

Understanding the Problem of Plagiarism Conceptually (Dr Terrel Manikam)

1. Introduction

In research, a *conceptual* problem arises when we do not understand something about the world as well as we would like (Booth *et al* 2016:51). In this case, we are looking at the problem of plagiarism in theological training. We will seek, first, to understand plagiarism as a concept from a higher education perspective. Second, a biblical-theological framework will be looked at in the Book of Revelation to conceptualize the issue of plagiarism and demonstrate it chiefly as “falsehood” with the intent to deceive. We will end with some practical application for theological training and practical ministry for servants of God.

2. Understanding Plagiarism in Higher Education

In some societies, plagiarism is considered “tolerable and appropriate” where copying the work of a master is viewed as respectful and principled in support for the work of others (Pillay, Martin & Nkomo 2022:250). Yet, many unethical dangers may be courted if there are no guards set up to acknowledge when sources are consulted. This is especially true in academic research. Various definitions abound from academics. Pillay, Martin & Nkomo (2022:250) share the following as an understanding of what plagiarism is within academic circles:

Plagiarism is considered to be the “verbatim or near verbatim copying of a text” (Boisvert & Irwin, 2006:23); “the appropriation of other people’s material without giving proper credit” (Allea, 2017:11); “the inappropriate, unauthorised, unrecognized use of another person’s ideas as if they were new or shared knowledge, or inadequate or unclear references that misinform the reader” (Gotterbarn, Miller & Impagliazzo, 2006:23); “the unethical use of other people’s publications, by claiming the contents or parts thereof as one’s own, without paying tribute to or recognising the sources from which the information was obtained, either at all or properly” (Ocholla & Ocholla, 2016:189).

From these secular minds, we can easily understand plagiarism to involve falsehood, dishonesty, stealing, lying, cheating and deception. Thayer (2017:676) also sees the meaning of plagiarism as a *lie*, that which is conscious and intentional falsehood. The goal of falsehood is to deceive. These twin concepts are married together, and their source is amply evidenced in the narrative of the Book of Revelation.

3. A Biblical-Theological Framework for Conceptualizing Plagiarism

In any field, researchers may seek to present a view of reality that is tested and authentic based on other truth statements borrowed and utilized. Yet, the vehicle utilized by which that knowledge is taken, used, packaged and communicated may be done using pretense, deception and lies – and in essence *falsehood*. This calls into question the commitment of the writer/researcher to *truth*. If researchers are to be proponents of truth; they cannot betray that concept by not embodying truth. This is even more true for proponents of the Christian Worldview – since we claim that truth is absolute, objective and exclusive and is grounded in the nature of God. The fact that truth is knowable is grounded in God’s self-revelation through special revelation. Special revelation presents a Christian understanding of truth that is both *propositional* (the written and read Scriptures) and *incarnational* (truth applied and lived out through Christ Jesus) – which cannot be divorced from each other (Jn 1:1, 14; 14:4; 18:37). In educational spaces, we see this applied in the formal and informal curricula (which is more content driven and mostly theoretical and propositional) and the hidden curriculum (this is behavioural teaching where the life of the one making truth claims speaks).

The Book of Revelation frames this concept of “falsehood” (Greek, *pseudos*) in 22:15 (verse 14 is important for it helps to highlight a contrasting picture that emerges): “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and *everyone who loves and practices falsehood*” (cf. 21:8). The issues of *truth* and *falsehood* are embedded in the macro-narrative of the Book of Revelation. The message claims to be from God through Christ. It is sent via the Angel to John, who is “in the Spirit”, and finally to the readers (Rev 1:1-3). The over-arching message can easily be lost when we don’t understand the types of genres contained in the book. John utilizes at least four genres (see Manikam 2021:4-10). First, Revelation is *Apocalyptic* (Rev 1:1). It demonstrates typical characteristics of Jewish and Christian literature that flourished from 200BC-100AD (e.g., Sovereignty of God as the theme, theodicy and the explanation of good and evil where through God’s intervention good will be rewarded and evil will be judged, salvation of the righteous and judgement of the wicked, etc.). Second, Revelation is *Prophetic* (Rev 1:3). Prophetic literature exhibit both fore-telling of future events and forth-telling (i.e., speaking in the name of God “Thus saith the LORD!”). Third, Revelation is a *Letter* to seven churches in the Province of Asia (Rev 1:4-9). Letters will include the author, recipients, salutation, purpose, etc. Finally, Revelation is a *Narrative*. The whole book is a story with typical utilization of characters, plot and development. It is within the narrative genre that other genres can converge and be interpreted within the framework of the overarching story. What then is the overarching story of the Book of Revelation?

