

Repeat performance: Pastoral plagiarism

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

Tom Long, one of the preachers I'm tempted to steal from, [points out in this issue](#) that stealing sermons is an old phenomenon but easier to do today given the thousands of sermons on the Internet.

Probably every pastor has a good story to tell about plagiarism. I attended a pastors' seminar years ago that included a Sunday morning visit to hear a prominent preacher. When the seminar reconvened after lunch, the first response was from one of our group who began reading from a book—uttering the exact words we had heard a few hours before. After recognizing the sermon, he had gone to a library, found a volume of Halford Luccock's sermons and located the one that the preacher had delivered.

A few years ago a member of my congregation handed me a copy of a sermon her sister in Seattle had sent her. It was a sermon I had preached, and her sister had heard it a few weeks later. "Explain this," she said. She had concluded that the Seattle preacher and I were using the same subscription sermon service and she was disappointed in me. As it turned out, the Seattle preacher had obtained a copy of my sermon, preached it and then printed it. One of his parishioners liked it so much she sent a copy to her sister in Chicago.

The Seattle minister and I talked. He apologized. I said his behavior had caused a member of my church to distrust me. He explained that it had been a very demanding week. I told him that our own efforts, however modest, are still more likely to be bearers of God's truth and grace than words written by others—particularly if we claim that the words are our own.

The divinity school I attended did not require or offer homiletics courses. When I was called to a congregation I stumbled on a series of pamphlets published by the National Radio Pulpit, and I learned by imitating Ernie Campbell, George Peters and John Vannorsdall. I borrowed from them, quoted, used ideas and always carefully

credited my sources.

I did not preach their sermons as my own, although I did hear that done one time wonderfully. During the civil rights movement a friend asked the leaders of his congregation to invite an African-American minister to preach on what we used to call Race Relations Sunday. They refused. So my friend preached himself and, at the end of an eloquent sermon on race relations, announced: "The voice you heard this morning was mine. The words were written by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." That is an example of faithful plagiarism.