

BROTHERS, WE ARE
NOT PLAGIARISTS

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*A PASTORAL PLEA TO FORSAKE THE
PEDDLING OF GOD'S WORD*



DAVID SCHROCK

Brothers, We Are Not Plagiarists:
A Pastoral Plea to Forsake the Peddling of God's Word

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Foreword

In 2 Timothy 2:15, the apostle Paul admonished Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” Rightly handling the Word of God—which the man of God is called to preach in the power of the Spirit of God—is inherent in being the kind of worker that God approves. This is the aspiration of every pastor and indeed everyone who is given the responsibility to preach God’s Word.

This responsibility is the primary duty of men whom God equips and calls to shepherd his people. The fact that Paul admonishes Timothy to “rightly” handle the Word reminds us that it is very possible to handle Scripture wrongly. Blatant mishandling of Scripture is rather obvious, like the time I heard a man quote “For we wrestle not . . .” (Eph. 6:12a) as his text for a devotional message for a pastors’ gathering, and then launch into a tirade on the cowardice of modern preachers because they were afraid to fight!

He may have had a point, but he surely didn’t get it from that text.

But Paul’s admonition does not only concern faulty exegesis and interpretation (though it most certainly includes

that), it also forbids any other shameful tactics that a man who is tasked with preaching might be tempted to employ. Preaching other people's sermons as if they are your own would most definitely be included among such activities. Sadly, in recent years we have witnessed several high-profile examples of pastors taking exact words, jokes, and even personal-life illustrations from other preachers and using them as if they are original. Such pulpit plagiarism is shameful.

Every pastor who gives himself to diligent study in the work of sermon preparation knows what it is to benefit from the insights of scholars, theologians, exegetes, commentators, and other preachers. We want to do our best to make sure we understand the text we are preparing to preach and we also want to preach it in the very best way possible. Those noble aspirations, however, can yield to subtle temptations to take the work of others and simply parrot it as if it is our own.

At most points, knowing where careful research ends and plagiarism begins is not difficult. Every well-taught student knows that it is never acceptable to take the exact sentences or paragraphs written by someone else and write them as if they are your own words. In most reputable institutions of higher learning (including most seminaries where pastors go to receive academic training), committing such an offense incurs severe penalties. Quotation marks and footnotes are important tools that should be properly used to help writers avoid intellectual theft.

For speakers, however, the line between research and plagiarism can sometimes be more easily blurred. If three

sources agree on a syntactical point in a text, should the preacher cite any one or all of them? If an idea is sparked in your mind while listening to the sermon of another preacher must that fact be stated when expressing that idea in your own sermon? Can a preacher legitimately use the divisions of a biblical passage that he finds in a commentary? If so, should he cite the commentator?

All these, and many more, are legitimate questions that must be considered by every pastor who wants to rightly handle the Word of God in preaching.

Dr. David Schrock has given careful thought to this malady that plagues the modern church. In an age when both written sermons and audio recordings of preaching are readily available, the wisdom that he shares in this small book is priceless. With scholarly precision and pastoral care, David explains and demonstrates what faithful expositors are called to do and must avoid doing. He writes as a practitioner who is very familiar with the challenges of using the insights of others when speaking publicly. As such, this book is not so much a critique of pulpit plagiarism as it is a positive manual of how to avoid it. His labors have served both churches and those undershepherds whose responsibility it is to feed them week by week by serving them the Word of God.

This book should be in the hands of every seminary student and aspiring pastor to help direct them to careful habits that will serve them well in pursuing their calling. Those already in the regular rhythm of preaching will also benefit

from the wisdom in this book, by using it as a guide to help maintain integrity in the main responsibility of their work.

All who love the Lord Jesus and are jealous for his glory to be manifested in the church through “the foolishness of preaching” are indebted to Dr. Schrock for this helpful tool.

Tom Ascol
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March 28, 2022

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

—2 Corinthians 2:14–17

Preface

BROTHERS, WE ARE NOT PLAGIARISTS

Anyone who has ever listened to one of my sermons or read the title of this book might say it sounds a lot like John Piper. And you would not be far off. I do not make such a statement with conceit, daring to liken myself to one of the most influential preachers of my generation. Rather, I am simply acknowledging that aspiring pastors are bound to emulate solid, seasoned teachers.

