

PASTORAL WORK

|

—

—

|

P A S T O R A L W O R K

Engagements with the Vision  
of Eugene Peterson

Jason Byassee *and*  
L. Roger Owens



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

PASTORAL WORK  
Engagements with the Vision of Eugene Peterson

Copyright © 2014 Wipf and Stock Publishers. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Cascade Books  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-022-2

*Cataloging-in-Publication data:*

---

Pastoral work : engagements with the vision of Eugene Peterson / edited by Jason Byassee and L. Roger Owens.

xvi + 206 p.; 23 cm—Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-022-2

1. Peterson, Eugene H., 1932-. 2. Pastoral theology. 3. Clergy—Office. I. Byassee, Jason. II. Owens, L. Roger. III. Title.

BV4011 P347 2014

---

Manufactured in the USA.

## Table of Contents

Introduction | vii

### **PART ONE: WORDS**

*The Pastor and the Art of Arts* | 3

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

Wanderers Between Two Worlds | 15

MARK RALLS

It's About God, Stupid | 28

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON

### **PART TWO: INSTITUTIONS**

*All Who Follow Jesus?* | 41

TEE GATEWOOD

Eugene Peterson | 53

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

Hunter and Peterson on Institutions | 63

KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON

The (Scholar-) Pastor | 76

JASON BYASSEE

---

**PART THREE: PEOPLE**

Leadership and the Christianity and Culture Dance | 89  
CAROL HOWARD MERRITT

Enough with Little | 100  
KYLE CHILDRESS

Eugene Peterson Saved My Ministry, and Ten Ways He Can  
Save Yours Too, with Jesus's Help (Not) | 110  
LILLIAN DANIEL

WWED? | 118  
TRYGVE DAVID JOHNSON

Staying with God | 131  
L. ROGER OWENS

**PART FOUR: LIFE**

Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of "Working the Angles" | 145  
TIM CONDER

The Vow of Stability | 157  
MARTIN B. COPENHAVER

Take and Read | 166  
JAMES HOWELL

How Baptism Makes My "Job Description" Different | 175  
JENNY WILLIAMS

One + One + One = Five (Or, Building Community and Curing Souls) | 187  
PRINCE RANEY RIVERS

Bibliography | 199  
Contributors | 203

---

## Introduction

AMID MASSIVE CONFUSION ABOUT the vocation of pastoral ministry in the last fifty years, Eugene Peterson has offered a clear and compelling vision of the life and work of a pastor. Perhaps more than any single author, his vision has shaped the understanding of the pastoral vocation across denominational and theological lines. It's easy to find Peterson's own books and others expressing appreciation for his clear vision. It's easy to find testimonials about how his vision of the pastor as a spiritual guide has saved pastors heading toward burnout. And it's easy to find people who invoke Peterson in their arguments with other visions of the pastoral vocation, especially those visions influenced by business leadership. But this book offers what's nearly impossible to find—appreciative, critical, and constructive engagements with Peterson's own vision of the pastoral vocation.

First, these essays are *appreciative* engagements with Peterson's vision of the pastoral vocation. Each of the authors has been shaped in positive ways by Peterson's vision of the pastoral life. For some of the authors, Peterson's vision has been a determining influence in how we imagine our work. A reader of this book, if interested in learning about what Eugene Peterson says about pastoral vocation, will find here appreciative discussions of his vision.

But they don't stop there. When it comes to Peterson, hagiography is not hard to find. But each of these essays resists hagiography, knowing that there are conflicting accounts of what constitutes good pastoral ministry. So these essays engage Peterson *critically* as well, asking what, if any, are the gaps in his work. Where is his vision too narrow? Where is it insufficient to account for the growing complexities of ministry in a new century? These essays show that Peterson is most useful not when his vision is blindly adhered to, but when it's engaged, questioned, and wrestled with.

viii Pastoral Work

Finally, these essays are *constructive*. Each pastor must live this vocation for him or herself. As powerful and influential as Peterson's vision is, each pastor must, in some sense, struggle with God, Scripture, the community of faith and wise teachers like Peterson to—paraphrasing Paul—“work out their own pastoral identity with fear and trembling.” So, these essays also offer constructive engagements with Peterson's vision, giving each of these respected authors—wise teachers themselves—the opportunity to show how engaging Peterson has helped them to work out their own understanding of the pastoral vocation in their various contexts.

This book is needed for three reasons.

First, this kind of sustained engagement with Peterson hasn't happened yet. It is long overdue. With the recent publication of Peterson's memoir, *The Pastor*, the time is right for this kind of engagement with his vision to happen. If Peterson's vision is going to remain helpful to generations to come, it needs to be engaged, critiqued, and built upon now. That's what this book does.

