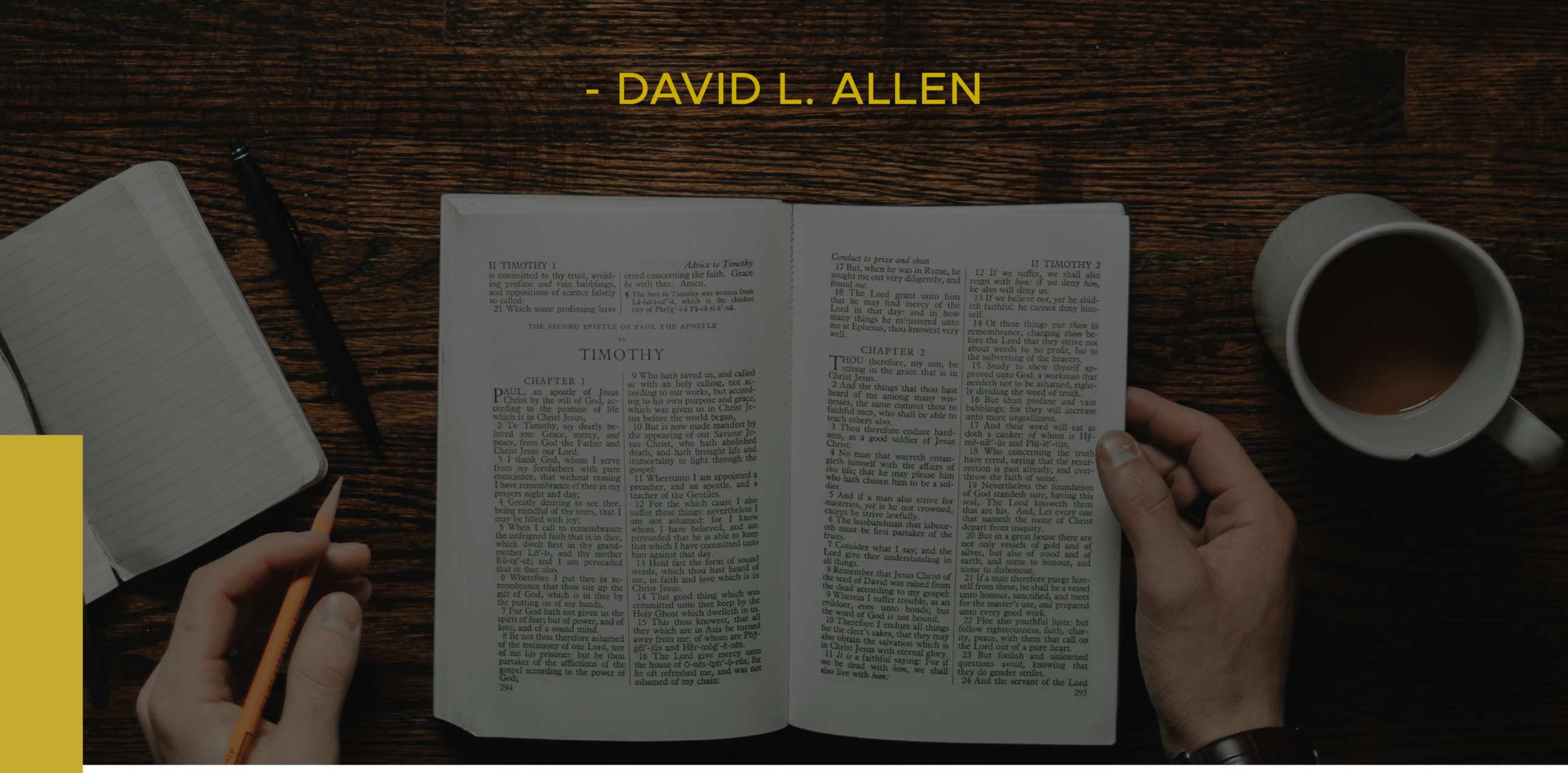
KEYS TO **AVOID PLAGIARISM** IN PREACHING

- DAVID L. ALLEN



PREACHING COACH

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Dr. David L. Allen is founder and editor-in-chief of PreachingCoach (**preachingcoach.com**), a ministry dedicated to equipping pastors and ministry leaders to communicate with clarity, competence, and confidence. Through personal and group coaching, podcasts, webinars, eBooks, Ministry classes, and other resources, PreachingCoach trains and mentors those who desire to communicate more effectively.