Early in my twenties, I cut my teeth on Piper's sermons and books. For close to a decade I listened to his preaching regularly. So it is only natural that, when I began to preach, his speech patterns, style, and doctrinal emphases would affect my own.

Thinking back on his influence, I can still hear Piper's voice, with the sound of *seashells* resonating in my ears. And today, lines from one of his biographies or one of his *God-besotted* expositions often come to mind.¹ Indeed, Pastor John's teaching and writing have shaped my language,

my theology, and my preaching immensely, as has the work of many other pastors, preachers, and teachers.

This is how all preachers are formed. No pastor is born in a vacuum, and each of us has tendencies drawn from those who have gone before him. Still, for all the ways Piper and others have influenced me, I have never preached one of their sermons. In college, when I began leading Bible studies, I used the notes of an older minister *one time*. Graciously, he offered them to me, and, for reasons of time and improvement (his notes were better than mine), I taught his material. Make that, I *tried* to teach his material.

Teaching the notes of someone else, in my experience, was a disaster. I didn't know the material—*his* material—and I fumbled all the way through it. Perhaps with more practice I could have mastered his material, but I vowed then and there, for good or bad, to always preach my own material, culled from my own study of the Word. By God's grace, for the last twenty years, I have kept that vow and always preached the Word of God with my own notes.

If this sounds boastful, it's not. It should not even be noteworthy. Every Lord's Day for the last two millennia, faithful servants of the Word have proclaimed the gospel from their personal study of the Word. They have labored over the text so that hungry souls would have living bread to eat. All of those brothers have had different abilities and different styles of delivery, but they have one thing in common—they preached God's Word according to their own honest, prayerful study. For generations this has been the way of the pastor.

Sadly, there are some today who do not seem to have that same conviction. Or, at least, they are more open to borrowing, sharing, or proclaiming ideas and words that are not original to them.

In the summer of 2021, this willingness to preach the sermons of others became a source of major contention in the Southern Baptist Convention. Just days after Ed Litton was elected convention president, it was revealed that he had repeatedly preached the sermons of J. D. Greear—the outgoing SBC president. Instead of calling for an inquiry or pushing pause on Litton’s presidency, Greear threw his support behind Litton, even as the latter admitted to using Greear’s sermons. Even more, Litton’s church did the same.

Such a revelation caused great concern, and the internet exploded for weeks. But when it became apparent that nothing would be done, the clamor soon died down and the concern was forgotten. Only it wasn’t.

Today, the topic of plagiarism in the pulpit continues to fill discussions on seminary campuses. While he has been supported by his friends, Ed Litton’s name has become irrevocably connected to that topic. In short, the blemish caused by his practice of preaching other people’s sermons has not been resolved. Worse, the unwillingness of his friends, his church, and his denomination to confront him not only shows a lack of love for him, but a disloyalty to the Word of God. Apparently, in our age of unapologetic pragmatism, peddling the Word of God is still fashionable (2 Cor. 2:17).

THE REASON FOR THIS BOOK

Going back to summer 2021, I wrote a number of blog posts on pastors and plagiarism.² Since then, I have continued to mull over this situation and what it means for plagiarism in the pulpit to be acceptable. If pastors are encouraged to use the work of others—with or without permission—I ask aloud: What effect will this have on the church, the pastoral office, and the preaching of God’s truth? The church already suffers from a *credibility* problem, and if pastors are permitted to plagiarize, this problem will only be magnified.

So out of concern for the church, its pastors, and its people, I write this short book.

In the following pages, I will offer far more than a response to Ed Litton. I have nothing against him personally. If anything, I am concerned for the toll this imbroglia has taken upon his soul. This book is not an *ad hominem* attack on him. Instead, it is a salvo against the systemic practice of sharing and stealing sermons, a practice for which Litton is the most well-known recent example. The real genesis of this book is the collective “Meh!” and shrugged shoulders of Southern Baptists who have not taken sermon plagiarism more seriously. I will address concrete illustrations related to Ed Litton and matters in the Southern Baptist Convention, but the overall message is constructive, not carping.