Revelation’s macro-narrative positions Christ in the midst of His churches conducting a SWOT analysis of each of them (1:9-3:22). The rest of the book serves to present an overall view of God’s plan and purposes for His people to gauge themselves by from both a transcendent perspective and an immanent perspective which forms one reality (Rev 4-22). Alignment in relationships to either the Trinity or the Anti-trinity are key to finding one’s identity and function within the

battleground of this world. Truth and falsehood appear to be key opposing features when representing reality. Truth, therefore, is that which aligns to God - and like light will illuminate and point people to God's reality (cf. Ps 27:1; Jn 1:4-9; Matt 5:14-16), for God is the ultimate and absolute moral Being within whom truth resides (Heb 6:18; Jn 14:6; Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Thus, anti-images serve to demonstrate to readers the contrast and where to position themselves.

Therefore, on the side of truth, you will find the Trinity comprises of the One who was, who is and who is to come (The Father is described by His eternal and holy essence, and His role as Creator and Sustainer) (Rev 1:4; 4:1-3, 8-11); the Lamb/Lion (Christ is functionally described through His work at the cross and the resurrection which deems Him "worthy" to provide redemption (Rev 5; 7; 14:1-5; 19; 21-22) and unveil history (Rev 6-20)); and the Seven Spirits before the Throne who is attached to Christ (The Holy Spirit is also described by the fullness of His essence and His presence reaching the entire globe to make special revelational truth known) (Rev 2-3; 4:5; 5:6; cf. Jn 15:26-16:13). Attached to the Trinity through the Second Person is the 'unashamed', 'without deceit' and "no lie was found in their mouths", Bride of Christ (Rev 19; cf. 14:5), who is also a city, the New Jerusalem (Rev 21). She will be saved for eternity and will enjoy the presence of Christ (Rev 21-22).

On the other side of all that stands for falsehood and deception, you will find the Anti-trinity made up of the Dragon (Satan who wages war against all that is true and deceives people leading them astray) (Rev 12; 20:8); the Sea Beast (like a lion)/Land Beast (like a lamb) merging into a deceiver of the inhabitants of the earth (Rev 13); the False Prophet who influences through delusions that present alternate realities for people (Rev 16:13; 19:20). Attached to the Anti-trinity through the second person of the Anti-trinity is the Prostitute seated on the Beast, who is also a city, Babylon the Great (Rev 17). Her attachment to the Beast is temporal and is mixed with fear for utilitarian purposes (Rev 13:16-17). She will be judged eternally by Sovereign God, being cast away from His presence.

Hence, John's summary list in the last chapter is striking: "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and *everyone who loves and practices falsehood*" (Rev 22:15). Revelation 22:15 describes the fate of the ungodly, excluded from the city. They are called "dogs" – used metaphorically for unbelievers in parts of Scripture. Here, they are used to signify the dwelling of dogs as outside from the home of its owner. Their works will eternally separate them from the righteous, for the practice of magic arts, sexual immorality, murder, and idol worship declares them unrighteous. In Revelation, *works* are what God provides through grace for believers to adorn themselves as the Bride (Rev 19:8) and by which all humanity will be judged based on their choice (Rev 20:12-13; cf. Eph 2:8-10). In that list, the final group are those who *love and practice falsehood* (Greek, *pseudos*). Beale's description of this group of people is revealing,

This counterfeit tone is stressed in 22:15, which adds that these people "love and practice lying." Their characteristic lying about their ultimate commitment amounts to "love" for duplicity – not duplicity in general, but a desire to benefit from both the spiritual advantages of church membership and the economic security of participation in the ungodly world. To confess Christ and also show loyalty to the idolatrous world is equivalent to "lying." These people say one thing, but do another ... Therefore, this is a reference not merely to false teachers and prophets, but to all whose lives have betrayed their Christian confession.

Beale's description rightly shows this group as counterfeit. They stand guilty of replacing truth with that which is false with the intent to deceive. Plagiarism, therefore, is not a new phenomenon. It has its origins and influence in the kingdom of Satan and will be judged as Revelation clearly shows. The people of God that belong to the Kingdom of God will stand for truth and will share in the inheritance prepared by God for His holy people.

4. Conclusion

Plagiarism involves loving and practicing falsehood with the intent to deceive. This goes against God's holy nature. Salvation with an ensuing discipleship involves the people of God being brought into truth from the realm of falsehood and deception - to know and teach it (propositionally) and obey and embody it (incarnationally) (Matt 28:18-20). Pillay, Martin & Nkomo (2022:250) provide a sobering reminder, "Knowledge, which is at the heart of scholarship, is fundamentally associated with truth, understanding and innovation. This means that principles of academic integrity, honesty and reliability form the foundations of all our academic endeavours in higher education institutions." These secular voices reflect truth that agree with the Christian worldview. Yet, the biblical reminder goes further to show the shocking eternal consequences when a life betrays truth and settles for utilitarian means to dispense truth – which is abhorrent to God within whom truth lies. We have to *nip it in the bud* with strict consequences in theological training – or else, this may grow and fester into lives lived with double standards which may have far reaching influence and consequences in the disciples they make in churches.

Bibliography

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