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He began preaching at age 16 and has taught preaching from the bachelor to the doctoral level since the late 1980s. He earned his MDIV from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, where he became Dean of the School of Theology in 2004, and the founding Dean of the School of Preaching in 2016. He served as the Distinguished Professor of Preaching, Director of the Center for Expository Preaching, and held the George W. Truett Chair of Pastoral Ministry.

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Over the past 40 years, Dr. Allen has led or participated in more than 400 preaching workshops, conferences, revivals, and other events in the US and in more than a dozen countries abroad.

This extensive background equips him to champion, teach, and model “text-driven” preaching, and he co-edited a book by that title, as well as numerous other books and articles on preaching, Old Testament, New Testament, and theology. His books have been translated into Spanish, Korean, and Portuguese.



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INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is a problem every preacher faces whether he realizes it or not. The very nature of preaching, of preparing sermons and preaching them, automatically raises the issue of plagiarism. Availability of digital cut and paste technology coupled with the ocean of sermons on the internet just waiting to be downloaded and preached creates the temptation to plagiarize.

Discussion of this issue is fraught with potholes and pitfalls. What exactly is plagiarism? What is the distinction between deliberate and inadvertent plagiarism? At what point does use of someone else's material or intellectual property in a sermon become plagiarism? What are the legal, ethical, professional, personal, practical, and spiritual issues surrounding plagiarism?

DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM

Although there is general agreement on what the term means, there is no standard definition of plagiarism. The first time the word was used in a literary context was near the close of the first century AD when the Roman poet Martial learned that another poet, Fidentinus, was reciting his works and taking credit for them. Martial responded with a series of verses castigating Fidentinus. He referred to Fidentinus as a "plagiarus," a word meaning a kidnapper, seducer, or plunderer. That is an apt metaphor for plagiarism. One "kindnaps" someone else's material and uses it as his own.

The word seems to have entered the English language in the form "plagiary" in the early 17th century with the connotation of literary theft. A "plagiary" is "one who steals the writings of another, and passes them off as his own."[1] In the mid-eighteenth century, plagiarism was defined in Samuel Johnson's dictionary as "the crime of literary theft."[2] Essentially, to plagiarize is to appropriate another's words without proper attribution of the source. This can be done in one of two ways: deliberate or inadvertent. "Plagiarism, therefore, can occur when citations are missing (designating the idea is from someone else) or quotation marks are missing (designating that the exact words is from someone else), or both. Plagiarism can occur even when the original text is paraphrased."[3]

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1 W. W. Skeat, ed., *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, new ed. rev. & enlarged (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 455.

2 Amelia Kennedy, "A Short History of Academic Plagiarism," https://www.quetext.com/blog/short-history-academic-plagiarism.

3 Christian Moriarty, "Note on United States Law, Policy, and Norms in Plagiarism in Brief," https://en.naqa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Note-on-United-States-Law-Sep-10-2020-Moriarty.pdf.

Deliberate plagiarism is almost universally condemned in Western culture.[4] In academic settings, inadvertent plagiarism is still considered ethically wrong, even though there was no intent to deceive. One of the major reasons for the launch of academic programs like Turnitin.com in 2000 was to provide a web platform where academic papers could be received and evaluated for internet plagiarism.

When it comes to the academic world, plagiarism is viewed as a form of academic cheating. We might say it is a form of theft, lying, and dishonesty. Nothing quite destroys credibility as plagiarism.

4 In some Asian cultures, using someone else's material without clear attribution as to the source is considered a way of honoring the author of the material. In this case, the plagiarism is deliberate, but without intent to deceive or pass off material that is not one's own.

