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Commentary: Business is booming for Web sites offer `fresh' sermons for pastors

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Have you heard the one about the pastor who didn't know the difference between piety and plagiarism? Or the one about the reverend whose "Ten Commandments of Purity" cautioned against eating alone with a member of the opposite sex who isn't his wife but says nothing about stealing the words and ideas of others and lying about it?

Neither of these are jokes, unfortunately. But unless you are a devotee of the front page of the Wall Street Journal, you almost certainly never saw a story about these clergymen, and many more, who routinely and without giving appropriate credit, deliver the sermons of others as their own.

Consider such Web sites as desperatepreacher.com and creativepastors.com. Creativepastors is also the home of those "Ten Commandments of Purity." These sites are part of a small industry in which anyone so inclined can find thousands of sermons in hundreds of categories, waiting to be lifted and used from pulpits across the country and around the world. Silly us. We thought these preachers were getting their inspiration from, well, God.

Of course, many do. But the volume on these Web sites has to make you wonder about how many. On Creativepastors.com, the going price for divine revelation is \$10. For ten bucks you can choose from dozens of categories ranging from "Relationships and Family" to "Faith Foundations."

Let's be clear. Newspaper reporters found using the material of others in their stories without attribution get fired. Students who hand in term papers they did not write and obtained off the Internet get expelled from school. And there have been a couple of instances where clergy have resigned after they admitted preaching the sermons of others without crediting the words to the appropriate source.

Regrettably, hypocrisy from the pulpit is hardly new. One of those who resigned in a sermon-plagiarizing scandal was E. Glenn Wagner, former senior pastor of the Calvary Church in Charlotte, N. C. Wagner is better known as the former minister at large for Promise Keepers, that assemblage of the self-righteous that fills stadiums with men publicly pledging themselves to faith and so-called family values. Which may or may not include stealing someone else's words and ideas and calling them your own.

In any case, the stolen-sermon business is booming. According to the Wall Street Journal, creativepastors.com, which is a nonprofit owned by Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, has 17,500 accounts and lists its revenue as \$1.7-million in the last two years.

"Think of us as part of your creative team," urges the Web site's banner.

But if your friendly local pastor is fresh out of inspired words and can't come up with ten bucks to get on creativepastors "creative team," no problem. There is always sermoncentral.com, which bills itself as the biggest such Web site. At sermoncentral you can lift, I mean read, more than 80,000 free sermons. The site claims it gets 170,000 hits a week.

The lovely thing about this story is that these plagiarizing pastors often haven't the moral wit to realize they're doing anything wrong.

"Don't be original, be effective," proclaimed Rev. Steve Sjogren, on one of the sermon sites, the Wall Street Journal reported. Sjogren is founding pastor of the Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati.

Thankfully, the good reverend's views are not shared by all of his peers. The Rev. Ray Van Neste, associate professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., called Sjogren's words "utterly disgusting." Churchgoers who discover this plagiarism "feel utterly betrayed by their pastors," says Van Neste. "It feels like cheating."

Feels like cheating? Amen, brothers and sister. Amen.

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Posted by bigskinny on December 12, 2006 at 11:04 a.m. (Suggest removal)

That's right. Lay the hammer down on the "assemblage of the self-righteous" (quote credited to Steve Lawrence). It is probable that the thousands of men listening to E. Glenn Wagner as he spoke at these Promise Keepers conventions were giddy with glee over the fact that this man was stealing material. I am sure in the end they shaved and butchered a bald eagle just to make sure everyone in the world knew how evil and un-American they were.

Is it possible not to dump the billion believers in Christianity into the hypocrite cauldron because of the few leaders that either knowingly or unknowingly break the law?

Are there men and women out there stealing sermons from these websites? Absolutely.

Are there men and women properly crediting the writers of these sermons as they use them? We have no idea from reading this editorial. I would suspect most preachers are very careful to give credit and keep their integrity not so much because of Mr. Lawrence's watchful eye, but because it is there joyful service to the God that has done so much for them. Don't know that for sure. Just a hunch. It would be interesting to ask some of them about it, though, wouldn't it Mr. Lawrence?

Posted by martin_g on December 13, 2006 at 10:53 a.m. (Suggest removal)

There is something absurd about the idea that a sermon can be plagiarized. Preachers are not paid to deliver brand new imaginative ideas week after week. It has been a long running joke that some preachers simply repeat the same set of sermons over a lifetime. This strikes me as a non-story and I wouldn't give a hoot where a good sermon came from. It's about the message not the messenger. It almost sounds like someone wants to make sure that the commercialization of religion becomes an established and accepted fact. I would think that use of copyrighted material in a sermon would fall under the exception of fair use for educational and nonprofit purposes.

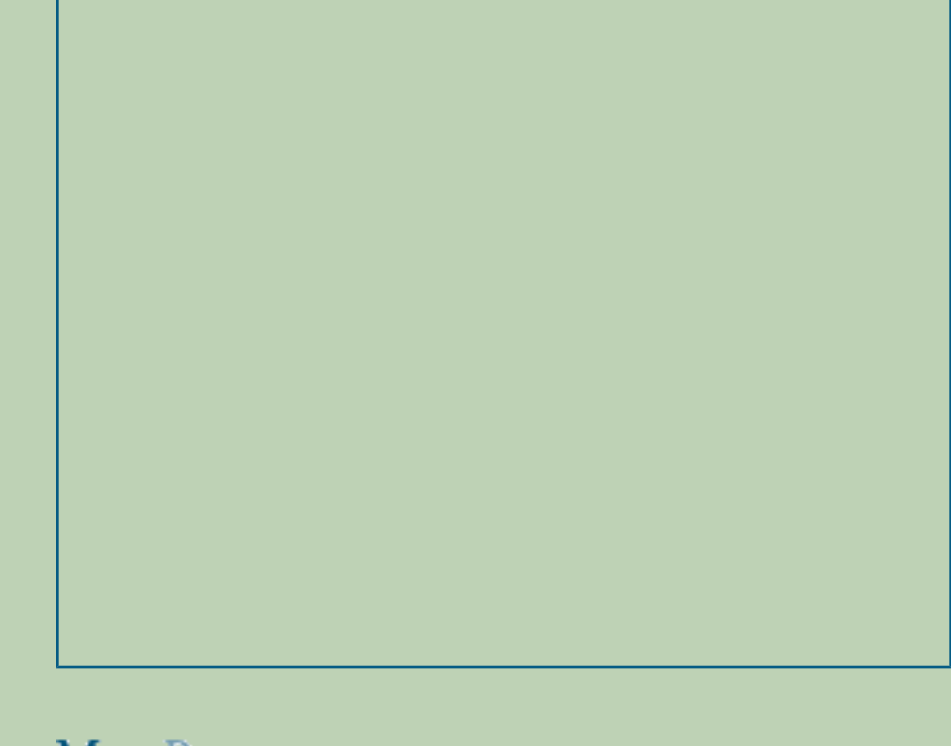
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