Second, this book is significant because of its contributors. The essays in this book are written by some of the most important voices writing about and practicing pastoral ministry today. A diverse group of authors in denomination, race, theology, and gender, this book hopes to generate the most wide-ranging and diverse engagement with Peterson possible.

Finally, this book is significant not just because it's about one of the most important writers on pastoral ministry in the last generation, but because it is about the pastoral vocation itself. The pastoral vocation is still in crisis, and the conversation about what constitutes faithful pastoral ministry is ongoing. This book hopes to be a significant addition to that conversation because it is an engagement with one of the most important voices in the conversation by several other significant voices in the conversation.

The book is divided into four parts—“Words,” “Institutions,” “People,” and “Life.” In his *Working the Angles*, Peterson compares the shape of pastoral ministry to a triangle, suggesting the work of ministry has three lines—preaching, teaching, administration—and three angles—prayer, Scripture, and spiritual direction. Our structure takes this as a starting point, but broadens it into these four sections.



## Words

“Words” includes those aspects of ministry that deal with words and the Word, including preaching and teaching, but also praying, storytelling, and reading. For Peterson, attentiveness to words and the Word is at the heart of his vision of the pastoral vocation, because such attentiveness trains us to attend to God. The essays in this section engage Peterson’s vision of the pastoral vocation from the angle of the pastor as one working with words and the Word.

Stephanie Paulsell’s essay shows, right out of the gate, that this collection means to be more than hagiography. She praises him fully, especially for his influential portrayal of the role of the imagination in interpreting the Scriptures. She appreciates Peterson’s confession of how often he does not know what he is doing as a pastor. Yet she has some hard questions for him. Are not the characters in his memoir stock characters? And worse, how can he justify, in 2011, his portrayal of an incident of sexual abuse of a minor in a church in which he was an associate? At the time his bewilderment is understandable and he does the right thing. But why does he not now question the obviously dated advice that professional gives to the abused child? One can hear the wisdom born of Paulsell’s years of teaching ministers at Harvard Divinity as well as a holy impatience with any kind of equivocation on this issue.

Mark Ralls’s essay could serve as an introduction to the way of reading the Bible either in Peterson or in his great mentor Karl Barth. He engages mostly with *Eat This Book*, one of Peterson’s hefty collections of essays from across the years, this one focused on the practices of reading Scripture. And he suggests Peterson is a worthy heir, a sufficiently attentive reader to Barth, to be an attentive reader of the living message of Scripture. This is interesting—most of Barth’s self-styled heirs either become systematic theologians in the academy or argue over Barth minutiae. Peterson read Barth over and over as a parish pastor and presented his way of reading, with God’s action having priority over ours, throughout his preaching and writing career. This way of reading is not “personally immense,” it is “immensely personal.” It is enough to make one envious of Ralls’s parishioners in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to hear sermons styled after Peterson’s Barthian way of reading.

Tony Robinson reflects on his own book, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, ten years after its publication. And he notes the ironic reception of the book by mainline leaders as just the next hot program to fix membership

x Pastoral Work

decline (leaders in the Emerging Church movement also found they were being turned into a fix-it program, with “Emerging Pastors” and “Services” sprouting up. We mainliners are nothing if not determined to stick to technical solutions . . .). Robinson credits Peterson with helping him see the issue is God, not our programming. Then he tweaks Peterson for having nothing good to say about “leadership,” before using Ron Heifetz to show the term’s potential for thinking more theologically about the church. Robinson’s essay is particularly confessional in its description of his failed initial effort to turn around a dying congregation. His goal was to right the ship by his own energy and effort, not to wait for the Lord. Ignatian retreats and praying Scripture taught him that the leader’s first move is second. We wait first, God works, then we respond.

### Institutions

The section on “Institutions” includes the work of administration, but we broaden that to understand more broadly ministry as leadership of an institution—the church. The very choice of the word “Institution” suggests it’s in this area we think Peterson’s vision can be critiqued. One emerges from reading Peterson with a deep appreciation of community. But community without institutional backbone can collapse to the floor in a puddle, running the risk of being romanticized or fetishized. The essays in this section engage Peterson’s vision of pastor as leader (broadly conceived) and his criticism of certain understandings of institutional leadership that have also influenced conceptions of pastoral leadership.

Tea Gatewood’s essay praises Peterson’s push to have ministry be done locally, attentively, and with love for the particular. He suggests reading the trilogy of *Five Smooth Stones*, *Working the Angles*, and *Under the Unpredictable Plant* backwards from the order of their publication. We don’t know why it works. We do know that it does—starting forward we got stuck as readers; going Gatewood’s backward way, the books almost read themselves. Then Gatewood pivots and launches the sort of attack his intellectual model, theologian Robert Jenson, might have launched. Why, with all the anti-gnostic rhetoric, does Peterson disdain the institutional structure of the Presbyterian Church in which he and Gatewood have both made ordination vows and of the wider ecclesia, the church catholic, often manifest in other denominations now? As with all of the critiques in this book, Peterson or his defenders might have material with which to respond.

