Pastors and Plagiarism: Some Thoughts

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In recent months the secular press has been giving big play to plagiarism accusations. The starting point was the "history scandals," allegations raised against noted historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin. They have been accused of plagiarism because certain short passages in their books are very similar to passages in sources which they cited in their bibliographies but did not specifically footnote at the suspect passages in their books. The recent death of Beatle George Harrison revived discussion of the plagiarism suit against him, which alleged that his song "My Sweet Lord" was too similar to an earlier hit "He's So Fine." Now the controversy has spread into the church. An Episcopal rector has been banned from his parish on the basis of allegations from members of the congregation that he is guilty of plagiarism in his sermons and newsletters.

According to a front page story in the March 1, 2002 *Detroit Free Press* Bishop Wendell Gibbs informed the Rev. Edward Mullins that he was prohibited from working or worshiping at his Bloomfield Hills parish for 90 days while the diocese investigates the plagiarism accusations and other allegations. Bishop Gibbs warned Mullins that plagiarism in particular "could constitute violations of your ordination vows and conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy." Other accusations against Mullins were refusing to administer communion to a member, breaching pastoral confidentiality, and failing to control parishioners' verbal outbursts at the church's annual meeting.

Free Press staff writer Alexa Capeloto remarked that the case has thrust this church into a national debate over the ethical boundaries of sermon-borrowing, especially from on-line sites such as desperatepreacher.com. The issue drew national attention last year when a Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis resigned after admitting he plagiarized sermons. ;

Mullins was accused when members searched the Internet and alleged that they had detected 10 instances of plagiarism from March 1997 to January 2002, similarities ranging from sentences to entire essays, with no credit. Mullins has said at church meetings that religious leaders around the country subscribe to sermon services and regularly use outside sources.

According to the report in the *Free Press* religious experts said that the practice of borrowing has become increasingly common. Brian Larson, editor of a sermon database, stated that most of his 15,000 subscribers are religious leaders who simply want to provide the best, most inspirational material possible for followers. "We recognize that a sermon is different than an academic paper or a novel," Larson said. "The goal is not to earn a doctorate, it's to serve the church universal. We're trying to help not with original words, but with the word of God." Other metro Detroit pastors acknowledged using books, articles, and services, but they insisted uncredited word-for-word borrowing is wrong.

One of the *WLQ's* readers forwarded the *Free Press* article to us and suggested that the *Quarterly* publish some comments on the issue of plagiarism in the ministry.

As far as the Mullin's flap goes, on the basis of the limited evidence in the newspaper article, it seems that if parishioners had to search through five years of sermons and newsletters to find ten alleged simi1arities' the case is evidence of a poisonous relationship of some parishioners with their pastor more than of any other problem. It also is something of a commentary on the Episcopal Church if alleged borrowing of ideas is a worse sin than inventing your own doctrine.

It is difficult to get very excited about either the history controversy or the George Harrison issues. The allegations against Ambrose and Goodwin didn't seem to amount to much more than some instances in which it was probably no longer clear to the authors whether items they inserted into their books from copious research notes gathered over several years were quotations or their own paraphrases of things they had read. The differences between the Harrison song and its alleged source are so great that it seems unlikely that any relationship could have consisted of more than unconscious echoes of a much-heard song. It seems that in recent years almost every author of a very successful screen play, book, or song has been accused of stealing ideas from some less successful author looking to cash in.

But how does this apply to the church?

In sermons and Bible classes you generally don't footnote things, and you don't attribute them unless they are direct quotes that amount to more than a phrase or two. When deciding whether or not to attribute an idea you picked up from somewhere, ask yourself whether there is some relevance to noting who said it, or is it just name-dropping that interrupts the flow. Even if you use illustrations or a story gleaned from some book or service, you generally wouldn't cite the source unless there is some reason to do so. In writing sermons I have often used ideas I recall I heard someone mention in a sermon somewhere-often by the time I used them no longer knowing where or when I had heard or read them. If a pastor is following a sermon series like the NPH series for Lent that could be mentioned in the pre-Lent announcement. After that he wouldn't distinguish which words he kept and which words he changed.

If a pastor is just copying sermons from a book or from the internet and reading them without doing his textual study and wrestling with what the text means and how it applies to his congregation, that is one thing-that pastor is not being faithful to his calling. It is another matter to interject ideas you have absorbed in reading or in speaking with others into a sermon for which you have done your own study of the text, aided by various helps. One of the reasons one reads widely is to be filled with language and ideas that will· also flow through you, perhaps coming out again with a new twist or an altered form.