With a desire to see churches built up, I offer this book as a short study of Scripture to see what God expects from his shepherds. After all, the job description of a pastor was not the brainchild of Lifeway, Vanderbloemen, or the Barna

Group. As the pastoral epistles tell us, pastors are called by God to bring the Word of God to the people of God. Therefore, the people of God and the men who teach and lead need to know—and abide by—what God expects of them.

Thus, in what follows, I will make a case that using the sermons of others is plagiarism, regardless of permission; that plagiarism never has a place in the church, let alone the pulpit; that every defense of the practice brings disrepute upon the church; and that churches should never shelter pastors who preach the work of others. Believe it or not, this book is far from an agitated rant. I will spend most of these pages outlining healthy habits for sermon formation and sermon annotation. Indeed, if Scripture itself is filled with citations and allusions to other texts, then it might have something to say about best practices for borrowing from others. How did the apostle Paul footnote? Inquiring pastors should want to know.

Thus, there is much for us to learn—or relearn—from Scripture on this subject. Too many churches and pastors have been enslaved by the gods of pragmatism, postmodernism, and packaging. Consequently, they have succumbed to treating pastors as performers instead of shepherds. What I am offering is an alternative vision for pulpit ministry. I am offering a biblical case for pastors to fulfill their primary calling by being pastor-teachers who equip the saints with a diet of biblical exposition.

To that end, I am riffing on, not ripping off, John Piper's *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*.³ In that book,

Piper doesn't touch on plagiarism, but he could have. In our day, a sustained argument against plagiarism in the pulpit is needed. It is needed because those pastors who have accepted the practice, or engaged in the practice, or endorsed the practice (even sharing their sermons), have forgotten what a pastor does and why preaching their own work is so important.

I will say it again: "Brothers, we are not plagiarists!" And by God's grace, may churches and their pastors repent of peddling the Word and recover a vision for true, biblical preaching.

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

to help him or her, so it is natural for pastors to get help too.

3. Isolation. “The pastor is about the only public communicator today whose efforts are not collaborative or edited by others before they are made public.” And any requirement that pastors must produce a sermon on their own is a “romantic illusion” that springs from the Enlightenment.²⁰

For these reasons, the editors of *Christianity Today* make the case that pastors should freely use the work of others (while always giving credit to their sources) and that “congregations should allow, even encourage, their pastors to use the best material from books, magazines, and the Internet.”²¹

With such an argument coming from such an influential magazine, it should not be surprising that pastors freely borrow the work of others. Ironically, the statements offered by Litton and Greear reflect *Christianity Today*’s argument and thereby prove that there is a stream of thought in the church today that stands against the strong denunciation of plagiarism in the pulpit.

This brings us back to the Bible with a bevy of questions: What does God think about such plagiarism? What does *he* expect of pastors, preaching, and plagiarism? If the Bible is our guide for all of life and godliness, then it must say something to us about pastors and the task of preaching. In their short editorial, *Christianity Today* simply assumes the modern context makes it permissible to re-tweet sermons, but is that what Scripture says? When it comes to plagiarism,

Christianity Today does not look to the Bible for answers, but we must.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PLAGIARISM?

Limiting our inquiry to the pastoral epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus), we find five discreet truths about plagiarism and one general truth that speaks to the issue of the pastor and his vocation of handling the Word. Without giving a full exposition of any passage, we can discern a double-sided message from Paul: (1) Pastors show themselves approved before God and God’s people by rightly handling God’s Word in the study and the pulpit, and (2) pastors do not show themselves approved by peddling the Word and re-tweeting the works of others. With those two themes in mind, let’s consider the wisdom given to Titus, Timothy, and all pastors everywhere.

1. Plagiarism Invites Teaching without Knowledge

(1 Timothy 1:3–7)

In 1 Timothy 1:3–7, Paul urges Timothy to remain in Ephesus and to contend with the false teachers arising in that city. Instead of teaching the truth of God’s Word, which Paul calls a “stewardship from God,” they “devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculation rather than . . . faith” (v. 4). Speaking of these false teachers, he writes, “Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, *desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding*

either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” (vv. 6–7, emphasis added).