That said, the critique is fair and deserves a hearing. One can also hear Gatewood's own struggles as a relative traditionalist in the PC-USA, many of whose peers have fled that denomination seeking "safer" waters in one of several shards of Reformed breakoffs in the USA. Gatewood has stayed, influenced by Peterson, and wants Peterson to make a similarly declarative, uncomfortable public commitment to a flawed and particular people like the Presbyterians.

Will Willimon's essay both praises and criticizes Peterson perhaps more highly than any other essay. Like all our writers, he deeply appreciates Peterson's critique of an Americanized church. That critique, of course, echoes those also long launched by Willimon and his companion in arms, Stanley Hauerwas, both of whose work has influenced Peterson. Yet Willimon worries that Peterson's shrill criticism of the specific institutions of the church, from his own Pentecostal background to his Presbyterian Church of ordination and long service, cause him to wind back up unwittingly in Americanized, interiorized, individualized Christianity despite himself. Perhaps it is the church, institutionalized and compromised though she may be, that is the only way God has of saving us from our Americanized selves.

Kristen Deede Johnson attends to the work of her mentor, James Davison Hunter. Hunter is tired of hackneyed and sentimental claims that individuals can change the world. The view overlooks the role of institutions, networks, and even elites. She argues that Hunter needs a bit of Peterson for his model to work, especially since the church plays a significant role in Hunter's prescription for influencing culture. And she suggests Peterson requires a bit of Hunter as well. When his attention is not on institutions he can speak of them lovingly; when he turns to them the language can be brutal. Perhaps institutions can be influenced by Peterson's vision—and who among us, whose lives depend so deeply on institutions, would not want that?

Jason Byassee's essay attends to the hyphen in Peterson. Eugene Peterson is the model of a scholar-pastor. How would our institutions that pass on theological wisdom look if remodeled on the gifts of a saint like Eugene? He may be the most important theological voice alive just now. But neither the church nor the academy tend to see Peterson as such—they are so little aware of one another's life. Yet they depend on one another. Peterson continues a long tradition of genuinely great theologians without a terminal degree; of genuinely great pastoral writers ignored by the academy

xii Pastoral Work

as currently organized. Couldn't we reacquaint these two with one another, perhaps via Eugene's work?

## People

The section "People" focuses on the centrality of relationships for Peterson's vision of the pastoral vocation. Peterson has said that he would never pastor a church with more members than names he can remember. The promise shows how important knowing one's flock is to his vision of pastoral ministry. He has also critiqued the way that psycho-therapeutic understandings of pastoral care have usurped the pastor's traditional role as a spiritual director within the community. The essays in this section will engage Peterson's vision of the pastoral vocation from the perspective of the pastor's working with people.

Carol Howard Merritt's essay engages questions of human culture in a variety of settings, from Uganda to Peterson's *Message*. She asks Peterson about his rhetorical denunciation of reading the Bible in ways that are affected by human culture. Is this not what he has done, and so brilliantly, with his own translation of the Bible? We are never free from "culture" as we do anything, not least interpret Scripture. How do we make that intersection between cultures life-giving?

Kyle Childress's essay gives a lovely portrait of Wilson, an old-timer at his first rural Baptist parish in Texas. The young preacher Childress, stirring up matters of race that the community would have preferred unstirred, was given the gift of friendship by this patient man. Wilson taught him to visit, to get to know, to steep in the life of the people of his church. Kyle did, and found himself in pastoral conversations after years that could have never happened in months. Kyle is inclined to criticize Peterson for not raising a voice during those turbulent decades when they were both in ministry, yet he owes more to Peterson than such a criticism would suggest. We defy you to read Kyle's conclusion, about a return to that first parish years later, without crying or at least saying "thanks" to God. Just for good measure Kyle throws in passing glances at *The Canterbury Tales*, Wendell Berry, and the leading lights of the civil rights movement, for a full intellectual feast.

Lillian Daniel's essay leaves us asking: my goodness, does anyone know a funnier writer than Lillian?! She lovingly details the way Peterson's great *Under the Unpredictable Plant* kept her in the ministry, alongside other pastor-writers with realistic views of ministry and a passionate hunger for

God. The life she satirizes is surely recognizable, as is her shock at a writer like Eugene who will sear us with descriptions like “Prostitute pastor.” “Who writes like this?” she asks, and indeed, no one but Peterson. Except he learned it from somewhere: the pages of the Bible, which speak with no less a searing eye and a lacerating pen. Whatever his other virtues or faults as a writer and pastor, Peterson speaks biblically, caustically, beautifully, as this singular writer bears witness to his affect on her.

