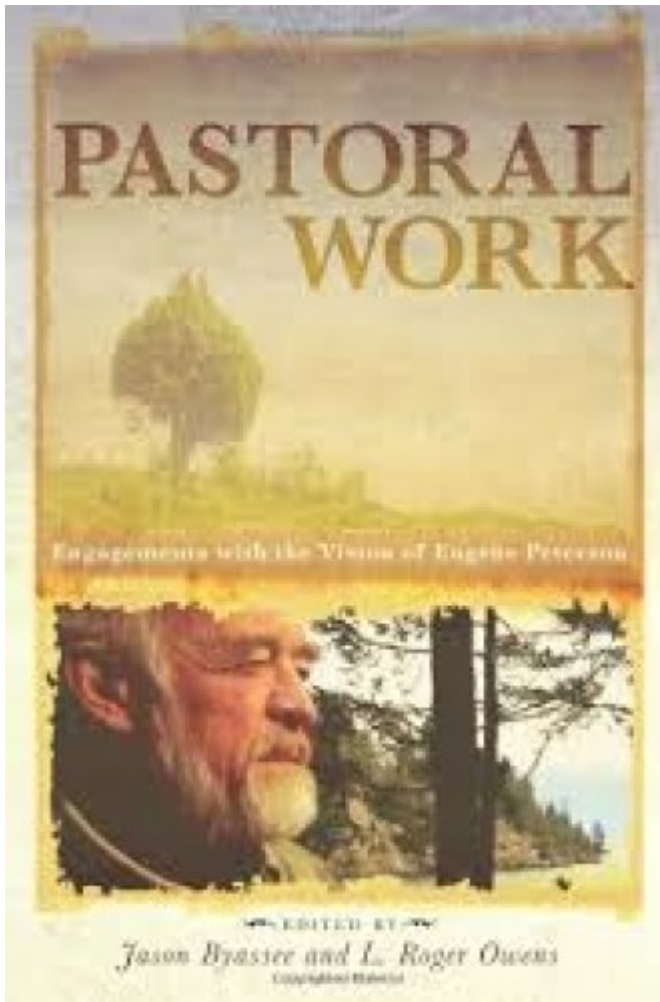


The pastor and other sinners

by [David J. Wood](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Pastoral Work

edited by Jason Byassee and L. Roger Owens
Cascade

On a recent visit with Eugene Peterson, I asked him, “What was the turning point? When did you realize that you were called to pastoral life rather than a life in the academy?”

The question was prompted by my realization of just how well suited he was for the academy in his formative years. Graduate school had revealed a passion and an exceptional aptitude for biblical languages. Upon graduation from the Biblical Seminary in New York (now New York Theological Seminary), he entered the Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins to study Semitic languages with William F. Albright. When Albright retired only two years into Peterson's course work, he recommended Peterson to his colleague Brevard Childs at Yale for a Ph.D. in Old Testament. After meeting with Peterson, Childs accepted him into the program and awarded him a generous stipend. Peterson was thriving in the academy and on track to become an accomplished biblical scholar.

So what turned the tide? In preparation for his work at Yale, Peterson took a position as associate professor at New York Theological Seminary. In addition, he became a part-time associate pastor at a Presbyterian church in suburban White Plains. He admired the senior pastor and the way he led his congregation. But that was not the tipping point.

The tipping point was when Peterson was asked to teach the book of Revelation at New York Theological Seminary. Up to that point, he had been teaching only Hebrew and Greek. As the course progressed, he became captivated by the pastoral character of the narrative. Revelation is a letter by a pastor to his seven congregations. The local context and the texture of the congregation animated the text in ways that Peterson's learning and teaching of languages had not. This experience in the classroom, combined with his encounter with the congregation in White Plains, took hold. He became convinced that the congregation was where the action was. It was there that the Word became flesh and fresh. It was there that salvation history was being made. Peterson wanted to be in on it. He did not leave behind the passion for learning and teaching that he had discovered in the academy; rather, he wanted to place that learning in an immediate pastoral context.