The key point for our discussion of plagiarism is this: *Plagiarism invites teaching without understanding*. While some may argue that those who preach the work of others would only cite or re-tweet a sermon they understand, the truth is that we cannot understand *fully* what we borrow from others. Within the study of Scripture, there is a Spirit-led process of learning from God’s Word that is essential for pastoral ministry and for faithful exposition.

In Paul’s letter, he makes the point to Timothy that false teachers do not understand the law and how it brings people to the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:8–11). In our day, the rise of plagiarism also assures us that those speaking about the Word of God will have less personal knowledge of the truth they speak. This is John Piper’s introductory point: Being an “echo of an echo,” instead of exulting in the glories that you have personally seen in the Word of God, is an invitation for pastors to speak of what they do not know.

Again, the argument can be made that those who borrow material can learn from the brightest minds. But such knowledge is always second hand. As twentieth-century German theologian Helmut Thielicke observed in his book *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, “The man who is in the position of reproducing a lecture about Luther, or possibly giving one himself, perhaps knows nothing or almost nothing about all this, and can hardly know.” Rather, this man “lives at second hand.”²²

In context, Thielicke is lamenting the “adolescent” seminarian whose knowledge about doctrine exceeds his knowledge of God. But the same problem applies here. If pastors are preaching the work of others, it will stunt their growth and hinder their own knowledge of God. As preaching professor Haddon Robinson has noted, expository preaching is the “communication of a biblical concept,” derived from a rigorous study of the Bible, “which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.”²³ If preachers skip the study of God’s Word for personal edification and rely on the work of others, they will endanger their own souls and the souls of their congregations.

To be clear, plagiarism doesn’t produce unbelief, but it does promote a way of speaking that divorces biblical knowledge from existential knowledge. Because pastors already struggle to live up to the words they preach *when they do immerse themselves in studying God’s Word*, the permission for and promotion of plagiarism will only produce a generation of pastors who teach without knowledge. And such teaching without knowledge can create a host of doctrinal and ethical problems.

2. Plagiarism Promotes Impersonal Communication

(1 Timothy 1:12–17)

A few verses later in 1 Timothy, Paul details God’s mercy in saving him and calling him to serve as an apostle (1:12–17). He describes his previous life as being “a blasphemer,

persecutor, and insolent opponent” of Christ (v. 13), but because he received mercy, God has displayed in his very life what the gospel looks like. Indeed, Paul’s testimony (repeated in Acts 9, 22, and 26) is given to the church to demonstrate what happens in conversion—the old man is put to death, and the new man is brought to life (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17).

Such is the nature of gospel ministry. A preacher speaks gospel truths as one recipient of grace inviting others to come and know the same. In such communications of the gospel, God uses vessels of mercy who have particular stories, gifts, and manners of speaking. No two preachers are the same. Yes, pastors will master the craft of preaching by listening to others, but to paraphrase D. A. Carson, if a preacher only listens to messages from one or two of his pastoral colleagues, he will sound like a cheap imitation. But if he listens to dozens of preachers, he will learn to develop his own voice.

One of the most important things a preacher can do is to grow comfortable in who God has made him to be and then to speak with the gifts God has given to him. I have pastored two churches, and my personality, education, and gifts served me well for one congregation, but not the other. Thankfully, I am now in a situation where my gifts match the church. But this fact needs to be recognized: A biblically qualified man will not fit in every congregation. And plagiarism inevitably leads to an ongoing impersonal ministry of the Word, even leading pastors to make use of illustrations and experiences that *others* have had.

Paul could proclaim the gospel through his personal testimony. Pastors who are true shepherds will do the same. As Peter tells elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2), so pastors should be preaching messages that arise from the life and strife of the congregations God has given them. When messages are borrowed from other locations, however, congregational specificity is endangered and preaching with a personal dimension is in jeopardy. Sure, attentive re-tweeters can supplement borrowed messages with personal stories, but that makes the message all the more artificial.