In newsletters you should not pass off as your own work articles or substantial quotes you lifted from somewhere, but it is not necessary to footnote every idea or phrase that you picked up from a friend or a model you came across somewhere.

There are a number of reasons why the standards being applied in the history controversy and perhaps also in the Mullins flap do not seem very applicable to the preaching and teaching of the church. These standards are based, at least in part, on two attitudes that are out of place in the church: a demand for recognition and a worship of novelty.

In news magazines it is not uncommon that not only the author of an article but also the contributing aides need to get recognition in the byline. Award ceremonies like the Oscars have had to make rules concerning the maximum number of people that can come on stage to claim part of the credit for some award. Directors of movies have to come up with clever devices to relieve the tedium of endlessly flowing credits. This is understandable in businesses in which you are judged by what you create. It is not appropriate in the church in which we recognize that we are part of a partnership in which one often builds on foundations laid by another and reaps a harvest planted by another. It is understandable that publishers would want to guard their product and make sure that nobody else benefits from their work. In preachers and teachers a better attitude to follow is "freely you have received, freely give." lf someone is able to build up others through words or ideas they have adapted from something they have heard or read from me, it should be a matter of no concern to me how much credit I get for it.

Academia and science venerate originality. Journalists value the "scoop" and the "exclusive." Hollywood thrives on creativity (though this never seems to stand in the way of raking in a few dollars through reruns, knock-offs, copy-cat shows, and re-makes). The church on the other hand values timeless truths, traditional formulations, and ancient words. It is nice to hear old truths in new words, but the church is not looking for new doctrines, but for fresh, timely applications of ancient truths. Liberal theology and higher criticism, like the Athenians, are always looking for something new, but the much derided "repristination theology" offers more milk and meat for the soul.

Another difficulty with the mania for attribution is that there really are not that many new ideas around. It often is quite difficult to figure out who was the first one to come up with a striking phrase or an exegetical interpretation. While discussing the format for a Psalms commentary which I recently submitted for publication, the editors and I decided that there would be minimal footnoting, but that we would note that fact in the preface and that works that had made the greatest contribution would be·

highlighted in the bibliography. The main reason for this was that we did not want this study commentary for pastors preparing sermons and Bible classes to be bogged down with notes. What was not mentioned in the preface was that such notes usually serve relatively little purpose since the same ideas are found over and over in many commentaries. In the process of writing this commentary I consulted 10 or 12 different commentaries with some degree of regularity. It soon became obvious that after one has consulted the first three or four, you seldom find much else that has not already been said. It is especially interesting to use commentaries from successive centuries and to observe how exegetical tradition has been handed from generation to generation. For example, nearly every commentary on Daniel 11 is ultimately traceable to Jerome's commentary. There is not much that the church fathers and rabbinic scholars did not already note. It is unlikely that the source you cite is much more than a link in the chain.

Tracing the genealogy of famous sayings and illustrations is usually as interesting or in most cases more interesting than tracing your own genealogy. Many of the stories attributed to Luther are found in much earlier church fathers, and there are many famous quotes attributed to different people from different generations in slightly different form. From time to time through the years in various Evangelical writings about the creation of woman from man I have run across the comment that woman was not made from man's head to rule over him; she was not made from his foot to be trodden down by him; she was made from his side to stand beside him. More recently I ran across this observation in the never-translated 17th century Latin dogmatics of Andreas Quenstedt. I am quite sure that recent Evangelical writers did not plagiarize this from Quenstedt. I am also certain that Quenstedt was not the first to express the sentiment. It would be interesting to see how far back the observation can be traced. And while we are at it, we could offer a prize for identifying the earliest expression of the sentiment that we are pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants.

Even in the literary realm the originality of an idea is often not of primary importance. Vergil's borrowing of Homer's epic concept is not entirely lacking in literary merit. Shakespeare cannot be accused of being overly original in his plots, but it does not seem to have hindered his status as a writer of the first rank. (Though one is reminded of the student who was advised to read "Hamlet" as an example of writing which exhibits a flair for turning a phrase. After wading through it, he reported to his professor, "I don't know what anyone sees in this Shakespeare guy. All his best lines are nothing but clichés that you hear all the time.")

