Stolen goods: Tempted to plagiarize

by Thomas G. Long in the April 17, 2007 issue

A couple of years ago, a student in one of my preaching courses was struggling terribly. The sermons he preached in class were plodding, disorganized and weakly supported exegetically and theologically. He was aware that he was not meeting expectations, and he was frustrated and embarrassed by his performance. But then, in his final opportunity to redeem himself in the course, he surprised us all by preaching a stunning sermon, both profound and lyrical. It was unexpectedly excellent.

Too good, in fact. Sadly suspicious, I plugged one of his more delicious phrases into Google. Alas, up came the whole sermon on a church's Web site, preached by the pastor of that church many months before. It was an unfortunate but clear case of plagiarism. That was not, however, the whole story. My search actually produced dozens of hits, disclosing that, evidently, my student was not the only preacher to find this particular sermon compelling. A number of others, all with their sermons posted online, had lifted paragraphs and pages from the original sermon, mostly without credit. In a last and unexpected twist, this much-copied sermon itself turned out to contain a long section cribbed without attribution from a Living by the Word column in this very journal. With a few clicks of the mouse, I had uncovered a crime wave of homiletical petty larceny.

The stealing of sermons is nothing new, of course, and the legends of such mischief abound. Typical of the genre is the story of Ernest T. Campbell, now retired as pastor of New York's Riverside Church. He was once invited to fill the pulpit of a church in a distant city, and he chose to preach "Adam's Other Son," a creative sermon on the biblical character Seth, one which bears the unmistakable mark of Campbell's style and which Campbell had published in a sermon collection. As he preached that Sunday, however, he had a sense that something was awry. "My sermon," he said later, "was landing like marbles on a tile floor." After the service, he was told that a young associate pastor had preached the same sermon nearly word for word the week before. No wonder the congregation had sat in shocked silence, convinced that the celebrated guest preacher had stooped to pilfering another pastor's material.

Pulpit plagiarism may not be new, but there is plenty of evidence that the practice is spreading and that the kerosene on the fire is the Internet. Not only are thousands of sermons available for the snatching on church Web pages, but scores of commercial sites hawk complete sermons, illustrations, outlines, images and PowerPoint accompaniments for a fee. The proprietors of these sites are aware, naturally, that their customers may have a flicker of conscience over downloading sermons, so several sites include words of reassurance. “We know you may be worried about plagiarism,” they essentially warble, “but the authors of these sermons want you to use them. And besides, these sermons are designed to stimulate your imagination as you create your own sermons. You’ll still be doing the work.”

Right. Rick Warren, of the Saddleback Church, who markets his sermons online, told the British journal *Christianity*, “If my bullet fits your gun, shoot it,” and Craig Brian Larson, writing about pulpit plagiarism at PreachingToday.com, cites a preacher who says, “When Chuck Swindoll starts preaching better sermons, so will I.” When it comes to preachers desperate to feed the incessant pulpit hunger, “the Internet,” as one of my colleagues likes to say, “is like having a drug dealer on every corner.”

But the Internet is not only the supplier, it is often the police officer too. More preachers may be stealing sermons these days, but more are also getting caught in the fine mesh of Web crawlers and search engines. Four years ago, early on a Sunday morning, the parish nurse at the National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., ran an Internet search on the sermon title that her pastor had announced for that day, only to find a sermon with that exact title on the Web site of a church in Manhattan. She carried a printout of the New York sermon with her to worship, and sure enough, she heard the same sermon from the National City pulpit that morning, almost word for word. This was the first evidence of what turned out to be a long-standing pattern of pulpit plagiarism on the part of the pastor, and its discovery threw the congregation into turmoil.

Because of the prominence of this church and the pastor, that controversy made national news, but there have been numerous other, less-publicized local occurrences where preachers have been caught in the pincers of Google or Yahoo. Almost every community has a story of a church torn apart and a pastor embarrassed, if not dismissed, over “borrowing” sermons. In the future, churches may well adopt the strategy of many colleges and universities, which have begun to combat plagiarism with powerful new software programs, such as Turnitin, that

comb through extensive databases as well as every nook and cranny of the worldwide Web, comparing student papers with possible sources and sleuthing out similarities in language. There may come a time when pastors seeking new calls or appointments will have to pass their sermons under the watchful eye of such software, as a kind of plagiarism background check.

What can we say about the ethics of preaching, without attribution, other people's sermons, in whole or in part? It is tempting to keep it simple, to cite the commandment "Thou shalt not steal" and be done with it. However, the issues surrounding pulpit plagiarism are more complex than they may appear at first glance. To begin with, the reality of the Internet is not merely a change in technology. As the music industry has already discovered, the use of the Internet carries with it major cultural shifts in how we understand the ownership and use of information.

