamed, *supposing them to do it without deception*. [. . .] Hence it happens that a wicked man who is eloquent may compose a discourse in which the truth is set forth to be delivered by a good man who is not eloquent; and when this takes place, the former draws from himself what does not belong to him, and the latter receives from another what really belongs to himself. But when true believers render this service to true believers, both parties speak what is their own, for God is theirs, to whom belongs all that they say; and even those who could not compose what they say make it their own *by composing their lives in harmony with it*. (emphasis added)

Acknowledging our sources properly is an issue of personal and professional integrity. If we fail to give credit where it is due, we risk undermining the public trust on which genuine ministry is built. On the other hand, if we are open about our dependence on other writers and speakers, we enhance the credibility of our message. Taking reasonable steps to avoid plagiarism is an investment in faithful Christian service.

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