What, then, could be more fitting than for a group of mostly pastors and a few academics to produce a volume reflecting on Peterson's work in the congregation? *Pastoral Work: Engagements with the Vision of Eugene Peterson*, edited by Jason Byassee and L. Roger Owens, is just that. The editors promote the book of essays as "appreciative, critical, and constructive engagements with Peterson's own vision of the pastoral vocation." It is a well-crafted collection that includes contributions from Lillian Daniel, Martin Copenhaver, Stephanie Paulsell, Anthony Robinson, Kyle Childress, Carol Howard Merritt, and William Willimon. The best essays reflect from

within pastoral life, elaborating on how the authors' reading of Peterson has directly shaped, clarified, challenged, or oriented their own pastoral work.

The 17 essays are organized into four sections: "Words"—exploring how the Word and words are pivotal for Peterson; "Institutions"—focusing on his sustained critique of institutional life and leadership; "People"—taking up Peterson's emphasis on the importance of relationships to pastoral life; and "Life"—reflecting on how Peterson's vision of pastoral work creates a context for flourishing and integrity.

Implicit in these essays is an appreciation for how Peterson's background suffuses his vision of pastoral work. He is a bona fide intellectual casting his lot with the congregation, bringing everything he has acquired—whether by nature or nurture. He does not speak as one who has figured it all out. He is a fellow traveler navigating the worlds of scripture, congregation, denomination culture, and "soggy suburbia." His books are not laced with extended footnotes or endnotes, yet we sense that we were reading someone who is widely read and well practiced. Just how widely read he is became clear only with his publication of *Take and Read: Spiritual Reading—An Annotated List* in 1995.

For Peterson, the congregation is capacious and generative, not a place destined to suck the life out of a pastor. It is a place, if engaged well, where one can thrive. The congregation is a nexus of God's interaction with the world.

How have readers come to learn of Peterson's unique take on the congregation? Because he wrote. For all his talk of the temptation to wrongful ambition, he managed to publish more than a dozen books while serving as a pastor. His books that deal directly with pastoral life and work—which account for less than 25 percent of his total output—display how scripture provides the contours and character of pastoral life, imagination, and practice. He gives pastors a sense for what it means to take themselves, their work, and their congregations seriously. His narrations give content and specificity to what is meant by a "learned ministry"—one marked by a love of learning, reading, writing, praying, preaching, and dwelling deeply in time and place.

Peterson talks often of the remarkable freedom that pastors have to shape their own lives. That congregants do not know what their pastors are called to be about is not cause for despair, self-pity, or whining; that reality sets the conditions for agency, witness, and leadership. Instead of focusing on a functional view of pastoral life,

Peterson evokes an imagination of what pastoral life can be like if one is given wholly to the right things in the right way. Pastors need to resist the temptation to accommodate themselves to the expectations of their congregations, which he assumes are off the mark. Furthermore, if pastors are to be true to their calling, their purpose and identity must not be oriented by an estimation of what counts in the larger culture. To be sure, the arena of the congregation can be reductive, even trivializing, but Peterson's sustained argument is that it is not necessarily so. The enduring possibility is that the givens of pastoral life can become a gift.

Navigating the landscape of congregational life is no simple matter. Take this passage about the context of pastoral work, from *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, as an example:

It means living hopefully among people who from time to time get flickering glimpses of the Glory but then live through stretches, sometimes long ones, of unaccountable grayness. Most pastoral work takes place in obscurity: deciphering grace in the shadows, searching out meaning in a difficult text, blowing on the embers of a hard-used life. This is hard work and not conspicuously glamorous.