The rules of attribution that obtain in one cultural place or moment do not necessarily apply in another. (For example, notice that there is nary a footnote in Matthew's Gospel to give credit to Mark, his main source.) Some voices are now arguing that the whole concept of intellectual property, on which many of our convictions about plagiarism rest, is a post-Enlightenment, modernist illusion that is rapidly being unmasked. The very idea that people create new things out of words and thus own them falls in the face of the evidence that every literary creation is an amalgam—known and unknown, acknowledged and unacknowledged—of previous oral and literary acts. We are now entering, goes the argument, a kind of postmodernist "open source" society in which the whole notion of plagiarism evaporates because, when closely examined, everything is a kind of plagiarism. A recent issue of *Harper's Magazine* includes an elegant essay by novelist Jonathan Lethem arguing just that. "Any text," he writes, "is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The citations . . . are quotations without inverted commas." Then, to prove the point, and as a kind of literary joke on the reader, Lethem reveals at the end of the essay that virtually every line of his piece was cribbed from other sources (the quotation just cited is not Lethem after all, but Roland Barthes).

Some pastors have picked up a theological version of this open-source argument. Sermon words are gifts from God, they say, and thus fair game for any and all who wish to appropriate them. How dare preachers do anything but sing the doxology, they ask, when their sermons show up in the mouths of other pastors? Moreover,

with God-given words in ripe clusters of low-hanging fruit all over the Internet, originality becomes a highly overrated virtue, perhaps even a sign of hubris. For these preachers, the goal is to create an impact upon hearers; who cares where the words come from?

“Don’t be original—be effective!” urges Steve Sjogren of the Cincinnati Vineyard Community Church, in an essay at Pastors.com. “In my mind,” he continues, “there is a tremendous amount of pride (let’s call it what it is) when we insist on being completely original as communicators. . . . The guys I draw encouragement from—the best communicators in the United States . . . get 70 percent of their material from someone else. Remember, Solomon wrote that ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’”

This vaunting of free gift over originality could be called the “Dizzy Gillespie Theory of Preaching.” When Gillespie heard that Phil Woods, a young sax player, had been accused of stealing the style of famed saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker, Gillespie defended Woods. “You can’t steal a gift,” he said. “Bird gave the world his music, and if you can hear it, you can have it.”

Others make a more practical argument in favor of softening the boundaries of pulpit plagiarism: borrowing a good sermon is far to be preferred over numbing a congregation into submission with a poor one of your own. When a pastor in my city was caught preaching cut-and-paste sermons from the Web and then distributing printed copies under his own name, he repented and was given a second chance by the congregation. However, one concerned member of the congregation wrote to Randy Cohen, whose column “The Ethicist” regularly appears in the Sunday magazine of the *New York Times*. The letter described the case and asked for Cohen’s opinion. Cohen responded by roundly criticizing the pastor for preaching another’s sermons without credit and, even more, for publishing them under his own name. But then he wondered, “Perhaps sermon writing should not be a job requirement.” Being a pastor, Cohen said, requires many different gifts, and no one can possess them all in abundance. “If an otherwise excellent pastor is clumsy with his pen,” he mused, “his parish would be better served by hearing him deliver the profound and stirring words of a more talented author.”

Really? Poor preachers should simply stop the pain and treat their congregations to sermons composed by steadier hands? Surprisingly, Cohen would find agreement from no less an authority than St. Augustine, who wrote, “There are, indeed, some

people who have a good delivery, but cannot compose anything to deliver. Now, if such people 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."

Complicating the plagiarism issue even more is the fact that some congregations in primarily oral cultures—for example, sectors of the African-American church and some Appalachian white churches—preserve and honor the tradition of repreaching well-known "set piece" sermons, such as "Jesus' Funeral" or "The Deck of Cards" (a sermon in which the preacher symbolically deals out cards, one at a time, making a biblical allusion for each one). The preaching of such sermons is folk performance art, and originality of composition is not the issue. Many of the hearers would have heard these sermons time and again and, as in the case of hearing a jazz riff, would be interested mainly in how the performer improvises on the old material.

The ethics surrounding pulpit plagiarism, then, are not simple, but a good bit of clarity is achieved, I think, when we keep two factors in focus. The first is truthfulness. "Plagiarism," writes Richard A. Posner in *The Little Book of Plagiarism*, "is a species of intellectual fraud." Posner goes on to name the two key ingredients of fraud in every act of plagiarism: one, somebody copies something and then claims ("whether explicitly or implicitly, and whether deliberately or carelessly") that these words are his or her original composition; and two, this deception causes the readers (or hearers) of these words to act differently than they would if they possessed the truth.

So, if a preacher takes a paragraph or a page or a story from a novel, a movie, another sermon or anywhere else and fails to signal to the congregation that this is borrowed material, then the first element of plagiarism is present. Sermons are not term papers, of course, and giving the full details about sources is not a must. A simple "as one biblical scholar has put it" or "another pastor tells the story about . . ." will usually do. Beyond this, source details should be filled in on the basis of how helpful they will be to the hearers. If it makes a difference to the hearers to know that sermon words have been borrowed from Luther or Anne Lamott or Walter Brueggemann, then say so.

