



A Professional Writer Responds to the “Ghostwriting” Issue

In a recent issue of Charisma, columnist David Aikman addressed the issue of “ghostwriting” – Christian leaders who actually hire professional writers to write their books, but then give them no credit. Aikman’s concern was that it is deceptive to readers and egotistical on the part of the Christian leaders. Phil Cooke, a writer and director in Los Angeles, who has worked a few times as a ghostwriter responded to David’s column, and as you’ll find out – this may only be the tip of the iceberg of ministry deception.

David Aikman’s excellent column in Charisma has opened up a long overdue can of worms, and as a professional writer, I am grateful the magazine has stepped into this controversial arena. Sadly, this is a prime example of an alarming rise in what some have called the “E.Q.” or “Ego Quotient” of numerous pastors, evangelists, and ministry leaders.

The rapid growth of Christian television has certainly played a major role in this issue. My own experience and research indicate that television is a “personality driven” medium, where viewers treat personalities like gods, as evidenced by programs like “Oprah.” Sadly, the history of Christian television is also littered with the debris of ministry leaders who started “believing their own press” and acting more like secular celebrities than men and women of God.

The next step seemed to be this issue of “ghostwriting.” As the Christian publishing industry grew, it sought out more and more content, often from high profile pastors and ministry leaders. The chance to expand their ministries through publishing, and the opportunity to get their message out on a higher level gave them a strong reason to write books. But the fact is – *writing well isn’t easy*. It’s a craft and art form just like music, painting, or filmmaking. Writing well takes years of practice and experience, and a desire to sit for untold hours in front of a typewriter or computer screen.

So some pastors and ministry leaders who were busy began hiring professionals to do the job for them, which is a perfectly acceptable option. In truth, there are many levels of working with professional writers. In my own experience of writing both books and magazine articles for ministry leaders, I have written for clients who gave me original material like sermon transcripts or extensive hand-written notes. In those cases, I was really “adapting” their own thoughts and ideas into book form. But in other cases, I

literally wrote from scratch, with little more than a few interviews, a sermon tape, or a conversation or two with the pastor.

But in every case, I've never received credit. In fact - in one situation, I actually wrote a book for a client who then he stood up on national television and described how he had "*labored night after night writing without stopping, until his wife had to beg him to get some sleep.*"

In another case, when I mentioned to a newspaper reporter that I written a television special for a major ministry, the ministry office called and told me to stay quiet, because they want people to believe that everything that comes out of that ministry was written by the ministry founder.

Is this a problem? Yes and no.

No, because often writers are just happy for the work. They have certain skills, and like a professional mechanic who fixes your car, or a an accountant who keeps your checkbook, some writers are happy to do the work and simply get a check. They have no desire to be famous, and actually enjoy writing for someone else – after all, it can pay very well.

However – a better answer is yes, because the fact is, books are far more personal than a car or a checkbook. When someone reads a book, they believe the writing is coming from the heart of the author, and the writing style, the content, and the message reflect the name on the cover. This is true *especially* in the Christian world, where the message is often a Biblical message conveying eternal Truth.

When a pastor or ministry leader publishes a book with only his name on it, he is making an unstated promise to the reader that the material is his, it's coming directly from his heart and mind, and he's personally presenting it in the form of this book.

That's why the issue of accurate credit on the book cover is so important. If we stand for the Truth of God, then we must reflect that Truth in every area of our lives.

So is it wrong to hire a professional to help you write a book? Absolutely not. Many readers would be shocked to see just how poorly some of our Christian leaders write. After all, writing and preaching are two completely different things. Professionals can take an anointed message from a man or woman of God and translate it into an exciting and enjoyable reading experience. However – as a point of honor and integrity, unless the writer is acting more as an "editor" – where he or she is editing a sermon transcript or written document into a book, then I suggest the ministry leader include the writer's name on the cover. Certainly it can be in smaller letters, or with the phrase "as written by" or "with" before the name. *But credit must be given.* Not to do so cheapens the creative process, and as people who serve the ultimate Creator, we can do no less.

Is it mainstream industry practice, and do secular authors do it? Who cares? We answer to a higher calling – a calling of honesty, integrity, and respect for the people God has given us to teach.

But in all fairness, this is just one of the areas in the Body of Christ we need to explore. Here's two *other* areas of ministry that drive me nuts:

- The use of “Doctor” degrees among pastors and church leaders who have not actually done the academic work, but received either an “honorary” doctorate or worse, bought it from a diploma mill. To falsely convey that a pastor or ministry leader has done the incredible amount of work necessary to achieve this academic degree is remarkably deceptive.
- And the explosion of ever-expanding ecclesiastical titles among pastors, evangelists, and other church leaders. You can't pick up a Christian magazine these days without being overwhelmed at the number of Bishops, Archbishops, Prophets, Prophetesses, Apostles, Covering Apostles, Psalmists, and the list goes on.

Certainly, there are legitimate and Biblical titles out there. But it does appear that in the last few years, the best way to make it to the top of the ministry heap is to give yourself an exotic title.

But that's another article...

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