As our dogmatics department is working to prepare a new edition of our dogmatics notes, we are trying to identify the source of quotations which are being carried over from earlier editions of the notes, in which they often lacked specific reference to where the original may be found. In trying to track them down it is interesting to find how some citations have been received by Meyer from Hoenecke from Baier or Schmid from earlier sources. Many of the quotations from medieval Catholic writers in Lutheran writings seem to have been gathered in the research of Martin Chemnitz. Occasionally one can trace peculiar forms or mistakes in quotations back to the 16th century where the trail grows cold (actually it would probably be more accurate to say that the researcher gets tired of following it and quits). The use of compendia to aid in research and references is not an invention of the Internet.

When you are writing history, unless you were an eyewitness, every fact in your work is derived from some other source. To avoid a tedium of notes, in conference papers or for that matter in seminary class papers or *Quarterly* articles you should footnote only statements that go beyond "common knowledge" or generally accepted facts about the subject at hand. I generally tell students to footnote quotations, controversial viewpoints, newly discovered facts, assertions that the teacher is likely to disbelieve, and points for which you are trying to evade taking responsibility (though I warn them this doesn't necessarily work). There is some truth to the rule, "If you copy from one source it's plagiarism. If you copy from lots of sources, it's research."

In light of the way that language and knowledge have been transmitted throughout history much of the present controversy does at times seem silly and pedantic. In Tennyson's poem Ulysses observes, "I am a part of all that I have met." He could as well have said, "All I have met is a part of me."

Teachers, I suppose, hope that they become part of their students and that through those students things which they have thought or said or praised will come back another day in another way—as often as not with the source forgot—and that through them their students will be connected to the thoughts and words of departed teachers they never knew, in a chain that reaches far back in history. It is also true that students become part of their teacher. No one who has taught for long can write or think or teach about anything without reflecting what he has learned from his students' questions and answers and writings—and, yes, sometimes from their mistakes.

In the church (and maybe in culture and literature too) this chain of shared experience and shared feelings has an importance that goes beyond footnotes. To be sure, if you are playing in the games of academia, journalism, or church politics, you have to play by their rules. And since many members of the church move in those spheres too, we can't be oblivious to contemporary expectations in regard to attribution of thoughts and words, but we should not be too caught up in academic games either.

By the standards that are being cast at Ambrose and Goodwin—"don't use or adapt phrases or ideas you have heard or read somewhere without footnote or attribution"—the majority of sermons probably contain some element of plagiarism. If we are reading, listening beings, we live in a swirl of words and ideas which mix and merge and mutate within us and come out again—someone else's yet now our own. For example, for a recent Foreword in the *WLQ* I used the title "Winners and Whiners," a word pair I have heard often enough to classify as a cliché (but clichés are useful sometimes too). I recall at least two sportscasters widely separated by time and space that used it regularly when passing out their weekly kudos and brickbats, but I can't come up with the name of either one of them right now. One, I believe, used the more colorful but *less-appropriate-to-the-Quarterly* expansion, "winners, whiners, and wieners." Early one Sunday morning a year or so ago as I was driving to a preaching engagement I also heard the phrase used in a radio sermon about the winners and whiners in Jesus' parable of the talents. I don't imagine I would ever have had the idea of writing a foreword on the topic of contentment in a pastoral call in connection with this text if I had not finished thinking through my own sermon for that day and flipped the radio on. In the end, the target audience, the interpretation and application of the text were quite different from the sermon that had been sloshing in my head a year, but it had provided a spark, and· I would hope that preacher would be glad. Last summer in the concluding discussion of a summer quarter class that was are-run of a course I taught 18 years ago, I had the thought, "This would be a good foreword for the centennial volume of this journal." What emerges a year from now, God willing, will be a mix and mash from me and students present and long past, from teachers long gone by. Most of what we make is such a mix and mash of us and others, of past and present, new and old.

So where does that leave us? For editors and authors, the present tempest dictates that a good rule is "when in doubt, attribute." We probably need to be more scrupulous and fastidious about this in written, published work. But what about for pastors?

The pastor who requested this article observed, "There were not many footnotes in the *Quarterly* in the old days. Now there are quite a few." He also recalled a seminary professor who used to tell the students, "Say what Luther said, but don't always say, 'Luther said .... '" Those two observations seem to pretty much sum up the situation for pastors—don't be oblivious to contemporary standards and sensibilities concerning attribution, but don't get too caught up in "citation theology" in your proclamatory and inspirational writing and speech. Don't take short cuts in your work with the text. Do your own thinking about how it applies to the lives of your people. Give credit when quoting, but don't be afraid to use ideas and words that have become part of you, that you have absorbed and shaped and placed in a new setting. "You are part of all you have met. All you have met is part of you."