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"BLOCKBUSTER SERMONS" AND AUTHORSHIP ISSUES IN EVANGELICALISM

In 2018, Rocky Mountain Church in Woodland Park, Colorado posted a call for a new pastor to an online job board for church workers. This post, though, caused a quite a stir. It read in part:

Rocky Mountain Church is looking for a pastor who teaches like Craig Groeschel or Andy Stanley or even a bit like Steven Furtick. . . .

When you watch a sermon from Craig Groeschel, Andy Stanley, or Steven Furtick, you feel like you were fed. Why can't we have a church without playing videos from the above pastors?

Here is our concept. If a worship leader can take a song from Chris Tomlin and play it just like the album and that is 100% accepted in the church why can't you, as a pastor, copy or do word per word of a sermon from Craig Groeschel and add 10% of your own style to it just like the band does. This concept would work great mixed with your own sermons about 20% of the time.

Meaning let's give Blockbuster Sermons to the people. Proven messages or hit sermons then add 20% to 50% of your personal sermons based on a mutual agreement and or the congregation response. Test it out and see how it goes. (qtd in Aigner)

Though job descriptions may surely have percentages and workload distributions, this one reads like a curious "originality report" produced by a plagiarism detection service for predominantly white evangelicalism where more copying from highly esteemed figures means a better sermon.

Responses to this ad within the target community of U.S. evangelicalism were largely critical. Evangelical news and culture magazine *Relevant* reported on the posting, calling it a "controversial" program ("This Church"). The satirical site *Stuff Christian Culture Likes* shared a screen capture of the original posting, and commenters identified such an arrangement as "plagiarism" and "stealing" ("You should"). *Patheos* blogger Jonathan Aigner characterizes this situation as "Pastor-Poacher nonsense." Jelani Greenidge, Associate Pastor at Sunset Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon, grounds his extensive critique in essentially rhetorical concerns: "I believe that God calls both pastors and worship leaders to minister in accordance with their context." Using popular songs in worship is common. Diverse audiences surely find similar sermon topics relevant. However, Greenidge lists the many modifications required to make songs

devotionally powerful or appropriate for in-person worship, and he notes how context-sensitive audience analysis should inform sermon delivery. Given the highly charged reactions against this call for a pastor, where did the unusual idea come from, that a preacher of celebrities' sermons would be desirable?

Questions related to delivering others' sermons have received a fair amount of discussion, with many leaders positively advocating some version of sermon appropriation. Rick Warren, pastor and founder of the influential megachurch Saddleback Church, has long-urged pastors to buy and use his sermons and other resources, adopting a tone of encouragement and cultivating a sense of teamwork ("About"). Two past presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have actively promoted the use of their sermons. SBC President from 2000-2002, James Merritt supported pastors appropriating at least one of his Father's Day sermons, absolving them of any concern about "plagiarizing." Adrian Rogers, SBC President from 1979-1980 and 1986-1988, told pastors interested in using his sermons, "If my bullet fits your gun, shoot it, but use your own powder" (qtd. in Rogers). The specific metaphorical image of gunpowder may be unfamiliar, but the notion resonates with the familiar Romantic idea of authorship as connected to an organic, vital energy. But the energy here involves not the production of original text, but the intentional use of another's work after prayerful consultation with God.

Despite these more enthusiastic endorsements of preaching others' sermons, diverse responses to the general practice have appeared alongside technological, moral, and pedagogical anxieties that will be familiar to writing specialists. As with many authorship and intellectual property questions, questions about such sermon-giving practices were raised in connection with the growth of the Internet. Instead of "paper mills," the concern was "sermon resources" (MacPherson) and Google (Thronton). Negative evaluations of sermon appropriation have led to responses that included, on the one hand, moralistic polemics: "You got lazy. You foolishly thought that if you preached like a megapastor you could be a megapastor. You started borrowing, then stealing" (Thronton). On the other hand, some offer instructive correctives (Grear; Perman and Taylor; Piper; Stetzer).

Why is it important to examine the phenomenon of sermon appropriation generally and specifically in the context of evangelicalism? According to the Pew Research Center's *Religious Landscape Survey*, just over a third of the U.S. population, and 58% of the evangelical Protestant community, attends religious services at least once a week. So a significant percentage of the population encounters sermons on a regular basis, and this genre is one frequently encountered by smaller, yet highly motivated constituencies. Consequently, questions of sermon content, function, and provenance are important.

Research from rhetoric and literacy scholars brings into focus issues of individuality versus community as it regards sermonic activity, as well as gender and

racial dynamics. In *The Gendered Pulpit*, Roxanne Mountford describes the gendered ideology that codes sermon-giving as masculine. While mainline Protestant denominations have largely settled that the pulpit should be open to women, Mountford studied how some women adapt longstanding expectations of the “manly” art of sermon writing to their preaching purposes – purposes that often foreground community-building over exhortation of dogma. With its focus on the singular accomplishments of apparently remarkable *men* (the list of “Blockbuster Sermon” writers in the Rocky Mountain Church posting were all men), the job description seems to embody the connection Mountford draws between the traditional, masculine sermon tradition and theologies oriented toward individual salvation, rather than the regeneration of communities. Relational dynamics and issues of community proprietorship surface at the level of rhetorical production in Beverly Moss’s study of African-American preachers’ sermons. Of these sermons, Moss contends that “multiple participants must be present to ‘write’ in order for the text to exist” and that “the sermon belongs to the moment” (138, 143). Community involvement is central. The emphasis in white evangelicalism generally operates from a different theological and cultural stance, one that privileges a perceived individualism (e.g., the individual believer’s experience of and relationship to God is paramount). Whatever promotes a believer’s faith development has value.

How the target community perceives sermon appropriation is also bound up with group perceptions of another text: the Bible. The Bible exists not just as another text, but as an ur-text. The Bible, within evangelicalism, is the revealed Truth of God. This Platonic understanding of truth leads to an ideology that treats language as best when operating transparently. Given that Truth is already established, the pastor’s task, then, involves presenting received knowledge in a useful way. In light of this predicament, J. D. Greear, prior to his election as current SBC President, sympathized with pastors who might find it difficult to know exactly how to avoid source misuse in sermon development. He sympathizes because “[a]lmost everything we say has already been said elsewhere. If not, we have reason to worry! If you come up with ‘something no one has ever seen before,’ there might be a reason. The faith was committed ‘once for all’ to the saint” (Greear).

This episode and the background that informs it lead me to some questions that might be of interest to writing specialists concerned about intellectual property and authorship issues:

- 1) Operating on a logic that likens the role of musical efforts within a religious service to the role of the sermon, the Rocky Mountain Church posting claimed universal agreement (“100% accepted”) for an understanding of worship music as pure copying. While this is highly questionable, how might insights from studies of remix culture and musical sampling help scholars and teachers think through the intellectual property and authorship issues involved in this pastor search? How are appropriations of music and discourse different?

- 2) White evangelicals are the segment of the U.S. population to most consistently register support for President Trump. What might the intersection of church growth-oriented, consumerism-influenced, celebrity pastor culture at which this job posting exists contribute to our understanding about the interaction of religious, cultural, and textual ideologies within this highly motivated community?
- 3) Given that the example pastors and worship leader referenced in the posting are all white men, to what extent do celebrity pastor culture and sermon appropriation practices reinforce oppressive racial and gender ideologies?
- 4) What other literacy practices and rhetorical activities might be implicated in, or influenced by, sermon appropriation?

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