

A Christian Publishing Scandal

You can't read the New Testament without realizing that living the Christian life demands not just avoiding sin but also living in truth. This means being transparent about who we are, not pretending to be who we are not and above all not lying about ourselves.

Americans as a whole are usually forgiving of people with weaknesses who admit them and are not proud of them. They tend to be utterly unforgiving of hypocrisy, however—especially from people who make their living in Christian ministry.

Even before the scandals that shook Christian television in the 1980s, rich American literature pilloried the foibles of dishonest Christian clergy and leaders. Sinclair Lewis, in his novel *Elmer Gantry*, succeeded with his scathing description of a crooked preacher partly because readers recognized that such Christian types exist. Fortunately, there have been no recent cases in the American Christian community that are even close to the examples just noted.

There is, however, an ongoing scandal in Christian publishing. It is the pretense that certain famous pastors, evangelists, teachers or Christian “celebrities” wrote books when, in fact, they didn't. What we are talking about is “ghostwriting.”

Ghostwriting is not illegal. A person may hire a writer to set down his or her story and claim the writing as his own.

It is not illegal, but it is certainly unethical. Famous Pastor X or Healing Minister Z may have had spellbinding youthful years as a cowboy in Montana or a busboy in Milwaukee, but if they have difficulty setting the tale down themselves, they should not claim the writing as their own when someone else did it for them.

There is nothing shameful in having someone do for you things you find difficult or impossible to do yourself. I am a professional writer, but I hire a tax accountant to do my tax returns. I am not embarrassed about this, but I would be deeply ashamed to claim that it was I who put the return together when I didn't.

For many years, the secular U.S. publishing industry has all but insisted that celebrities who publish their stories include on the cover of the book the name of the actual writer or writers. In this respect, secular publishing houses have shown themselves to be more ethical than some Christian houses.

Christian book publishing still seems to linger in the dark ages of publishing ethics. Some publishers are obsessed with the star quality of the Christian celebrities whose books they publish. They seem to think that readers might not buy as many books by Healing Minister Z or Famous Pastor X if they knew these worthy folk had actually written almost nothing of their books.

The celebrity Christian figures themselves seem almost terrified that people will discover they can't write, even though they can preach or preside over healings. This is nothing but vanity, arrogance and pride.

There are two more aspects of this shameful practice that need attention.

One is, obviously enough, the insult delivered to the readers. Do publishers consider the buyers of their books so crass and immature as to be put off buying a book because its alleged author got enormous help from a professional writer?

The other is far more serious—the tendency of Christians to idolize certain leaders. As one Christian writer friend put it, “These celebrities have become our bishops and popes.” This is, of course, a form of idolatry, which is condemned in the Bible.

The secular world has plenty of celebrities who are almost worshiped by their fans. But should Christians imitate this tendency? Of course not.

Christian publishers who continue to deceive their readers about the authorship of books they publish are directly nurturing this idolatry.

Next time you see a book by a Christian celebrity, see if any “collaborator” or “co-author” is named, perhaps with a simple “and” after the supposed author’s name.

Let’s help famous Christians cease pretending to be who they aren’t.