

As the Sr. Visual Content Editor at HarperCollins Christian Publishing, I often am asked to research and find older images that may have fallen out of copyright. As you of course know, that can be extremely difficult or impossible when it comes to orphan works.

I know that the PLUS registry is working very hard to create a solution to this problem as it relates to photos. However, it requires photographers and copyright holders to register their images. I believe copyright holders may not be aware they are supposed to go through this extra step to help people find them as image owners. So while not a perfect system, and it will take lots of time, I propose the following steps, which are at least a step in the right direction and hopefully will become have fewer and fewer flaws over time.

#1 – enter a photo into the PLUS registry to be searched (or some similar database on copyright.gov if one is ever created)

#2 – enter a photo into Google, TinEye, or some similar reverse image search engine. Search all results to see if any online sources provide a credit line or copyright information

#3 – If photo was previously in a book, contact the publisher to see if they have information on the copyright holder

If after these three attempts no copyright holder is found, I believe the image should be free to use for non-commercial use.