PLAGIARISM AND THE LAW

Technology has been something of a double-edged sword for plagiarism: in making it easier to plagiarize, it simultaneously made plagiarism easier to detect. I find it interesting that to date there remains no legal definition of plagiarism, and plagiarism, though considered unethical, is not considered a crime. Nevertheless, things are changing quickly. Preachers should take plagiarism seriously because of potential legal problems.

Carol M. Bast and Linda B. Samuels make a salient point that all pastors should be aware of:

> The authors take the position that unintentional plagiarism should not be treated differently from intentional plagiarism, if the plagiarism is material. Universities, professional organizations, law reviews, journals, and other publishers should adopt a definition of plagiarism that clearly includes both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. While awarding punitive damages will only be appropriate where there is intent, even negligent plagiarism can cause injury and therefore provide the basis for compensatory damages. A successful defense based on lack of intent encourages others to raise the same defense; in addition, it is self-serving and raises doubts as to whether the author was as innocent as claimed. Thus, even an unintentional misrepresentation should be actionable.[5]

The Legal Writing Institute is an organization of professors who teach legal writing at law schools. The Institute has developed a definition of plagiarism for the training of law students and published a plagiarism policy available for adoption by law schools. In the legal field, apparently

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5 Carol M. Bask and Linda B. Samuels, "Plagiarism and Legal Scholarship in the Age of Information Sharing: The Need for Intellectual Honesty," *Catholic University Law Review* 57.3 (Spring 2008), 812–13.

much depends on “express or implied consent,” which if present renders plagiarism “intellectually dishonest or intellectually fraudulent,” but not actually illegal.[6] What is of note here is that plagiarism may not be defined or judged to be illegal, but even when the original author gives consent, such activity is considered ethically problematic.

Plagiarism is intellectual dishonesty and discourtesy. Failure to cite a source is a failure to identify authorship. This intentionally or unintentionally leaves the implication that the plagiarist is the author. It is unprofessional and gives offense when discovered. [7]

If this is the case in the academic world and in the legal world, how much more should plagiarism be viewed as ethically problematic by those in the Christian world.

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6 Bast and Samuels, “Plagiarism and Legal Scholarship in the Age of Information Sharing:” 780–81.

7 Bast and Samuels, 777–79.

HISTORY OF PREACHING & PLAGIARISM

Attitudes towards plagiarism have varied throughout Christian history. Some have advocated using the sermons of others without compunction. Recognizing the reality that not all preachers were created equal in terms of their preaching skill, Augustine sanctioned the use of other's sermons by those less gifted in their writing and sermon skills,[8] but added that such should be done "without deception."[9] Augustine seems to be saying "give credit when making use of other sermons."

During the Middle Ages, there was actually a book of "Sleep Well Sermons," so that "without much study, they may be appropriated and preached to the people."[10] Given the number of sermons now prepared at the last moment on Saturday evening, it would seem many preachers are indeed sleeping well. In seventeenth century England, Queen Elizabeth I mandated that preaching follow the homilies prepared by Cranmer, Latimer, and others and distributed to the pastors. She deemed this necessary to streamline what was being preached and to provide helps to the new Protestant preachers so that they would preach Protestant doctrines. William Paley was blunt: "... if your situation requires a sermon every Sunday, make one and steal five."[11]

Others, however, have viewed the use of other people's sermons as a moral issue. John Chrysostom, contemporary of Augustine, bluntly stated: "If it happens that a preacher weaves into his own words a proportion of

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8 Raymond Bailey, "Plagiarism," William Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 375.

9 Raymond Bailey, "Ethics in Preaching," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, Michael Duduit, ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 551.

10 Charles Dargan, *History of Preaching*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 309.

11 Edmund Paley, "Life of Dr. Paley," in *The Works of William Paley*, D.D., ed. Edmund Paley, 6 vols. (London: C. J. G. and F. Rivington, 1830), 1: xci.

other men's flowers, he falls into worse disgrace than a common thief."[12]

Most people today would agree that using another person's entire sermon nearly verbatim without attribution is egregious plagiarism. Using 50% of another person's sermon, or even 25%, without proper attribution is plagiarism. In my 44 years of church ministry experience, most church members do not approve of their pastor employing another's sermon even with attribution.