Peterson is fiercely critical of any and all that gets in the way of pastoral work. Whether it be denominational hierarchy or consumerist, success-oriented, self-indulgent American culture, it comes within the scope of his withering critique. He does not offer a sentimental, romantic view of congregational life either; a congregation is not a demarcated zone of idealized community. Pastors are sinners working among sinners. The potential for misdirection and distraction abounds. The solution is not boundary making; nor is it adoption of practices from other culturally legitimized worlds, such as the clinic, the corporation, or the academy. Rather than defensively setting the boundaries of self-protection that are so blithely urged on seminarians these days, Peterson calls on pastors to cultivate a personal gravitational center from which to develop skills of involvement. Attention to the narrative world of scripture, the practice of prayer, and the sacredness of time, place, and conversation are at the heart of such cultivation.

Ironically, the strongly personal dimension of much of Peterson's work, his emphasis on the importance of being a pastor in a very particular place, earns him the most criticism from the contributors to *Pastoral Work*. Authors' substantive concerns include these questions: Does Peterson's critique of pastor as manager or strategist

leave us with an anemic view of pastor as leader? Does his sustained case for pastoral stability—for resisting the siren song to move to greener congregational pastures—fail to account for the importance of discerning when leaving is essential to vocational holiness? Is his vision of pastoral work and integrity applicable to pastors in larger congregations? Does Peterson’s notion of the contemplative life lack an understanding of contemplative practice?

Peterson’s emphasis on locality and interiority also draws critical attention. Does Peterson encourage the view that pastoral life and work are isolated from or even antagonistic to institutional life—ecclesial or otherwise? Is his focus on interiority and locality insufficiently attentive to the external conditions in which ministry is practiced these days?

The essay by William Willimon, while not lacking in appreciation, goes the farthest in developing a critique of what he terms Peterson’s “scorn for the institutional framework for ministry.” Anyone familiar with Willimon’s own writing cannot help feeling the irony of this critique coming from his pen. In his essay, Willimon speaks very much like the bishop he became, and far less like the iconoclastic pastor of his earlier years. But because Willimon’s critique is echoed in several other essays, it’s worthy of further consideration.

Willimon is correct to point out that Peterson does not highlight or advocate ecclesial institutional life beyond the congregation. However, it certainly remains implicit in his pastoral identity as an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and in his explicit insistence that pastors be connected to friends and colleagues beyond the local congregation. Peterson does not encourage pastors to delegate responsibility for their own growth and flourishing to congregations or larger ecclesial bodies, nor does he call for them to extricate themselves from denominational bodies.

Peterson’s lack of emphasis on this dimension of pastoral life and identity is perhaps to be expected when you cross a Pentecostal with a Presbyterian—the call to order, tradition, and connectionalism is embraced, but the impulse to autonomy and locality remains strong. Peterson’s focus is squarely on pastor and congregation. Whether his lack of a constructive discussion of institutions rises to the level of indictment that Willimon suggests will be a matter of ongoing debate. At the very least, however, ecclesial bodies would do well to consider what it means to encourage conditions conducive to the formation and flourishing of pastoral life

exemplified by Peterson.

The criticisms included in most of these essays read like addenda to extended appreciative reflections. The writers are familiar with Peterson's body of work and are grateful for how it has shaped their own understanding and practice. Stephanie Paulsell affirms his articulation of a pastoral life that is "prayerful, improvisational, steeped in Scripture, and psychologically astute." Mark Ralls celebrates his practice of a "hermeneutics of adoration" as an alternative to "a hermeneutics of suspicion."

From reading Peterson, Trygve David Johnson learned to ask three daily questions of himself: "Did I love my people? Did I love my place? And did I love the Word?" As a pastor, Anthony Robinson was reminded that pastors are called "to attend to God, to place God at the center, to place ourselves at the center that is God." Jason Byassee has high praise for the exceptional way Peterson "combines the reading of Scripture and the living of the Christian life between church and academy."

