

Chapter 1

On Plagiarism and Preachers

WHY PLAGIARIZING SERMONS IS POPULAR
BUT BIBLICALLY INDEFENSIBLE

It seems, frankly, utterly unthinkable to me that authentic preaching would be the echo of another person's encounter with God's Word rather than a trumpet blast of my own encounter with God's Word. Now to be sure, my sermon should be an echo. It should be an echo of the voice of God. But not an echo of an echo of the voice of God. So that is my conviction.

—*John Piper*⁴

When it comes to light that a pastor has been “echoing” the work of another—what we might euphemistically call sermon borrowing—it is deeply troubling. But it is even worse when that pastor has any influence on the life and ministry of other pastors because it says to younger men, who are finding their way in the wilderness of pulpit ministry, that it is acceptable to use the work of others.

To date, I can think of two pastors I knew personally who were fired for preaching someone else's sermons. I have heard many other reports of the same.⁵ I can also think of

ministries I have written off as unfaithful after learning that they were reheating the meals prepared by others. And last year, I watched the unbelieving world make sport of God's people because of plagiarism in the pulpit.⁶

Soon after the Southern Baptist Convention elected Ed Litton to be president, it came to light that he had, on numerous occasions, preached material from J.D. Greear. If you wonder what the extent of such "borrowing" is, you can watch his expositions of Romans 1 and Romans 8 online.⁷ Both sermons demonstrate word-for-word dependence on Greear's work. In response, Greear and Litton released statements explaining the matter,⁸ but with more than 140 sermons pulled from Litton's archive,⁹ the trouble runs deeper.

PASTORS AND PLAGIARISM

Without getting into the specifics of the Litton situation, I want to step back and ask a few questions: Is it wrong for a pastor to borrow material from another? What does it mean to plagiarize in the pulpit? Why does this seem to be such a common practice? And what does Scripture say?

To start with, I am not the first to tackle this subject. Albert Mohler has discussed it, as have D.A. Carson, John Piper, and Andy Naselli with Justin Taylor.¹⁰ Letting Carson speak for the whole, he expresses the severity of the problem.

Taking over another sermon and preaching it as if it were yours is always and unequivocally wrong, and if you do it you should resign or be fired immediately. The wickedness is along at least three axes: (1) You

are stealing. (2) You are deceiving the people to whom you are preaching. (3) Perhaps worst, you are not devoting yourself to the study of the Bible to the end that God's truth captures you, molds you, makes you a man of God and equips you to speak for him.¹¹

Carson's words are severe, and they are matched by the severity of others. Yet the consensus of these leaders does not mean there is an overall consensus. On the internet, you will find James Merritt offering permission to plagiarize his words,¹² websites selling sermon helps and pre-packaged sermon material,¹³ and various sources encouraging pastors to partake in the practice of using the work that is not their own.¹⁴ Thus, in what follows, we need to answer three questions:

1. What is plagiarism? Does it apply to borrowing the work of another when permission is received and attribution given?
2. Why is plagiarism so prevalent today? Who is championing it?
3. Is plagiarism biblically defensible? (My answer: No, it is not!)

By pursuing the answers to these questions, we can define our terms and evaluate from Scripture what God thinks about using the sermons of others.

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

Defining plagiarism should be relatively easy: It is using someone else's material without giving proper attribution.

Or, as Justin Taylor makes the point more finely, “Plagiarism’ involves using the original and specific wording or arguments of others without acknowledging the source, thus giving the impression that they are original with you.”¹⁵ Such a definition makes it clear that when a pastor uses the material of another *and does not give attribution*, he is plagiarizing.

If he does acknowledge the source in the message, then the problem moves from plagiarism to “sermon sourcing.” This, too, is problematic, for reasons we will see in Scripture. But even before addressing the re-use of sermon material with permission and attribution, it is worth considering if such attribution escapes the charge of plagiarism.

In their helpful taxonomy of plagiarism, the good folks at Turnitin, an online resource for teachers spotting plagiarism, list ten types of plagiarism.¹⁶ These ten types range from the copy-and-paste form of plagiarism to the “re-tweet”—an allusion to the practice of passing along someone’s words on Twitter with the click of a button. In this taxonomy, they suggest that a re-tweet is a paper (or sermon) that “includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text’s original wording and/or structure.”¹⁷ In such an instance, the author acknowledges the source of the information, but he is still guilty of plagiarism because a single footnote in a paper is insufficient for properly citing the copious amount of information borrowed from the original source. The same applies to a sermon.

Understandably, this specificity makes the discussion about plagiarism more technical. But it also acknowledges

the fact that even when permission and attribution are given, if the second sermon is a clone of the first, the issue of plagiarism remains.

The takeaway from re-tweet plagiarism is this: When we are talking about plagiarism in the pulpit, that label fits whether attribution is given to the original source or not. Whenever a pastor is making extensive use of someone else's work for his own sermon—with or without attribution—the term plagiarism still applies.

Now, one might object that Turnitin does not have a monopoly on defining plagiarism, and that we should explain the term with something more like Justin Taylor's definition. Maybe. But that only improves the matter slightly, and it may make it worse. If pastors are defending anything that comes close to plagiarism, the problem remains. By comparison, should the larger community of academics and communicators hold a higher standard than the church? Certainly not! If the world appears more honest than the heralds of truth, pastors have lost a hearing for the Truth before anyone gets to Sunday morning.

Wherever you land on the definition of plagiarism, I will use Turnitin's tenth type of plagiarism, the re-tweet, to address plagiarism in the pulpit. When pastors re-tweet other sermons, they are, to return to Carson's three points, (1) stealing, (2) deceiving others and (probably) themselves, and, most notably, (3) failing to live up to their calling as a pastor.¹⁸

Yet that calling may actually be the thing that divides Christians most on this subject. For those who define the

pastor's calling according to the pastoral epistles seem to be at odds with those who define the pastor's calling in terms handed down from the modern professionalization of the pastorate. This difference may explain why so many have been defended the statements released by Greear and Litton, and why *Christianity Today* once offered a defense of plagiarism in the pulpit.

WHY IS PLAGIARISM SO POPULAR TODAY?

In 2002, *Christianity Today* offered a short editorial on the subject of plagiarism, called "When Pastors Plagiarize."¹⁹ With a title like that, one might think that the editors would warn pastors against plagiarizing sermons. Yet *Christianity Today* did just the opposite.

Instead of explaining why pastors should preach their own work, they list three reasons why pastors plagiarize. In so doing, *Christianity Today* urged pastors to cite their sources and for churches to expect pastors to re-tweet the sermons of others. Here is their rationale:

1. Pressure. "We live in a media-saturated age in which we can watch, listen to, or read the brightest and best preachers at any time." Therefore, "the pressure on the local pastor to match this eloquence is felt on both sides of the pulpit."
2. Comparison. Because no other modern vocation is asked to generate as much content as the pastor who speaks multiple times a week, the pastor needs help in content creation. Politicians have a team of people