

Steve Martin is a theologian

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

A few years ago I resigned as pastor of a congregation I had served for 29 years. It was a reluctant leave taking. I had been the organizing pastor of the congregation; I had learned how to be a pastor in the company of these people; and after nearly three decades there was accumulating evidence that we were actually becoming a people of God and not just a random assemblage of various shades of saint and sinner. Energy was building. Increasingly, acts of worship were spilling into ventures of justice and mission and evangelism; mature lay leaders were taking over various aspects of ministry. I was looking forward to enjoying the harvest.

But then I accepted a writing assignment that would require an intense seven or eight years to complete. I couldn't take on the assignment and continue as pastor. At the time, the assignment seemed to take precedence and so I resigned. The resignation, though reluctant, carried a sense of completion with it. I was grateful for those years; the people were gracious in releasing me.

Three weeks after leaving I began to have unsettling thoughts. What if my leaving would trigger *their* leaving? I was the only pastor many of them had ever known; what if their primary relationship turned out to be with me and not God, and now that I was gone they would see no reason to stick around? What if for all those years I had unconsciously used the language and work of the gospel to ingratiate myself with them, to get them to like me, but had not helped their souls to develop in relation to Jesus? I didn't stay awake at night thinking these thoughts, but when they arrived from time to time at the margins of my consciousness, I would think, "How awful, what a waste of my life that would be. What if it turns out that while I thought I was serving Jesus, I was only serving myself?" The legacy of gospel ministry I had supposed I was leaving behind would turn out to be nothing but the leavings of my ego, what Yeats once called "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

And then not six weeks after my departure I learned that a young couple, with whom I had spent an enormous amount of time, had left. They went half way across the county and joined another church. A couple of weeks later another family bailed out

and went to that same church. Maybe there was substance to those vague anxieties I had harbored. It was not so much that they had left, but what they had left for. They left an elegant sanctuary for something resembling a warehouse; they left a community of grace and hospitality for a harsh, critical, judgmental atmosphere where members were regularly paraded before the congregation and made to repent of some sin (usually sexual) in which they had been found out; they had left a place of quiet worship for a noisy harangue. Why? Why would they make such an exchange? What had I done? Or left undone?

I heard of no more defections, and my anxieties went into remission. Three months later my youngest son came home from graduate school for the holidays. Shortly after coming off the airplane he said, "Dad, Steve Martin's a theologian--right now, probably America's best theologian." The enthusiasm was not unexpected; Leif had been idolizing Martin all his life, but I didn't get the theologian angle.

Later, the "theologian" claim came up again and Leif said, "I'll show you what I mean." He rented *Parenthood*, starring Martin, and that evening we watched it. It's about four sets of parents who raise their children, but not very well. After they've all made a thorough mess of their parenting, one couple, now in middle age, starts all over again with a new baby. It's passingly funny (funnier if you're not yourself a parent).

I conceded that the video was amusing but that I still didn't get the theologian business. "But don't you see," Leif said, "after all that failure, that mess, there's hope. One couple refused to be defined by their sin and went for more life--that's a metaphor for salvation. Don't you see the transcendence? He's a theologian, Dad!" I was beginning to realize that he was using the term "theologian" in a somewhat looser way than I was accustomed to.

It was late and we went to bed. I dreamed. I dreamed that my wife and I were at that church across the county. We entered and discovered the place full of people from our congregation--everyone, including all our elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers. There were no pews. The place was packed, everyone milling around, smiling and laughing. There were huge posters on the four walls with rules and regulations that had to be kept--but no one had any trouble keeping them. No sinners were allowed here. No second chances. People had pencils and pads of paper, going from poster to poster, diligently copying down the lists, cheerfully comparing notes, chatting in an easy comraderie. The pastor was over in one corner

standing on a box, making disconnected pronouncements on stuff he'd read in the newspaper that morning. Nobody paid any attention to him.

Astonished, I looked at my wife (this is still the dream, remember) and said, "Why on earth would all of our people come here, abandoning all that beauty and grace and divine mystery?" She said matter-of-factly, "Simple. If you can have a church that makes people believe they aren't sinners and that they can do without God, that's a pretty good deal, isn't it?" I looked at her hard and said, "They need Steve Martin for their pastor."

The next morning sitting down to breakfast, I said to my son, "Lief, you're right. Maybe Steve Martin is a theologian."