Giving credit to others is not merely a matter of keeping our ethical noses clean; it is also a part of bearing witness to the gospel. No sermon stands alone, but instead takes its place in a "cloud of witnesses." The proclamation of the gospel does not

spring forth from our cleverness or ability to generate novelty. To borrow words from others and to show that one's sermon dips into the deep well of shared wisdom is itself part of Christian testimony, a fresh expression of Paul's confession, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received."

But what of Posner's second ingredient of fraud— namely, that pulpit plagiarism occurs when the preacher's deception about sources causes the hearers to behave differently than they would have had they known the truth? Perhaps as much or more than any other form of communication, preaching depends upon a cord of trust binding together the speaker and the listener, the preacher and hearer. A good sermon consists not primarily in flawless logic, soaring poetry or airtight arguments, but in passionately held truth proclaimed with conviction. To compromise the truth in ways that hearers would consider deceptive makes them reluctant to extend this necessary trust and damages the witness. For evidence, we can point to the hard disillusionment and sense of betrayal experienced by many in congregations where pastors have been caught plagiarizing sermons.

Preaching, like all forms of communication, rests upon a tacit agreement between the parties involved. When Jon Stewart sends up the news on the Comedy Channel's *The Daily Show*, it is not necessary for him to say, "Now this part of what I am saying is absolutely true, but this other part is satire." His viewers already know this; it is woven into the implied agreement. When a revival preacher in a Pentecostal church in Galax, Virginia, pulls out a deck of cards and begins dealing them out and chanting, "When I see the Ace, I am reminded there is but one God, . . ." nobody needs to be told that the preacher is performing a script. This is already well known, and no deception is involved. But preachers who stand up on Sunday morning with a sermon ripped off the Internet and preach the words as if they were their own almost certainly violate the implied agreement with the congregation.

A good test of this point is to ask, What would happen if the preacher told the truth? "Hey folks, it's been a busy week and I didn't have time to work on a sermon, and honestly, I'm not all that creative anyway. So this is a little something I found on the 'net." The fact that the air would immediately go out of the room is a reliable indicator that the tacit agreement of the sermon event has been violated. This is why plagiarists, for all their blather about God's words being free for all, never confess their true sources and always imply that these words are coming straight from the heart. Yes, Augustine made space for preachers to memorize the words of other, more eloquent proclaimers, but note well that he added the test of truth:

“supposing them to do it without deception.”

In addition to the standard of truthfulness, the second factor to keep in focus is immediacy. While there is surely room in the pulpit for the “set piece” sermon and the oft-repeated illustration, finally preaching is a word from God for *these* people in *this* place at *this* moment. Preaching is not just about inspiration; it is ultimately about proclamation: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jürgen Moltmann once described the act of preaching as someone getting up from the assembly, standing in front of God’s people, and speaking and acting in the name of Christ. The church, Moltmann says, “does not want to listen to itself and to project its own image of itself; it wants to hear Christ’s voice.” That is, God’s people want to hear Christ’s voice speaking now, and to them.

Moltmann’s picture points to the location of the preacher, at once joyful and agonizing. The preacher comes from the pews to stand in the pulpit. Only preachers who deliver their own sermons stand with one foot in the life of the people and one foot in the biblical text. No Internet preacher stands in this same place. No borrowed sermon, however fine, can answer the question that cries out from every congregation, “Is there a word *today*, a word for *us*, from the Lord?” This is not the same as saying that sermons must be fully original. All preachers borrow from others, and should. There is a difference between being a debtor and being a thief. All preachers stand on the shoulders of biblical scholars, theologians and faithful witnesses from across the generations. We do not owe our congregations an original essay; we owe them a fresh act of interpretation.

Gray areas remain, of course, and judgment calls must be made. If a preacher finds a superb Fred Craddock story in a sermon by Jane Doaks, must Doaks be credited along with Craddock? If a preacher reads a wonderful sermon by Jim Forbes and borrows not a single word of it, but adopts the structure of the sermon, should Forbes be cited? Is the phrase “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake side” so much a part of the culture that it is, in effect, in the public domain, or should Albert Schweitzer be explicitly credited as the author?

Preachers who strive to tell the truth, who seek to honor the communion of saints, who desire to maintain the trust of the faithful community—that is to say, preachers with ethical integrity—will wrestle with these questions and make the best decisions they can. Pulpit plagiarists, however, in the name of expediency, will grab what they wish wherever they can find it and claim it as their own. Their stolen sermons may occasionally sparkle, but in the end they will have spread the banquet table of God

with the empty calories of homiletical fast food.