Though some preachers use significant amounts of material from other preachers without giving attribution, homileticians are less flexible—they tend to frown on the practice. All preachers would do well to read John Broadus's discussion of the issue in his famous *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. In eleven pages, he summarizes virtually everything a preacher needs to know about plagiarism. He marvels at how preachers "can practice an appropriation which is condemned by the guilty pains they take to hide it."[13] Broadus continued: "If plagiarism is ok, why do so many preachers feel ashamed to admit what they do? ... If it would be bad policy to proclaim the borrowing, how can it be honesty to conceal it?"[14] Haddon Robinson is also clear: "Plagiarism is stealing other people's material ... In a world of preaching, a pastor who takes sermons from other preachers—word for word—without giving credit, is guilty of plagiarism. That is stealing what is not yours."[15] Scott Gibson, who wrote an excellent book on the subject of preaching and plagiarism, hit the nail on the head: "Plagiarism has less to do with actions and more with attitude. It has everything to do with taking responsibility."[16] "Preaching cannot be separated from the personal and professional life of the preacher," said Raymond Bailey.[17]

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12 John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, trans. Graham Neville (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 27.

13 John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, rev. ed., ed. E. C. Dargan (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1898 [Harper Bros., 1926]), 140.

14 Broadus, *Preparation*, 140.

15 Haddon Robinson, "Using Someone Else's Sermon: What is Plagiarism?" Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 586.

16 Scott M. Gibson, *Should We Use Someone Else's Sermon?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 45.

17 Bailey, "Ethics in Preaching," 550.

10 REASONS WHY PREACHER'S PLAGIARIZE

Many factors contribute to pastoral plagiarism. Here is my top ten list.

1. INTERNET TECHNOLOGY.

In the past 25 years, the internet has grown from just under 25,000 websites in 1995 to 1.86 billion in June of 2021. The available data at one's fingertips in a cut-and-paste world is quite a temptation. Homiletician Tom Long noted how "With a few clicks of the mouse, I had uncovered a crime wave of homiletical petty larceny."[18]

2. INSECURITY/LACK OF CONFIDENCE/SENSE OF INADEQUACY.

I have taught preaching now for 35 years. More and more I am hearing from pastors who tell me that they don't feel confident in their preaching. Oftentimes, these are pastors who have been to seminary. I suspect one of the greatest reasons for plagiarism is this lack of self-confidence and insecurity when it comes to preaching.

3. POOR TIME MANAGEMENT/INSUFFICIENT STUDY TIME.

Everybody is busy. Pastors are no exception. They are often some of the most overcommitted people on the planet, with near-impossible schedules to keep. Sermon preparation time is at a premium. It is well-nigh impossible to prepare from scratch a top-notch sermon for Sunday morning in less than 10 to 12 hours when you factor in what it takes in research and writing, even if what is written are notes and not a manuscript. No preacher has the time to prepare sermons; you make time to do it.

4. COMPETITION/COMPARING SELF TO OTHERS.

This reason is related to #2 above but with a built-in pride component. No preacher wants to be out-preached. Any pastor's church members can

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18 Thomas Long, "Stolen Goods: Tempted to Plagiarize," The Christian Century (April 17, 2007), 18.

now get on the internet and find the sermons of well-known preachers at the click of a button. In today's celebrity preacher culture, preachers feel under the gun to produce grand-slam sermons every Sunday so as not to lag behind the pack. I tell my preaching students they live and preach as a small voice amidst an alphabet of professional voices—CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, ESPN, FOX, with millions of dollars of tech and video production.[19] Church members are watching and listening to these slick productions daily, and then on Sunday, … they come to church to listen to you. The competition is stiff and the pressure can be just enough to drive the preacher to plagiarism.

5. LAZINESS/LACK OF DISCIPLINE.

Sermon preparation is the one area in the life of a pastor about which he cannot afford to be lazy. And it must be done every week. Pastors can be tempted to look for a short cut.

6. DESIRE TO BE RECOGNIZED/KNOWN AS A GOOD PREACHER.

This is related to #4 above. Average is not the location on the scale of preaching ability any preacher wants to be parked on. There is a difference between desiring to be the best communicator of God's Word you can possibly be and desiring to be known and recognized as the best preacher out there. The former is worthy; the latter is not. Either way, plagiarism is not the means to that end.

