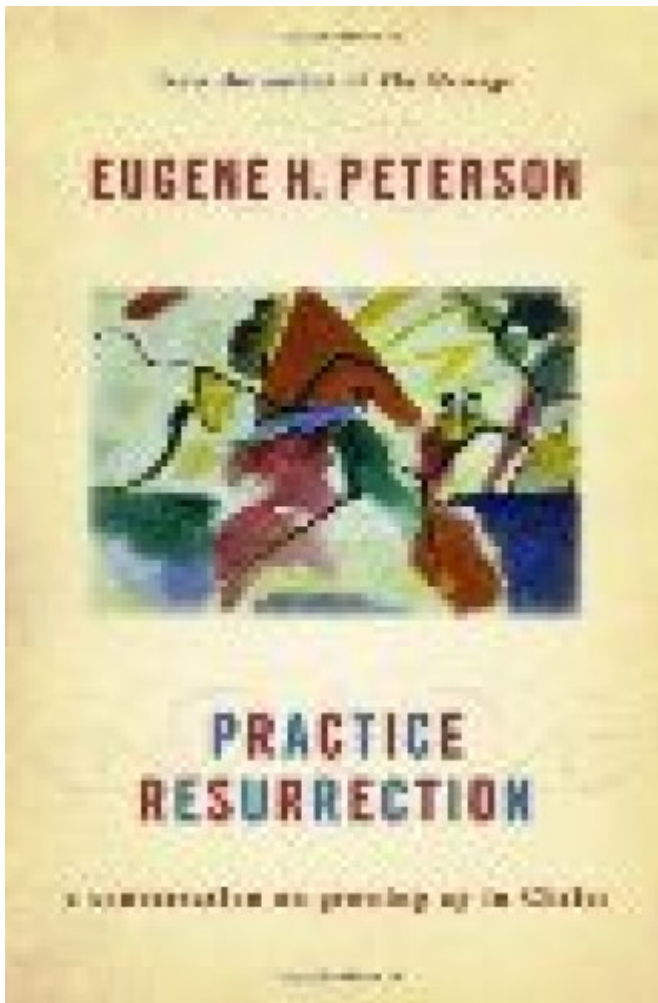


Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ

reviewed by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ

Eugene H. Peterson
Eerdmans

Eugene Peterson writes often and clearly about spiritual theology, which has helped greatly to define a discipline that can be vague and fuzzy. He did this particularly well in his previous book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. But as needed as that book was, Peterson is never better than when he is writing out of a specific biblical text.

Perhaps this is because Peterson never left his calling as a pastor who proclaims the word. Or maybe it is because he spent so much time with the text when he was writing *The Message*, his popular translation of the scriptures. Or most likely, Peterson just loves the Bible. His earlier books on Jonah, David and the Psalms will long remain classic depictions of how one uses ancient texts as confessional proclamation to contemporary society. He now returns to his groove with *Practice Resurrection*.

This is the fifth and culminating contribution to Peterson's series of books on spiritual theology. His faithful readers will be delighted that a pastoral commentary on the epistle to the Ephesians concludes the series.

The book is organized according to the chapters of Ephesians, but it is not presented as a biblical commentary. Peterson no doubt has intentionally avoided this label, but he doesn't say why. My assumption is that he doesn't want the book to remain on the shelf until a preacher is researching a sermon. It reads better if one simply starts at the beginning and works all the way through its densely packed perspectives on what it means to "grow up in Christ."

Peterson builds bridge after bridge from the biblical text to our contemporary context. Along the way, he reinterprets the familiar topics of grace, calling, love, church, mission, Trinity and even verbs. His insights are not so much innovative as they are penetrating depictions of what the author of Ephesians would have to say to the church of the 21st century.

In both the goals of the book and the quality of the writing, Peterson has provided an extraordinary example of pastoral scholarship. He exemplifies the best of what pastors strive to be for their own congregations—the resident parish theologian who engages in exegesis of the biblical text as well as of society, which strives to prevent anyone from being nurtured into Christian maturity.

From the beginning of *Practice Resurrection* to the end, Peterson holds forth on his central point that spiritual maturity is accomplished only by the risen Christ, who works through the Holy Spirit. We grow up in the faith not through what we do, but by receiving the life Jesus Christ was literally dying to give us. In his risen life, we find our own. This thesis frees Peterson from providing prescriptions for spirituality, theological subscriptions for cognitive assent, or maledictions for those we blame for our problems. All of that, he claims, only gets in the way of growing up in the faith. Maturity comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, the “shy member of the Trinity,” who transforms our lives into Christ’s life.

As Peterson claims more than once, when it comes to growing up as Christians “the action is not something we do, but something done to us.” This is why he chose the title *Practice Resurrection*, a phrase he borrows from Wendell Berry. It describes his thesis: “We live our lives in the practice of what we do not originate and cannot anticipate.” This is a very prophetic notion for the contemporary church, which has been heavily influenced by a society that has long believed that life is self-constructed.

This book reminds us that Paul’s letter was written to a congregation in Ephesus that had real problems, as all congregations do. But Peterson refuses to measure any congregation by either its functions or dysfunctions, because that reduces it to the instrumental benefits it provides to a highly individualistic spirituality. While such an agenda can easily be found in American Christianity, Peterson claims that it cannot be found in Ephesians. So he calls for a return to ontology in our thinking about congregations. “An ontological understanding of church has to do with what it is, not what it does.” And what the church is, he writes, is mostly invisible. It is the communion of the triune God, in which we participate.

As a pastor who has dealt with the dust and grit of ordinary congregational life, Peterson makes it clear that he is under no illusions. But he looks through the lens of Ephesians to discover a heavenly depiction of the church, which is more than it appears to be. It is the persevering and holy means of grace that not only invites us to new life but also nurtures us into “all the fullness of Christ.” Peterson’s significant point here is that the church already has this fullness: “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” Anyone who spends more than 30 minutes in the church on the corner will need to be reminded of this profound truth. Real and even broken church families are used by God to form our lives as mature Christians. According to this book, there is no other way.

Peterson supports his insights from Ephesians with frequent illustrations from historical and literary sources. Here again he models what every congregation needs from its own pastor—one who is well read and knows how to turn Bernard of Clairvaux, Martin Buber, Herman Melville and Robert Frost into a Greek chorus for an ancient letter in the New Testament. This creates a beautiful harmony of voices in the book that speaks gospel to contemporary kindergarten teachers, bankers, lawyers and homemakers. Such insights are plentiful throughout the book—perhaps overly plentiful.

If I have any quibble about the book, it is that it left me feeling like I had spent too much time in the buffet line. I couldn't decide which delicious offering to savor, so I loaded my plate with everything before me. It felt good going down, but I was soon overwhelmed with internal heaviness and couldn't remember the taste of any one item. That's not a very mature way to eat, or to digest truth. It's an ironic problem for a book about growing up. In the author's defense, he is interpreting the writing of the apostle Paul, whose theology doesn't exactly fit on a tapas plate.

Practice Resurrection, like the other four books in this series, was written as a "conversation." This word is in the subtitle of each of the books. It means that the writing is organized as a collection of relatively short but powerful insights, each completed quickly before Peterson is off to the next amazingly profound idea. If it were possible for readers to really have a conversation with Peterson, when it was our turn we would say, "Slow down. Take your time. I'll read the next book too."

There will be another one, won't there? Please?