Trygve Johnson’s essay tackles a question that many of ours’ dances around: *can’t* we live out Peterson’s vision in a congregation of more than 150 people? Trygve’s “yes” draws on some of the most obscure portions of the Peterson corpus. He argues that Jesus’s priestly prayer, his constant intercession of us by name, allows us to pastor those whom we do not know. And he recounts his daily self-questioning of whether he has loved his people, his place, and the Word. By loving those three he can pastor personally, whether on a first-name basis or not.

Roger Owens’s essay attends to some of the spiritual writers who have tried to “democratize” contemplation, to make it accessible to every Christian, not just “experts.” And he asks what pastoral ministry would look like with the pastor as a leader of contemplation. He attends to others who have made a similar move to Peterson in this. Who else’s portrait belongs on the wall besides Peterson’s than John Henry Newman’s, Alexander Whyte’s, and Baron von Hügel’s? How about yours and ours?

## Life

The fourth section, “Life,” acknowledges that the pastoral vocation is isolated activities—working with words, institutions, and people—but these activities find their coherence in pastoral life. That it is a life itself attentive to God and discerning of God’s presence; and a life that delights in Sabbath rest. One of the beauties of Peterson’s memoir *The Pastor* is how it displays his growing understanding of the pastoral life as one greater than the sum of pastoral tasks. The essays in this section will engage broadly Peterson’s understanding of pastoral ministry finding its integrity in the unity of the pastoral life.

Tim Conder’s essay is a rollicking homage of praise to Peterson for his influence on Tim’s quarter century of ministry. Tim studied with evangelicals and worked in megachurches before “downsizing” to a smaller university Bible church and then planting an Emerging-style neighborhood

missional community, Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina. Peterson has been a constant amidst all this change, and Tim praises him appropriately. He challenges Eugene by the end to add a fourth angle to his important three in *Working the Angles*: missional activism, with the line of this polygon as the human body. Conder's sympathetic addition echoes Kyle Childress's, though put less strongly: where is the activism, the community engagement, in Peterson?

Martin Copenhaver's essay has a very different tone. Though a long-term pastor in one place himself, he takes on Peterson's relentless advocacy for staying in one place. Surely the determination to stay can itself be a form of disobedience? While Martin cherishes knowing "the back stories of the back stories" at Wellesley Congregational, he worries he may stay too long, and so jokes about a poison pill entrusted to a confidant. Martin reminds us of two UCC pastors we met at a church in Maine, the senior who has been there twenty-three years, his associate twenty-five. She, the associate, told us, "I think they're starting to trust us." On the other hand, a Methodist points out (perhaps overly defensively, given that tribe's penchant for moving entirely too often), that there is *one* good reason to leave a pastorate or to do anything else: the call of God. How do we get that right? We would love to hear Copenhaver and Kyle Childress argue this one out.

James Howell's essay asks whether his 5000-member megachurch can embody some of the virtues that Peterson so passionately extols. He thinks so, but has more to say here about the formation of his own soul as a pastor. He recommends most highly two slightly under-read Peterson volumes: *Reversed Thunder*, on the Apocalypse of John, and *Take and Read*, a list of salutary reading that could keep one busy for decades, as Howell points out. Howell is a master reader himself, and we found most interesting listening in on how Howell reads Peterson, what passages he returns to, how he imagines his own image in comparison to Eugene's visage. We all need models to emulate, disagree with, improve upon, and Howell does here what all this book's authors are trying to do.

Jenny Williams's essay critiques her own (United Methodist) tradition's default assumption that the pastor will do all the pastoral care. She wants congregations instead to be instigated to be in their neighborhood in mission. The future of the church depends on concentrating on the latter. But a pastor cannot both be in the hospital for every hangnail and empower and invite others in mission and ministry. She quotes a parishioner on the

difference. A pastor doing all the visiting is like heroin! It feels good, but it will kill the congregation eventually.

Prince Rivers's essay answers some of the questions James leaves off: how can we appropriate Peterson in a larger church context, such as Prince's own United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem? For Rivers, the African-American church has historically embodied the attention to the local and the particular that Peterson so beautifully praises (though Prince worries that the influence of the prosperity gospel can threaten this heritage). Too, pastors must attend to the cure of souls above all else—not local boards, not institutional upkeep, not even budgets and maintenance, but prayer. He asks, hauntingly, why he is never asked about the state of his prayers, but always about the state of the institution's budget or maintenance. And he tells of his own efforts one Lent to concentrate his efforts on being a pastor, not an institutional administrator. Many writers in this volume are in similar ecclesial settings, and as lovers of Peterson, hope we can adapt him to our callings as Rivers has done here.

We hope these essays will contribute to greater reading of Eugene Peterson both in the church and the academy. We have tried to pay him the ultimate academic compliment of critique. And we have tried to pay him the ultimate ecclesial compliment of saying we want our lives to look more like his. This book is for others who want also to read him critically, with appreciation, and with thanks to God.