7. HERO WORSHIP.

Younger pastors are particularly susceptible to this. We all have our favorite preachers and influencers. If we are not careful, we can fall into the trap of simply preaching much of their stuff … to the detriment of the people.

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19 This nugget is from Haddon Robinson, "Foreword," in Mark Galli and Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 9.

8. LACK OF CREATIVITY.

“Creativity” is a buzzword in preaching in the 21st century. For some preachers it seems that lack of creativity is a greater problem than lack of solid theology or hermeneutics. Those of us who find ourselves on the short end of the creative stick are often tempted to mimic or copy the creativity of others in preaching. When you think you are a one-talent preacher surrounded by ten-talent preachers, it becomes easier to rationalize bending the rules in order to try and level the playing field.

9. LOSS OF MORALE.

This at first may sound odd as a possible reason for plagiarism. But when you think about it, you can see how this could play a role. Pastors get demoralized at times like anyone. In these low times in ministry, we may just not have the motivation to expend needed energy week by week to crank out those Sunday sermons. It is easy to rationalize plagiarism when at such a low point.

10. MISPLACED PRIORITIES.

When preaching falls several rungs down the ladder of priority for the preacher, the door is open for shortcuts and the temptation to let plagiarism fill the void grows.

Undoubtedly, you can come up with other reasons or excuses for plagiarism. The important thing is it does not matter what the underlying cause of the temptation to plagiarize, we must resist the temptation.

10 TYPES OF PLAGIARISM

In a very helpful White Paper produced by the people at Turnitin, a web-based platform designed to assist professors in academia to spot plagiarism in student papers, they have identified "the Plagiarism Spectrum" from a study of thousands of plagiarized papers defined across a spectrum of intent.[20]

This is very helpful to preachers in that it clearly identifies the actual examples of plagiarism and thus helps us to know what to avoid in our preaching.

Ordered from the most to the least severe in terms of intent to deceive, the 10 types are listed and defined below.

1. CLONE:

An act of submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own.

2. CTRL-C:

A written piece that contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations.

3. FIND–REPLACE:

The act of changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source in a paper.

4. REMIX:

An act of paraphrasing from other sources and making the content fit together seamlessly.

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20 Turnitin White Paper, "The Plagiarism Spectrum: Instructor Insights into the 10 Types of Plagiarism." https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/10-types-of-plagiarism.pdf.

5. RECYCLE:

The act of borrowing generously from one's own previous work without citation; To self plagiarize.

6. HYBRID:

The act of combining perfectly cited sources with copied passages—without citation—in one paper.

7. MASHUP:

A paper that represents a mix of copied material from several different sources without proper citation.

8. 404 ERROR:

A written piece that includes citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources

9. AGGREGATOR:

The "Aggregator" includes proper citation, but the paper contains almost no original work.

10. RE-TWEET:

This paper includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure.[21]

From these examples, the preacher can identify where he has or might be most likely to plagiarize, and thus where to draw the line.

Preachers must become like Kenny Rogers' gambler: "You've got to know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em." Most preachers aren't

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21 "The Plagiarism Spectrum: Instructor Insights into the 10 Types of Plagiarism." 4. https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/10-types-of-plagiarism.pdf,

plagiarizers, at least not intentionally. Preachers must write sermons weekly. Moreover, preaching is an oral/aural event not a formal paper in the classroom. In sermon preparation, preachers make use of a cornucopia of sources: reference material, commentaries, theological books, grammar books, and a host of others. In writing a single sermon, a pastor might make use of a dozen sources easily; some even more. To what extent should these sources be cited orally in the sermon?