Carol Howard Merritt appreciates the way that Peterson "calls out amongst the discontent that surrounds us and encourages pastoral leaders to set aside the careerism that can engulf us." Kyle Childress writes that he learned from Peterson how important being "patient, local, and personal" is to being both pastoral and prophetic. Lillian Daniel found in the Peterson corpus a narrative of pastoral life that is "not a ten-step, one-size-fits-all plan, but one man's story, bravely shared with a reader he trusted to have the intelligence to sort through the details rather than be spoon-fed a list of rules."

The range of criticism and appreciation expressed in these essays demonstrates how Peterson's body of work can become an occasion for generative reflection on pastoral life—reflection that draws deeply from the well of one pastor's understanding and practice and draws us into a shared tradition of sources and experience. As personal and idiosyncratic as his vision may be, it resonates with pastoral experience across a wide range of ecclesial traditions.

There is only passing reference in these essays to Peterson's description of "The Badlands"—a period in his pastoral life that he recounts most extensively in *Under the Unpredictable Plant* and *The Pastor*. His description of this six-year period has all the earmarks of an experience akin to situational depression. From these accounts we learn how crucial constancy is to pastoral character. As strange as it sounds, my reading of them years ago was enormously encouraging. It helped me to narrate my

own experience—both emotional and conceptual—of the struggle, restlessness, and wrestling that has been part and parcel of my pastoral life.

Given the congregational, institutional, and cultural conditions under which we operate these days, I don't trust pastors who do not encounter days, weeks, months, even years of struggle. But Peterson persisted in hope—putting one foot in front of the other. To our great benefit, his writing was crucial to his progress. He wrote not to escape the dissonance or withdraw from the nexus of Word and flesh, but to probe it, understand it, plumb it, and, finally, abide by it. As he puts it, "It's like I sailed into clear air." Not because he had figured out how to ride above it all, but because he had figured out how to tack in those crosscurrents and choppy seas. He learned to thrive within them—working at the local level, persisting with the quotidian practices that strapped him to the mast of pastoral life, and thereby discovering that in that liminal space between Word and flesh lay the sacred, unfolding story of salvation.

In Peterson's later years, there is an unmistakable sense of coming full circle. Upon leaving Christ Our King Presbyterian Church after 29 years, he returned to the academy—first to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and then to Regent College in Vancouver. No move could have been more fitting. Along with teaching courses on the pastoral life, his primary focus was the biblical languages. It was in these years that he took on the task of translating the Bible, the outcome of which was *The Message*. His lifelong pastoral work prepared him to take up the language of scripture in a way he could not have if he had never made the turn to the congregation he did so many years ago. His translation of the Bible, perhaps more than any of his other works, brings together his love of the Word and his passion for the Word to take on flesh in people's lives.

Peterson's turn toward a larger lay audience is no less evident in his five books on spiritual theology: *Eat This Book*, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, *The Jesus Way*, *Practice Resurrection*, and *Tell It Slant*. In these volumes, as in *The Message* and so many of his other books, we pastors are less the audience than the observers—bearing witness to a pastor at work with his flock.

There was no grand plan for Peterson to one day translate the New and Old Testaments, sell a millions of copies, and retire. He and his wife of over 50 years, Jan, had sketched a future in which they would someday wind up on Flathead Lake in Montana. They just kept making their "intently haphazard" way—Peterson's favorite

metaphor for the pastoral life. They now live a modest and eloquent life on the shores of Flathead Lake in a home built by Peterson's father in the 1940s and remodeled by them in the 1990s. There is an enduring congruity, coherence, and fullness to his life and their life together, with more reading than writing these days (although a book of sermons is in the making), even less traveling, and almost no speaking engagements. He and Jan are at peace and are as mindful, soulful, and vital as ever, thriving in the rhythms of life they have practiced over many years. There is no table more eucharistic than the one that sits in their dining room—situated between kitchen and fireplace with a clear view of the exquisite beauty of Flathead and the Rockies.

Few have inhabited the pastoral life as well as Eugene and Jan. None have disclosed more its depth and promise.