3. Plagiarism Threatens the Pastoral Office

(1 Timothy 3:1–7; cf. Titus 1:5–9)

When Paul turns to the qualifications of an overseer in 1 Timothy 3, he provides at least two reasons why plagiarism cannot work in the pulpit.

First, the overarching qualification for an elder is to be “above reproach.” Both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 list this qualification first, and Titus 1 lists it twice (vv. 5, 7). In the second occurrence, Paul says, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.” Stewardship for Paul relates to teaching God’s Word, and thus the one who brings God’s Word must not have any moral or character flaws that would threaten the communication of that message.

But this is exactly what plagiarism does. Undetected plagiarism may not threaten the content of the gospel, but when it is discovered that the herald of the truth has not

been truthful in citing his sources, all sorts of questions arise. When such knowledge is revealed, the watching world writes articles exposing the removal of past sermons and laughs at the church. And more harmful, others are less likely to listen to preaching of God's Word. After all, the world will say, "Pastors are charlatans, anyways." To avoid this kind of accusation, Paul says of the overseer, "He must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7).

When a pastor is not above reproach in his preaching, the unbelieving world is uninterested in *Christianity Today's* defense of tired pastors borrowing sermons. Instead, they add plagiarism to their list of reasons for dismissing God's church and its life-giving message. If you haven't noticed, the reputation of pastors is not doing well today, and incidents of plagiarism, whether we think they are justified or not, do not help. God calls pastors to be above reproach so that we do not become a distraction to the truths of the gospel.

Second, elders are those who must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Titus 1:9). Plagiarism undermines this pastoral qualification and makes it impossible to tell if someone is gifted to teach or if he is simply skilled to speak.²⁴ Worse, if a young preacher permits himself to use the work of others, he will never develop the gifts God has given him, which will lead to a perceived skill in preaching that does not match his actual gifting. To put it bluntly, plagiarism will inevitably misplace men in ministry.

For the sake of men called to preach and for the sake of their churches, we cannot permit pastors to re-tweet sermons. Such a practice is a recipe for long term disaster—for the preacher, for the local church, and for the universal church. Focusing on pastor themselves for a moment: One way men are sustained in ministry is by studying the Word, nourishing their own souls and bringing to their congregations the bread of life on which they have already fed. Plagiarism short-circuits this weekly rhythm, hindering the soul of the preacher, threatening the pastoral office, and changing the nature of gospel ministry.

4. Plagiarism Changes the Nature of Gospel Ministry (2 Timothy 2:1–2; James 3:1)

For those familiar with trends in ministry over the last century, you will not be surprised by the popularity of preachers borrowing sermon material or relying on teams for their sermon preparation.²⁵ As Gordon-Conwell professor David Wells has demonstrated time and again, pastors have become ministry managers, therapeutic counselors, and church-growth professionals.²⁶ This is a far cry from the biblical pattern of pastors as stewards of the Word and heralds of the truth. The current tendency to *encourage* borrowing sermon material, instead of repudiate it, is the sad but unsurprising fruit of losing a biblical approach to the pastorate.

When we go back to the pastoral epistles, however, we find something else entirely. We don't find teams collaborating to create sermons; we find gifted men who studied the Scripture and labored hard to feed the flock with the Word.

Most explicitly, Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” This verse, which addresses the individual preacher, single-handedly denies the place for borrowing material. Why? Because it is impossible to be approved as a faithful handler of God’s Word if you are using someone else’s best material.

Certainly, we could get into all the ways that pastors *rightly* lean on others in the process of sermon-writing.²⁷ It is true that every preacher depends on those who have gone before him. Commentaries and those who write them are gifts to the church. Any pastor who refuses to use them is fooling himself. Even Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:1–2, encourages Timothy to remember what Paul has said, so that he can teach faithful men who will then teach others. There is a place for preaching in community, but plagiarism sours the goodness of learning from others or preaching among a fraternity of preachers (as in Acts 13:1–3).

