



## It Is Personal

by Kim A. Pettit

*How the use of gratuitous jargon, Scripture, and verbiage is an ethical issue.*

Gratuitous sex and violence. Those are words often used in evangelical reviews of films in the United States to give strong warning that some content is not suitable for believers. I sometimes wish that manuscripts came with warning labels too. The kinds of problems I encounter in the Christian material I edit are not the steamy scenes, blood, and explosions that we see on the silver screen, but troubling nonetheless.

**Gratuitous jargon.** A local television channel used to offer a service for parents on the latest movies: information on the number of expletives, the body counts, and other such items in films. However, such statistics do not necessarily help. The body count in *Hotel Rwanda*, for example, is astounding—but intrinsic to the plot. In assessing the morality of films, more criteria are needed than just numbers. The same is true for our work as editors. The worth of a Christian article or book is not dependent on the number of times that Jesus' name is invoked therein, nor on its lengthy prayers and copious references to church history, nor on its use of religious (or technical) terms. Faith is no substitute for good writing; erudition is no guarantee of clarity.

**Gratuitous Scripture.** How can I claim there is such a thing? Before someone takes exception, let me offer a clarification: I believe in the power of the Word. I know the truth proclaimed by the Lord in Isaiah

55:11: "My word that goes out from my mouth... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." It is also true that we need God's Word, that we thirst for Living Water. I will not deny that—but will say that the Word itself commands us to take care in how we present the Gospel to others. We are not to treat God's Word as an afterthought, or casually, handling it without care. Bible verses are not mantras. Nor are they to be used merely to legitimize our own ideas—rather, they should transform our thinking. How is the Bible handled in the manuscripts we edit?

**Gratuitous verbiage.** Editors delight in cutting, chopping, slicing, and so forth. We love to swim in seas of red ink, or so I'm told. If you ever had an editor ask for unwarranted changes, you may think editors ought to come with warning labels too. The truth is, we are fallible. We can become over-involved in our work, or we neglect it. We can fail to respect authors or readers. We can behave unethically, changing the author's voice to our own; changing the teaching of Scripture to conform to our ideas; disregarding the publisher's intent for a product line; and so on. And this is why ethics are important at every level of a publishing house. They are not gratuitous.

This issue of *InterLit* provides a grand overview of ethical concerns for Christian publishers, but consider also the more ordinary level: micro-ethics, if you will.

Russian thinker Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reportedly said: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy his own heart?”

Ethics is personal, after all. It is a matter of the heart. I do not know the intricacies of intellectual property law, but I can explore who owns the copyright and decide what to do with the information I receive. I do not know how my country ranks on a corruption index, but I can decide what I will do if asked for a bribe. I do know this: the Lord examines our hearts, and He will hold us accountable.

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