Here is where most preachers can find themselves in the land of confusion. How does one adjudicate the varying standards of plagiarism on the market today? One person's plagiarism may be another's research. Most preachers don't want to plagiarize, but don't always know when or how to credit sources in a sermon. Craig Brian Larson expressed this frustration for all preachers when he said: "Preaching is like blocking defensive linemen in football: the line between blocking and holding can be as fuzzy as that between research and reliance."[22]

I have been writing new sermons or revising previous sermons almost weekly now for forty years. When I prepare a new sermon, it is not unusual for me to glean from, quote or otherwise use material from upwards of 25 sources. How does a preacher determine when to reference his use of someone else's material and when not to do so? Surely a preacher should not cite all his references in verbal footnote form in every sermon. To do so would destroy the oral flow of a sermon and drive the listeners batty with clunky and boring repetition of statements like: "As Martin Luther said in his commentary on Psalms …" or "In Spurgeon's sermon on the Prodigal Son which he preached in 1878 …" or "In volume 8 of The

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22 Craig Brian Larson, "Plagiarism, Shmagiarism," https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/themes/purity/plagiarism-shmagiarism.html.

Works of John Wesley, …”

Craig Brian Larson provides preachers with some good practical principles to aid in making decisions about source citation in our preaching. I basically agree with his approach:

> 1. Preachers should credit others only when necessary. Otherwise, we clutter up the sermon with unnecessary oral footnotes.
>
> 2. Regarding Scriptural and theological principles, main idea, sermon titles, etc. – the guideline is whether the idea has common currency or not and whether the expression is unique and striking.
>
> 3. All verbatim material should be acknowledged.
>
> 4. Illustrations, other than stories, should be credited if you can find the source.
>
> 5. Sermon titles, if well known to be identified with one preacher, should be cited.
>
> 6. Sermon outline citation depends on how much of the outline is employed. If the outline is modified at least 50% or more, credit need not be given.[23]

When we are constrained to cite a source in our preaching, there are ways to do so without unnecessarily becoming pedantic, formal, or academic. For example, you might say: “I came across this story …” when needing to introduce the story. Another helpful introduction would be something like “Recently in the newspaper,” or “I read recently on the internet …” When needing to cite a commentary but not a direct quotation, you might begin with “One commentator notes …” or give the name of the author: “D. A. Carson noted [stated, said, etc.] …” Another option is to

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23 Larson, “Plagiarism, Shmagiarism.”

say something like “Luther once wrote …” I would not recommend making use of full citations in preaching so that you give the author, book title, year of publication, etc. Such a practice would virtually destroy the flow of preaching as oral discourse.

KEY STEPS TO GUARD AGAINST PLAGIARISM

THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS WE CAN DO TO GUARD AGAINST PLAGIARISM IN PREACHING.

1. Be honest about the problem of plagiarism with yourself, others, and God.

2. Determine simply not to do it.

3. Always give proper credit when necessary with any material used in your sermon.

4. Study, Study, Study. The more work you put into the sermon, the less you will feel the need to plagiarize. Read widely.

5. Let your text of Scripture dictate the sermon outline, exposition, illustration, and application. Text-Driven preaching will minimize plagiarism because you are letting the text dictate the outline and content of the sermon.

6. Look for creativity first in the text itself. On careful reflection, often the text itself will suggest creative ways to present it in a sermon.

IF YOU HAVE PLAGIARIZED, THERE ARE SOME IMMEDIATE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE.

1. Confess privately to God the sin of plagiarism.
2. Confess to your church and seek forgiveness.
3. Contact the author whose material you have plagiarized and seek forgiveness.

WHEN YOU HAVE PLAGIARIZED, WHAT THEN?

PLAGIARISM AND 3 BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES.

1. Jeremiah 23:30 says: “Therefore, take note! I am against the prophets”--the Lord’s declaration--who steal My words from each other.” Plagiarism is stealing. It is a betrayal of trust.

2. Pastor’s should be responsible with the gifts God has given us (Luke 12:48).

3. God calls preachers to be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Culturally, plagiarism is considered unethical. How can we preachers have any lower standard than culture in this area? It doesn’t matter whether the material we are using is copyrighted or not (it is still someone else’s work whether copyrighted or not, right?), or whether we have purchased the material for use, or whether we have been given permission by the author to use material. Failure to give credit is morally and biblically wrong.

Fundamentally, giving due credit in our preaching is about being honest with God, our hearers, and ourselves.



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