# Christians' Copyrights [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 25 October 2015 - 23:08

Read time: 8 minutes
The world grows increasingly complex. There are issues which the church did not have to may much attention up until a few decades ago, but is now part of our everyday lives. In this article I am going to discuss Christians and copyright.

This article is *not* about piracy; it is about how Christians handle the copyrights which they own on the works which they create to spread the gospel, whether sermons or booklets or videos.

## A Tale of Christian Copyright Restrictions

Recently, Inspiring Philosophy [2] (IP) shared that they had been handed a take down notice on their YouTube channel [3] for videos which contained excerpts from Timothy Keller's sermons. IP claimed that they had been granted permission from Tim Keller's church [4] in 2012 to post the videos. However, last month Keller's church asked YouTube for the videos to be taken down, citing their copyright claim. They said that their reason for doing this, according to IP, was that

> We prefer to host all sermons on Redeemer's website because we would like people to know where the resources come from and get connected to all of our other resources for spiritual growth and ministry.

Commentators lamented this development on IP's Facebook page and some said that IP's Tim Keller videos were their first introduction and exposure to Keller's ministry.

As of the time of writing, I believe that IP was still try to reach an agreement with Redeemer Presbyterian Church on this matter.

While it may seem like Keller is being singled out in this article, this kind of thing is not entirely uncommon. However this particular story does highlight a very important topic which Christian authors before did not have to think much about, but is becoming increasingly important, and that is the topic of copyright.

## What is a Copyright?

Copyright [5] is defined as

> The exclusive right to make copies, license, and otherwise exploit a literary, musical, or artistic work, whether printed, audio, video, etc.1

A copyright is granted to a content creator (or originator) when the work is created. They then have

control over who is allowed access to the work and who may distribute it2.

As a software developer and content creator, I am reasonably well acquainted with copyright issues. There are many different software licences which impose different restrictions on how you, as a programmer, can use them. Failing to adhere to these restrictions, especially if you publish on the Internet, can get you into serious trouble very quickly. But copyright touches everyone: whether you want to photocopy pages from a book, share someone else's photo on social media, download a movie from the Internet, back up your DVD collection, bequest your iTunes account to your children or sell an old book; all of these questions need to be framed within the question of copyright law (which is different from country to country)—assuming that your intent is to conduct yourself lawfully3.

## The Christian's Copyright Dilemma: A Double Edged Sword

The biggest argument in favour of copyright, is that the remuneration which the content creator receives allows them to create more content. In Keller's case, he needs to maintain a staff which can assist him in the administration that comes with being a much sought after preacher, staff to curate his created works, and other duties. It is possible to maintain this staff largely by the money which he makes from his books and other works for which he receives an income (which the copyright law guarantees him). Without this staff, Keller would arguably need to handle many of these matters himself and would therefore have less time to create new works and engage in speaking events (for which he is in high demand). Keller's intellectual property serves as oil for the gears of his ministry, which has (and can continue to) positively impacted the lives of countless people. Or the money can be needed to fund the works themselves: for example, the cost of producing high quality videos (whether by a church or independent groups) can be offset by selling them afterwards.

It is good and right for people—even pastors, missionaries and evangelists—to be compensated for their work (Luke 10:7, 1 Timothy 6:17–18, 1 Corinthians 9:7–12).

A counter argument is that tightly controlling works restricts people's access to that content. As the commentators on IP's Facebook page said, had it not been for the exposure which Keller got from IP's videos, they would not have become acquainted with his work and ministry. And, more seriously, it restricts access to the gospel. The *purpose* of Christian works makes the motives for restricting access to it dubious at best. At my own church at the beginning of the year, we temporarily had to restructure how we conduct our Bible studies, because the copyrighted material which we were using (with permission) restricted the way in which it could be used. What is more, our church (which struggles financially) needs to set money aside for the licence fees of these works, which generally are produced out of more affluent churches abroad.

Sharing one's work is a wisdom issue, and therefore I cannot prescribe one or the other of the above arguments. However, regarding gospel work specifically, I strongly favour the latter view. This is evident how I handle my own copyrights. The text of this website and my sermons are under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike v3.0 [6] licence, and I typically quote [7] from the public domain [8] World English Bible [9]. I also support initiatives such as Free for All [10]. The reason is simple: I do not believe that any there should be any hindrance to someone trying to access gospel resources. While many people in the secular world fear giving their intellectual property away for free will end up damaging them, others have found ways of monetising open source software (such as Red Hat and Canonical), and researchers and educators are realising the value of open access [11] for educational material (such as text books) and scientific data for humanity as a whole. Should we, as Christians, then not be as open, for ours is the most valuable of all that can be shared?

> Nevertheless we did not use this right, but we bear all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the Good News of Christ. — 1 Corinthians 9:12b

## Conclusion

Copyright is something which affects all of us. In the world in which we live, we cannot escape it. We need to recognise this fact and educate ourselves so that we can most effectively use it for our ministries. Many Christians and churches already ask themselves whether they have the appropriate legal rights to use certain works, such as worship songs, Bible study materials and movies for screenings. However, they also need to seriously think about the copyright of the works which they create. Even the smallest church needs to do this. When a work is created, the creator has full rights. Without explicitly making it available for others, other people cannot assume that they are at liberty to use or distribute such material. I recommend adding a copyright notice (whether restrictive or permissive, such as a Creative Commons [12] licence) to each work, whether a recorded sermon or written material (such as Bible study work books). This clearly identifies the content creator, directs them to the source and stipulates who may distribute or alter the work. If someone wants to release their work into the public domain (in other words, relinquish their copyright completely), this needs to be done explicitly. Creative Commons also allows for this with their CC0 [13] licence.

- 1. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/copyright?s=t [14]
- 2. For an overview of intellectual property concepts and laws, see this YouTube playlist [15]. The second and third videos deal with copyright specifically. While it discusses intellectual property within the context of the USA, in broad strokes it can be useful to understand copyright in general.
- 3. Christians should generally desire to conduct themselves lawfully: see Jeremiah 294–9, Daniel 2:21, Mark 12:13–17, 1 Peter 2:17.

## Categories:

- Ministry [16]
- Terminology & Concepts [17]

## Tags:

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