Because teachers will be judged more severely (James 3:1), they must give an account for what they teach and how they teach it. In the pastoral epistles, the elders who are gifted to teach are called to be stewards of the Word, faithful servants who teach sound doctrine from the Scriptures. Unfortunately, a culture of plagiarism changes the nature of this ministry. Pastors are led away from being prayerful disciples of God’s Word to being skillful distributors of man’s sermons. Such a change impairs the ability of the preacher to give an

account for his words. And it denies the preacher the need to be skilled in biblical knowledge, languages, doctrine, or the wiles of the human heart. Freedom from doing the work of preparing sermons each week may open up times to do other ministry (counseling, discipling, etc.), but in the long run, the church is impoverished when its primary teacher is not steeped in the Bible.

In such instances, the pastor and his flock suffer from a deficiency of the Word. This may not be immediately evident, especially in a day when biblical literacy and theological depth are already lacking. Nevertheless, the bitter fruit will come. And when it comes, it may be too late for the shepherd and the sheep under his care.

5. Plagiarism Entices False Shepherds and Rewards

Laziness (1 Timothy 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:1–7; 4:5)

In addition to the harm plagiarism does to the genuine pastor, allowing unoriginal teaching material also entices false shepherds to find a place in the church. Addressing the problem of false teachers, Paul warns Timothy of those who imagine that teaching God’s Word is “a means of gain” (1 Timothy 6:5). Without assigning motives to those who have been exposed plagiarizing sermons, I submit that if a congregation permits borrowed material to be preached, it will only open the door to false teachers—either false in doctrine or false in desire.

Churches already have enough trouble calling pastors who will serve with good consciences, and pastors have

enough trouble restraining their own ambitions for success in ministry. Adding the prospect of preaching slick sermons of someone else does nothing to mortify the pastor's desires for a larger congregation nor to protect the church from charlatans who are using the pulpit as a means of self-promotion. Just the opposite—it allures pastors to depend on the work of others. Thus, even if a church experiences a greater season of sermonic delivery following the use of re-tweeted sermons, in the long run, the costs will outweigh the benefits.

Closely associated with the desire for a larger church and the monetary gain that goes with it is the desire for greater ease. Preaching is hard work. And as with anything that is hard, the temptation to find shortcuts are many. Yet this temptation for ease is exactly where Paul speaks most directly: “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5) In short, Paul is saying to preachers of the Word, “Do the work!”

The bivocational pastor doesn't have to be the next Billy Graham or John Piper. The small-town pastor doesn't have to engage all the cultural challenges that Mark Dever does. Before the Lord and his heavenly court (2 Tim. 4:1), the faithful pastor must simply “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (v. 2). Nowhere in the pastoral epistles do we find a word about eloquence or erudition. It is all fidelity to the Scripture, but such

fidelity means crucifying the desire to use the ministry as a means of gain and eschewing all temptation to laziness in preaching. By contrast, when plagiarism is embraced and encouraged, it does untold damage to the preacher and the church who receives his ministry. But even above the impact that can be seen is the impact that plagiarism has on the Word of God itself.

A FINAL WORD: PLAGIARISM DISHONORS THE WORD

The cumulative message of the pastoral epistles is to guard the flock by guarding sound doctrine. Preaching the Word is the work of the pastorate. There is nothing more important for a pastor than holding out God's Word to God's people every week. In that work, the pastor soon learns that what God has called him to is an impossible task. "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). Yet the faithful pastor, in prayerful dependence on the Lord, finds strength to do the work of the ministry in the power of the Spirit (cf. Col. 1:28–29).

Plagiarism destroys all of this. Not only does it turn preaching from a week-long communion with God and his Word to the rehearsed repetition of someone else's work, it also invites scrutiny and skepticism on the veracity of God's Word and the sincerity of God's gospel. Instead of protecting the Word and the flock, plagiarism endangers the flock and the right preaching of the Word. For this reason, pastors must spur each other on to fulfill their ministry of preaching the Word—a Word prepared during the week for the people they pastor.

Anything less than this fails to honor God's Word properly and invites disrepute on the Word of Life. For that reason above all others, as popular as plagiarizing sermons has become, it is biblically indefensible.

May God give us the courage of our convictions to stand against such practices. And may God strengthen his shepherds to continue to study the Word of God so that we would show ourselves approved as faithful shepherds of the flock that Christ purchased with his blood.